

Book Review

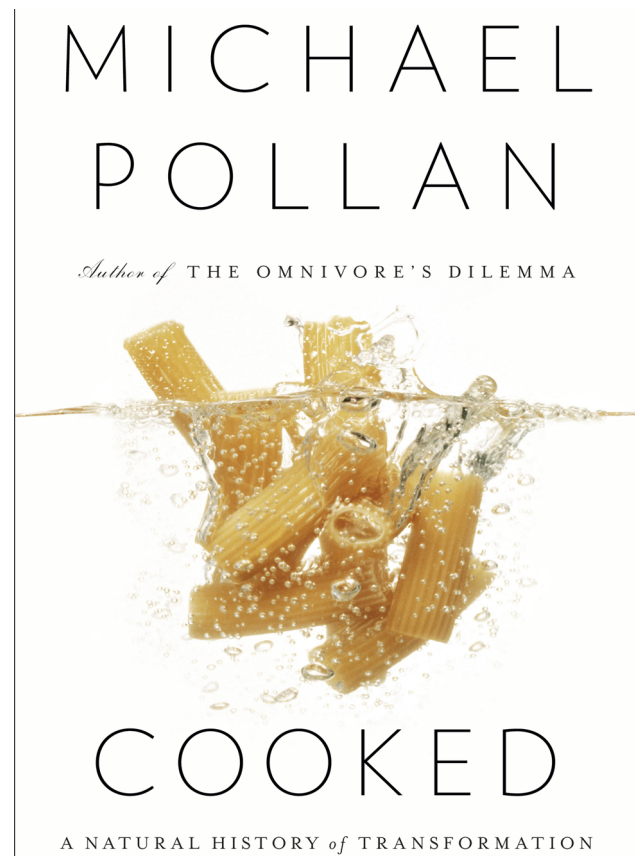
Getting Us Back into the Kitchen

Cooked - A Natural History of Transformation is Michael Pollan's 7th book, following *Food Rules*, *In Defense of Food* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. In this book, Pollan delves into the kitchen to show how to improve the health and well-being of the family, make the American food system healthier and more sustainable, achieve more self-sufficiency in a consumer economy, and acquire a deeper understanding of the natural world. It is, in part, the story of his own education in the kitchen.

Dividing his book into the classical elements of fire, water, air, and earth, and working under a succession of teachers (cooks, bakers, brewers, picklers, cheese-makers among them) in various settings from a barbeque pit to an abbey, Pollan learns the art of how to grill with fire (outdoors in a barbeque pit); cook (indoors) in a pot with water—i.e., braise; bake (bread) and ferment (cheese, sauerkraut, pickles, beer).

He takes us on a long (at times exhausting) journey to experience the pleasure and skill of learning to use the elements in order to transform a pig; a watery mix of plants and meat scraps; grains; and live organisms like fungi and bacteria into edible foods and even beer. He does so by blending historical, anthropological, philosophical, scientific, and personal stories about food in a masterly way that makes this book interesting, educational, and entertaining, and a tad rambling and overindulgent on detail in parts. Weaving together diverse perspectives and peppering the book with amusing accounts from his personal journey, the book is part academic, part practical how-to, part personal memoir, and part investigative journalism into the underworld of cooking with the elements—fire, water, air, and earth.

The section on fire takes the reader into North Carolina's cookhouses and barbecue pits where we start a 90 + page journey into the world of hog cooking. Pollan's



skill as a writer allows one to smell the fire and experience what it takes to transform a pig from dead meat into food, exalting in this process of meat preparation and consumption (which is perhaps at odds with his assertion in his previous work, *In Defense of Food*, that we should “eat food, not too much, mostly plants”).

The section on water encourages us to see cooking as a way of slowing down and appreciating the origins and diversity of the plants and ingredients we use. The physio-

chemical reactions that occur in onions are one of many interesting, if somewhat esoteric, insights into what makes plants and ingredients so tasty when cooked appropriately. As with the section on cooking pigs though, oddly, he does not discuss how to prepare dishes in healthy ways. Rather, he tosses salt and fats into the mix as if they automatically will be healthy if cooked at home in the kitchen, yet unhealthy if made by food companies and restaurants.

Many civilizations grew after they domesticated grains and started some form of baking. The section on air elaborates on this point using a series of celebrity bakers and bakeries. Pollan takes us through the process of preparing the perfect loaf and provides a step-by-step recipe to try at home. He does warn that it will take 5–10 days to prepare! Embedded in this section are interesting accounts of how we got super refined, sweetened white bread, epitomized by Wonder Bread (into whose bakery he indeed ventures).

Being cheese lovers we enjoyed the section on “earth” and its vivid descriptions of smelly foods and how one culture may value and savor what another culture may find disgusting. The growth of knowledge about the role and importance of our own gut biome and how it interacts with fermenters is indeed fascinating and could have been developed into a discussion on the relationship between the gut environment and the external environment.

Pollan is frustrated that people are watching cooking (on TV, in restaurants), talking and reading about it, yet practicing it less. He sees the consequences in terms of obesity, unhealthy diets, and disconnect of people from the source of food and nature. He laments a world where so few of us are obliged to cook at all anymore—not even the poor.

Time, or lack thereof, is one of the reasons given that people do not cook at home. However, people manage to spend nearly 35 h a week on average watching TV, and around 13 h a week surfing the web and playing games on smartphones. Pollan presents interesting research showing that the more time a nation devotes to food preparation at home the lower its rates of obesity.

