



HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

Home Renaissance Foundation

Working Papers

Number 2

“Tell me what you learn
and I’ll tell you how you’ll eat”

The different ways of “learning” how to cook and its influence on
decisions of consumption.

By Dr. Jesus Contreras
May 2006

“Tell me what you learn and I’ll tell you how you’ll eat”

The different ways of food and cooking “learning” and its influence on decisions of consumption.

Dr. Jesús Contreras¹

After all, cooking is still a predominantly female task

For a few decades already, the extension of the work-related life outside the house for women has shaped a new situation within the home, but without giving rise to a new distribution of roles at home. Except for some exceptions, it is stated that the majority of cooking activities are carried out by the adult woman of the household group. Generally speaking, it is admitted that women – wives or mothers – are the main cooks while children and fathers only “help”:

- My mother is the one who cooks at home. I set the table, I clear it, I wash the dishes, all of those things...
- My mother is the one who cooks ... My father only sets the table.
- My mother is the one who cooks, but if we eat things like fried food or something like that, my father makes it. I make my bed. Sometimes I wash the dishes and set the table.
- My mother is the one who cooks. My father... well, at weekends, when we go to a country house we have, he makes the paella...

Food preparation and cooking activities still, therefore, appear as linked to one of the adult women, so that the gradual increase of their participation in the work market has not come with shared responsibility of the household tasks for the men’s part or for the rest of the family group members. In this sense, the following testimony appears illustrative, the testimony of a man who, although he carries out some tasks related to the house cleaning, he never participates in the household tasks related to cooking, but he expresses his statement in such a way that he seems to point out that he is doing his wife’s job:

- At home, I don’t do anything in the kitchen. Well, I set the table... Yes, my wife works, but I just really don’t like it, honestly. At my age, I still don’t know how to fry an egg. I admit it, but I really dislike cooking. However, I mop and clean the floor *for her* and I sweep the floor *for her* and if the kitchen has to be cleaned, I do it *for her*...

In general, women say they carry out all the tasks related to the kitchen and that their husbands or partners hardly participate.

- At home, my husband doesn’t do anything at all. While I’m at home, he doesn’t help. My husband only comes into to the kitchen to open the fridge.

¹ Professor of Anthropology, University of Barcelona and Director of ODELA, Barcelona

Men, for their part, specify their participation in cooking tasks according to meals or activities where they participate more or less sporadically: *'she cooks during the week and I cook at weekends'*:

In short, cooking is a task carried out in 76% of cases, mainly, by women, as well as buying food products (70%), in opposition to the 3.4% and 4.9% of men who cook and do the shopping mainly themselves. This last task, however, is mostly shared by the men and women of families composed by couples without children –young and retired people according to our own data-, representing 30% of the cases, in opposition to when there are children; then it is only shared in 8% of the cases. In 1990, according to Subirats and Masats (1990), regarding the distribution of food related tasks depending on the work situation of the members of the couple, we can observe that only when the head of the family works outside the house, cooking and buying food is mainly a female role (82.8% and 79.7%) more than a male one (2.6% and 3.2%). When the head of the family and the wife are both busy, cooking and buying food are still mainly female activities (63.2% and 57.9%), as much as the proportion of mainly male dedication hardly changes in this situation (3.3% and 3.6%). However, the indicator which considers the participation of both members of the couple together does change significantly: from representing the 4.8% and 8.9% in the first situation it goes to the 19.3% and 29.4%.

Ten years later, according to the *Metropolitan Survey of the Area of Barcelona* (2000), the people in charge of cooking and buying food are still mainly women: 73.2% and 54.4%. However, the percentage of mainly male people has increased. In the year 2000, the percentage of men in charge of cooking and buying food was 4.8% and 6.7% respectively. But the most significant factor is the increase that has taken place in the level of 'both together'. According to this source, cooking is an activity carried out by both in the 11.2% of the cases and shopping in the 26.7% of the cases. On the other hand, the distribution of food related tasks between other members of the family reaches percentages of little relevance. Sharing the tasks of cooking and buying food is more common between mothers and daughters than between mothers and sons (2.8% and 2.5% against 0.8% and 0.8%). This is another significant piece of information. Although this result is worked out in terms of percentages, it shows us that sons, generally speaking, do not share the daily food related tasks with the woman responsible for the housework. It also suggests that, in the case of sharing them, they are mainly shared between women, so that the daughters, although they assume a limited food related responsibility, are more participative than the sons. This confirms that we are dealing with a job assigned to women.

