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Cooking without Women: The Rhetoric of the New Culinary Male

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Between their detailed instructions, measurements, and helpful hints, cookbooks provide directives about the proper management of household space.¹ Cookbooks establish rules that govern intimate habits, helping readers to make sense of how cooking rituals fit within the domestic division of labor. They cultivate, naturalize, and sometimes resist domestic habits as they pass into the realm of unconscious investments that ideological critics call “common sense.”² However, Isaac West argues that while cookbooks “invite readers into specific subject positions, some of which are more attainable than others,” they provide cooks with “opportunities for communicating who they are and who they might want to be.”³ Critical/cultural scholars have documented how cookbooks, domestic advice manuals, and food television socialized women into the cult of feminine domesticity.⁴ Meanwhile, if men were hailed by domestic food discourse it was as a caveman-like caricature of alpha males cooking large portions of meat over open flame.⁵

By and large, male cooking has taken place in professional kitchens, where a chef’s credentials and a hypermasculine environment situate cooking as a manly vocation. Despite the recent growth in women ascending the ranks of professional kitchens, most women report the persistence of a male locker-room culture in the restaurant industry.⁶ Meanwhile, a surge in men’s interest in cooking has imported such cheflike machismo into home kitchens. While women still do a majority of household cooking, Generation X men are

more involved in the kitchen than their fathers.⁷ “Gastrosexual” men spend significantly more time shopping, preparing food, and consuming culinary media.⁸ Jon Miller notes that the growing numbers of professional women who are equal or sole income-earners have contributed to “a reallocation of time and duties” in the home.⁹ This shift has been accompanied by cooking instructions that help men adapt to their new domestic duties by masculinizing home kitchens, converting them into laboratories where men can emulate the bravado of their professional counterparts. The proliferation of men’s cookbooks such as *Man Meets Stove*, *Tough Guys Don’t Dice*, and *Tastosterone* are a response to a perceived crisis in masculinity associated with women’s continued integration into the workforce that necessitates an expansion of men’s domestic duties.¹⁰

The new culinary male reveals how cooking discourses structure our dispositions toward the intimate practices of domestic labor. Grounded in Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of *habitus*, this essay finds domestic cooking advice to be a naturalizing force that establishes the patterns of experience that incline social agents to perform gender through domestic labor.¹¹ *Habitus* is a structure of the mind that is acquired through the practices of everyday life. James Aune reads *habitus* as a “structuring mechanism” whereby the social world is internalized, a concept that illustrates how ideologies are acquired through embodied experiences with social structures.¹² Cooking discourse fundamentally structures *habitus* because food preparation and “taste” are reflections of social position—race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality.¹³ Thus, men’s cookbooks invest culinary skills with cultural capital that compensates male audiences for adopting feminine domestic duties. Here, I briefly examine *Esquire* magazine’s *Eat Like a Man Cookbook* (hereafter *Eat*) as an exemplar of domestic advice that distinguishes masculine skill from feminine care work.¹⁴ Of course, *Esquire* is renowned for providing a bombastic take on manliness. My selection of *Eat* is premised on its explicit effort to import the machismo of the professional kitchen into men’s reclamation of domestic care work. In part, *Eat* speaks to men whose role in the home or workplace is dissimilar to their father and grandfather and who might seek advice as to how they can recapture their “manliness.”

Cooking Like a Man

In 2013, *Esquire* magazine emphatically declared: “men are the future of cooking.”¹⁵ As this bold statement implies, *Esquire* editor Ryan D’Agostino is one of the leading advocates for masculinizing home kitchens. The “Eat Like a Man” brand is perfectly situated to reach a Generation X audience of “intellectually curious and confident modern men.”¹⁶ *Esquire*’s popular cookbook weaves together man-tested recipes, practical advice, and short reflection essays. The book’s glossy pages are populated with both classical images of charred meat and artfully prepared meals designed to impress others. But, how does one cook “like a man”? While women cook to fulfill their prescribed roles as domestic caretakers, *Eat* suggests that men prepare meals to adapt intergenerational masculinity to material advances in women’s equality. In *Eat*’s foreword, Tom Colicchio frames the change in the social division of labor as the testing grounds for the new manhood:

That division is beginning to break down, with more women than ever making names for themselves in restaurant kitchens and an increasing number of men cooking at an amateur level. I know fewer and fewer guys who restrict their culinary ambitions to manning the backyard grill—a hoary cliché I’d be happy to get rid of once and for all. This is a great thing. And if you pick up this book, you’re probably part of the new vanguard of men who consider cooking one of the manly arts. I support you in this! Keep up the good work and keep on cooking like a man.¹⁷

Colicchio’s remarks illustrate Michael Kimmel’s observation that crises in manhood recur when “men’s relationship to their work, to their country, to their families, to their visions, [are] transformed.”¹⁸ Transparent in culinary culture, the present crisis in masculinity is a response to declines in upward mobility, the wane of so-called masculine industries, and fear of being supplanted as heads of household.

Eat reestablishes male primacy with two organizing themes. First, *Eat* suggests that cooking is the proving grounds for men’s essential nature. In the introduction, David Granger explains, “one of the defining characteristics of manhood is the joy we take in tangible results. We love possessing the competence that allows us to fix a broken lock, replace an electrical fixture, make minor auto repairs.”¹⁹ Colicchio adds, “we like to tinker, to build, to renovate our own bathrooms and slide with a wrench under our own cars. At our best, we bring that spirit of curiosity into the kitchen.”²⁰ Trafficking in mundane stereotypes, Colicchio explains that “men don’t stop to ask directions,” and “men don’t always think with their heads.”²¹ These “truisms” turn clichés of male stubbornness into assets that will enable men to flourish in their new environment. Moreover, the analogies between culinary skills and working-class manhood imbue cooking with the same symbolic capital as traditional manly arts. Reframed as “knowledge” and “tools,” *Eat* likens skills in the kitchen to skills in the garage. Short sections on “essentials,” including “Things a Man Should Know About Wine and Spirits”²² and “Things A Man Should Know About Entertaining,” suggest that cooking performs manly knowhow and is rewarded with confidence, the respect of peers, and the admiration of women.²³ Like home repair, physical labor, athletic competition, or sexual exploits, cooking masculinizes men.