Strangely, Pollan does not highlight the fact what we choose to cook is of paramount importance to our health. Rather, he asserts that if we let food corporations do the cooking for us they are bound to skimp on quality ingredients and go heavy on the sugar, fat, and salt. However, we question whether home cooking is any better and whether the cooking practices that he indulges in the book (roasting pork and crackling, making cheese, brewing beer) are better for our health.

He wagers that if people were to regain mastery over the physical processes by which food has traditionally been made, we will be able to bring food back from the ether of abstraction into our own kitchens. His happiest discovery, he says, was that the wonders of cooking rely on a magic that remains accessible to all of us, at home. If we are willing to make cooking and eating meals a part of daily life, then we can go back to “primary” eating and a culture of every day cooking. This book however, in our view, is not about to make that happen, as he is preaching to the converted.

The examples that Pollan chooses for his education journey—which range from pig roasting to sauerkraut fermentation to cheese making and beer brewing—seem unlikely candidates to entice people back to the home hearth, although he does concede that most readers will probably never make beer, cheese, or even bread themselves. It is true that at one time in history all these transformations took place in the home, but that’s ... well ... history.

Presumably, if this book was a “how to” concerned with nudging people back into healthy home cooking, Pollan would have used examples of nutritious foods that people would choose to eat and cook at home in a healthy, time-efficient way. If anything, these particular examples of what it takes to achieve mastery at the site of the barbecue, the bakery, or the kitchen (some of them unhealthy, time-consuming, and more effectively done outside of the home), may well lead some readers to conclude that outsourcing many aspects of food preparation makes sense for them.

Pollan does indeed admit that baking is one of the few cases where outsourcing has served humanity well (with the exception of the Wonder Bread era). He took up baking, he says, because he was determined to “know” bread, saying his impetus was more journalistic curiosity (“...Elation, effervescence, elevation, levity, inspiration – air words all, alveolated vowels, leavening the dough of everyday life”)... rather than a desire to make his own bread. Breadmaking is necessarily a messy process—unforgiving, mysterious, not amenable to mid-course correction, etc.

An important part of Pollan’s motivation for his cooking journey would appear to be that he is clearly angered by food corporations who, health considerations aside, are doing more and more of the job of cooking for us outside of our own homes, and thus turning us into passive consumers. This is not an ennobling role, he says. He expresses his own personal frustration at being a producer

(“of words and ideas”) and yet a passive consumer of so many other things in his life. Joining the “makers” of the world would make us feel a little more self-reliant, a little more omniscient, he says.

Thus, sharing with us the pleasure of learning how certain everyday foods are made is a major inspiration for the author. This is a perfectly fine goal for the book. He talks about a deeper type of learning that comes from doing the work yourself—about obtaining a physical kind of knowledge that is the opposite of abstract or academic pursuits at a time that we spend most of our waking hours in front of screens.

Pollan says that to learn to cook is to put you on intimate terms with the laws of physics and chemistry, as well as the facts of biology and microbiology. Thus, he attempts admirably (and scientifically) through well-researched examples that will undoubtedly impress many a food scientist. Reading the book, however, we wonder whether the average person interested in food and home cooking would be as impressed.

Pollan certainly has assimilated an extraordinary body of knowledge from the numerous sources he approached and drew upon in the course of his “cooking education.” These include a wide range of institutions and people who are generously acknowledged and thanked at the end of the book, including a “cheese” nun and someone singled out for “deepening his appreciation for salt.”

Pollan does not pay much attention to issues of health as he extolls, among various things, the virtue of pig roasting (...“flipping rubbery flaps of pigskin until the magic moment when they turn into blistered brown glass - Crackling!). Nonetheless throughout the book, Pollan expresses his disdain and distrust for “processed, packaged and fast food,” and seems to hanker for a past era when people grew, reared or hunted for their food, and cooked it simply and immediately. He comments that people were healthier then. This myth is repeated in most of his books, and is simply not supported by the facts. Over the last three centuries, we have seen profound declines in childhood deaths, stunting and nutritional deficiencies. The 1993 Nobel Prize winner for Economic Sciences, Robert Fogel, showed how improved nutrition has fueled, not just

improvements in health, but profound and widespread development gains in each generation.

Pollan’s previous work correctly addressed the importance of reducing excess sugar, saturated fats, and sugar in our diets, but home-cooked hog, home-baked bread (potentially laden with salt), home-made stews filled with fats, and home-brewed alcohol (if consumed in excess) will not lead to a healthier nor more environmentally sustainable future.

It is a pity Pollan does not remind us more forcefully about the value of fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, and other ways of eating raw food, as he has done in some of his other books. A lack of these foods in our diet has been associated with an increased burden of disease. And the more they are consumed, the more likely other foods will be substituted from the diet with positive effects for health and the environment.

All in all, we are not convinced this book does justice to Pollan’s past work and leadership in providing clear messages to help people enjoy healthier and more sustainable diets. Readers of Pollan’s previous books will probably not find this book terribly insightful if they seek guidance on improving their health and that of the environment. But they are clearly not the target audience. In this book, Pollan seems to be reaching out to those who need to be nudged back into the kitchen mainly to experience the pleasure of assembling and transforming ingredients in food. For them, this book will be a delight and even an inspiration.

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