Cooking, the only household task where the time dedicated to it is decreasing

The mechanization and realization by *third* parties (public and private services) of the household work is favouring, in the last decades, for part of the contents assigned to household tasks to be replaced. However, according to several sources of information, women work at home three times harder than men (Burnett, 1989; Fischler, 1995; Segalen, 1992). Regarding the time spent on 'cooking', according to the data of the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2004), women spend every day 1 hour and 57 minutes on this specific task while men spend 49 minutes. We can confirm, once again that the gradual participation of women in the labour market has not changed the daily life as it could be expected, as their greater incorporation has not come with a higher share in responsibility for men in the household tasks. On the other hand, such incorporation has not reached levels of equality regarding male participation.

All this has led to solutions which have meant a reduction of time and effort dedicated to food shopping and preparation: concentration and reduction of the times of shopping, resorting to service-food, resorting to collective and private catering and simplification of the structure and contents of meals. In general, we have been able to state that 'mothers' are the ones who decide what to buy and eat. 66.8% of the interviewed people declare that, at their home, the one who decides the meals and menus is the 'mother'. We have been able to establish, however, that her decisions are influenced by the need to satisfy several simultaneous imperatives: time organizing, the family budget and the personal tastes of the different members, among others. Even, when the woman –wife and mother- devotes herself exclusively to the household work, timetable restrictions do not disappear as she adapts to the variety of the other members of the group time tables, so that this situation can, also, be the cause for a restructuring of her own food behaviours, as well as a large increase of the food related tasks.

Some men still make the excuse of some 'natural aptitudes' that women have, in order to justify the fact that they are the only ones responsible for the home or, they even refer to 'the family values' so that the situation does not change at the same time as they can complain, for example about the fact that, today, "girls are educated in the same way as boys".

Some men declare not to be interested at all in participating in the household tasks in general and particularly in the cooking tasks; although they admit that they are tasks that involve daily work and effort. This is why, some of them, and as a 'reward' for this daily work of their wives, arrange their vacations in places where they 'have everything made for them'.

- The only tribute I give my wife, which I seriously enjoy, is when we go on holidays. We went to Cadiz on year, for example, and rented an apartment. During the holidays, I do not allow my wife to go into the kitchen at all, not for breakfast, or lunch or dinner. We normally go to a hotel, because I do admit that my wife is really involved with this.

Clearly, the sentence of *finding everything done* does not mean the same for men and women. While the former considers spending the holidays in an apartment a good idea, women believe that they are not proper holidays. In the 'vacation' apartment the same distribution of household tasks takes place as throughout the rest of the year, that is to say, they carry on working:

- No. You pay for a week in a hotel where they make the bed for you - that is a real holiday for me. If I'm going to go to an apartment and I have to do the washing, prepare the meals – for ten people rather than for four - and then, run to go to the beach... At eleven o'clock it is already too late to go to the beach. Yes, you do spend two hours sitting on the beach later on, but you're exhausted. When midday comes, I have to heat up the food, clear up, wash up, clean the floor... clean the bathroom from everybody's shower...

The idea of "tribute" appears repeatedly. In any case, what these momentary "tributes" – which, occasionally, include the purchase of electrical appliances that supposedly will "lighten" and "speed up" "women's" household work- highlight is the fact that there is still a great lack of equality in the

distribution and realization of food related tasks. The same happens with the so declared male participation in the kitchen at weekends, which usually goes further than the preparation of the *barbecue* or *paella*, the most men like “specialities”

- I gave my wife a microwave for Christmas...
- My husband gave me a termomix as a Christmas present.
- We, almost always, especially in winter and autumn times, on Sundays, as a tribute to her, eat out...
- When I’m at home, I make a barbecue – on Sundays, I make a good quality meat barbecue.