Second, *Eat* mediates a precarious transition from Baby Boomer to Generation X masculinity. The book provides a poignant example of how the perception of male domesticity requires that manhood be recast in terms of occupational skills familiar to previous generations. Thus, the book’s male contributors appropriate memories of their domestic-avoidant fathers to infuse cooking with the masculine spirit of previous generations. Chef Frank Crispo introduces his recipe for Spaghetti Carbonara by explaining, “my dad was a plumber, so I also grew up with a wrench in my hand, learning how to fix things. Recipes are no different.”²⁴ This excerpt is emblematic of *Eat*’s profound father trouble, or a sense that home cooks seek the retroactive approval of yesteryear’s men’s men, who would have seldom seen domesticity as an expression of manhood. Take, for instance, Chef Tom Chiarella’s sentimental anecdote “Eating with My Father,”²⁵ in which he and his father negotiate their long-standing animosities through shared meals, or Mike Sager’s “A Brief Biography, In Food,”²⁶ in which his proud breadwinning father never let him pay for a

meal. Scott Peacock's "Oyster Stew" recipe makes intergenerational masculinity transparent where it reads, "our oyster stew was also the domain of men, with recipes passed down from father to son."²⁷ When mothers are mentioned, they are either proud domestic caretakers or reluctant cooks who prepared food for their children despite possessing no culinary skills. Each male contributor draws more inspiration from his father's tough guy stoicism rather than his mothers' skillful self-sacrifice. *Eat*'s contributors authorize today's men to enter kitchens with the same manly confidence their fathers possessed when they entered the factory or the office.

To conclude, the mastery of traditionally feminine labor enables men to take feminism into account without questioning misogyny and the contemporary cult of manhood. Moreover, *Eat* illustrates Tania Modleski's observation that masculinity crises are often resolved when men manage the "threat of female power by incorporating it."²⁸ But, while *Eat* incorporates the feminine, it resituates the grounds of the feminine by suggesting that cooking has always been masculine. Ultimately, the new masculinity of contemporary culinary culture occludes a broader conversation about gendered inequities in the home, workplace, and society.

Notes

- [1] See Jennifer Horner, "Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook: A Gendered Response to Social Crises of the Postwar Era," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24 (2000): 332–46; and Rebecca Swenson, "Domestic Divo? Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity and Food," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26 (2009): 36–53.
- [2] For an overview of ideological criticism, see Dana Cloud and Joshua Gunn, "Introduction: Whither Ideology?" *Western Journal of Communication* 75 (2011): 407–420.
- [3] Isaac West, "Performing Resistance in/from the Kitchen: The Practice of Maternal Pacifist Politics and La WISP's Cookbooks," *Women's Studies in Communication* 30 (2007): 358.
- [4] See Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
- [5] See Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1990).
- [6] See Julia Moskin, "A Change in the Kitchen," *New York Times*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/dining/a-change-in-the-kitchen.html> (accessed 5 November 2014).
- [7] Moskin, "A Change."
- [8] See Janet Helm, "Dad's Gift to the Family," *NBC News*, June 17, 2010, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/37734480/ns/health-diet_and_nutrition/t/dads-gift-family-cooking-dinner/#.VFqTU P2yNg0 (accessed 5 November 2014).
- [9] Jon Miller quoted in Alexandra Sifferlin, "Generation X: Men Spend More Time in the Kitchen," *Time Heartland*, April 30, 2012, <http://healthland.time.com/2012/04/30/generation-x-men-spend-more-time-in-the-kitchen/> (accessed 5 November 2014).
- [10] See Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2013).
- [11] See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980).

- [12] James Arnt Aune, "The Scholastic Fallacy, Habitus, and Symbolic Violence: Pierre Bourdieu and the Prospects of Ideology Criticism," *Western Journal of Communication* 75 (2011): 430.
- [13] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London, UK: Routledge, 1984); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press), 60.
- [14] Ryan D'Agostino, *Eat Like a Man* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2011).
- [15] Elizabeth Gunnison Dunn, "Are Men the Future of Cooking?" *Esquire Magazine*, June 5, 2013, <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/food-for-men/men-cook-more-now-than-ever-15506451>. (accessed 5 November 2014).
- [16] *Esquire Magazine*, "Circulation," http://www.esquiremediakit.com/r5/cob_page.asp?category_code=circ (accessed 14 November 2014).
- [17] Tom Colicchio, "Foreword," *Eat*, np.
- [18] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 10.
- [19] David Granger, "Introduction," *Eat*, np.
- [20] Colicchio, "Foreword," np.
- [21] Colicchio, "Foreword," np.
- [22] David Wondrich, "Thing a Man Should Know About Wine and Spirits," *Eat*, 196–197.
- [23] Ted Allen, "Things A Man Should Know About Entertaining," *Eat*, 12–13.
- [24] Frank Crispo, "Spaghetti Carbonara," *Eat*, 158.
- [25] Tom Chiarella, "Eating With My Father," *Eat*, 149.
- [26] Mike Sager, "A Brief Biography, In Food," *Eat*, 165.
- [27] Scott Peacock, "Oyster Stew," *Eat*, 152.
- [28] Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (London, UK: Routledge, 1991), 7.