The fact that there is an evident lack of equality in the distribution of cooking tasks does not mean that there are no men who, from their own initiative, and pointing out that they like cooking, carry out part of the daily cooking. It is significant that, when this is the case, this co-participation is measured up in terms of percentages. This would be pointing to the fact that it is considered as something which has to be specially valued, at least, in relation to the participation that men usually have:

- I participate in 40% of the household tasks, but cooking, to be honest, is something I love. My wife really loves the fact that I phone her and tell her, ‘listen, don’t worry about the food, I’ll deal with that.’ The kids also enjoy it when I tell them ‘come on, I’m inspired today.’ For my wife, food is an obligation and, for me, it requires some imagination. I enjoy it.

Are things changing?

Men and women agree, however, in stating that there has been a change and that ‘things are changing’. There is a kind of unanimity in considering that the most important changes will be noticed, not so much in this generation of husbands but in the younger couples, where relations between genders are, apparently, more egalitarian regarding household tasks. This view comes from parents whose ages range from 35 to 45-50 years old. It is striking that these men still see themselves as belonging to a ‘generation of older people’ brought up according to traditional values, even though the majority of them lived their adolescence in the seventies, a decade when many of these values started to be questioned, though not in a widespread way. Some of the men interviewed explained that the first ones to avoid the ‘help’ from the men, help offered by sons or sons-in-law, were the mothers themselves or mothers-in-law who, however, did demand and this help from their daughters and daughters-in-law.

- Things are much more equal in young couples. They share the shopping as well as the shopping list, and the cooking.
- They take it as one more responsibility to be shared. I see it in my elder nephews who have partners and in friends who are a bit older than my eldest daughter. They are beginning to do something, perhaps not as a rule but from time to time. When you go to the supermarket you see more and more young people. I don’t know about people from our generation, because there are still men whose biggest contribution to housework is to opening a tin. As for us women, we do something at home, even though we might not like doing it. I don’t like

it at all, not at all, but you have to do it in the end. It's something you have to learn to live with.

- The biggest problem I had with my mother-in-law was when I wanted to clear the dishes for her the first day. She gave me a funny look. She didn't understand that I had been brought up in a family where my father and mother had always worked, and where I saw both my father and mother washing up. I also did the washing up, so it did not appear striking to me. I suppose, in those days it wasn't the done thing...
- Here in the village, at my mother-in-law's house, we always had a glass of milk with cake or some other sweet thing. As soon as her brothers finished eating, my sister-in-law, who is getting married now but was 9 at the time, would automatically put the last spoonful of food in her mouth and my mother-in-law would say to her, 'Mari Carmen, get up and bring the milk for your brothers.'

The first conclusion that arises from the previous statements is the little consideration given to household tasks nowadays. Because this lack of consideration is found in both men and women, the different household tasks, when accomplished, are carried out interchangeably. No specific abilities are attributed to either the man or the woman, and when it comes to distributing the work and 'the cooking, the task can fall in anybody's hands.

"Today's women don't like to cook"

We can observe a significant change in women's attitude to housework, especially when it comes to cooking: 'Today's women don't like cooking at all'. With all the nuances that may be observed, this statement is commonly shared by men and women, as well as by older people and younger people.

- 'My wife doesn't like cooking. That's it. She doesn't like it. I'll tell you why: because women study now-a-days. She has been brought up the same way as boys, studying, and they don't know how to sew or anything'.

In some cases, the greater or lower inclination to cooking simply comes out in terms of enjoyment: a person enjoys cooking or they do not. Among other views, there is a more realistic and contextualized opinion: young women have not been or are not socialized for the kitchen. That is, it would seem that there has been a break with the culinary learning process as a consequence of women continuing with their studies after completing the A levels in a proportion almost superior to men's and/or them carrying out a paid job outside the home.

- 'My mother has always worked outside the home...'
- 'Our generation is one that is really breaking away from tradition - that's the tradition we started, breaking away from things - but this generation now is even breaking away even more.'

Among the different household responsibilities, it seems that cooking is the least appealing to women. Other responsibilities, regardless of whether they are more or less enjoyed, seem to be

accepted with greater devotion or resignation in comparison to cooking. The different 'value' given to one task or other, as we will see, could be an explanation of this situation.

Time, a determining constrain

Time seems to be a very important problem in our society. More specifically, time constrains directly affect the restructuring of the practices related to food and, not necessarily in a positive way. The increase of female paid work, commutes, and the length of the working day (and the variety of timetables which have to be made compatible within each home) turn time into one of the most important variables regarding food choices carried out by the individuals throughout their days. It is plausible to consider that the progress made in agricultural productivity, domestic culinary technology and food services have been encouraged by the time problems of the middle and working classes and are, therefore, the result of an evolution of the economy and urban life. This is one of the paradoxes of modernity: to eat a lot and quickly (*fast food*) is a sign of poverty and to eat little and slowly (*slow-food*) has become a privilege of the well-off classes. Many problems arise from managing working time and from the constrains that "cooking" entail. Furthermore, the compatibility between eating well and eating healthy, or eating nice food and eating healthily, do not always work out easily.

The problem with timetable constrains have different expressions and it affect in different ways the quality of one's diet in different ways. On the one hand, the amount of time which can be spent buying food or cooking has to be combined with the amount of time that one must, or would like to, dedicate to other tasks and activities. In any case, the time devoted to food provisioning and to cooking has decreased considerably, especially, among the younger and middle age generations. There is a general consensus regarding the fact that 'there is very little cooking being done. Eating is done fast. Everything is bought already made'. Therefore, 43.3% of the population identify themselves with practices which are all related to the 'lack of time':

- 18.2% are '*trying to do the shopping in one shop only*'
- 15.1% are '*eating fast*'
- 10% '*lack the time to do the shopping*'.

Time constrains can have a more or less direct effect on:

- the decrease in the frequency with which food is bought.
- the use of service food and/or meals.
- the amount of food eaten throughout the day.
- the minutes spent eating.
- commensality.

Cooking: not valued and stressful

Insofar as household tasks are not very much shared, specially those related to food preparation, it can become a particularly stressful task for the people responsible for them,

considering the various objectives, sometimes in conflict, that they have to satisfy: health, price, time, tastes, etc. For all these reasons, and considering also the already mentioned strong devaluation of household work, it does not seem strange that, today, the transfer of food and cooking knowledge becomes difficult within the home and because of this, the difficulties for having a healthier diet increase and that the food choices made are conditioned by the same lack of this type of knowledge. The relative lack of interest about tasks related to the daily diet has caused that, throughout the last decades, the transfer of cooking know-how has been gradually breaking up and/or re-formulated. The present generations of women, main recipients of this know-how, are no more educated to become mothers and cooks, learning from their own mothers or grandmothers the minimum culinary principles and dietary values.

This fact becomes evident in the 62.5% of the population who state that '*I would like to learn some more.*' There is a desire to gain more knowledge and culinary abilities, especially considering the increasing pressure those responsible for family food preparation have to deal with, be it the decline in the quality of diets or the inadequacy of the food habits developed both in children and in adults. Therefore, it seems that people are becoming aware of not having enough training in this field. The remaining 38% of the interviewed people say they know '*just enough to get by*' (11%), or that their knowledge is '*virtually nil*' (9.2%) or that they do not know '*because nobody taught them*' (8.9%) or because '*they are not interested in it*' (8.1%).

When observing the different answers according to gender, we find that the attitudes toward the acquisition of cooking competences still show a clear distinction between men and women, in the sense that the former wash their hands of it more than the latter. Compared to the 15.8% of men who say that nobody taught them how to cook or that their knowledge is virtually nil (14%), the percentages presented by women go down considerably to a 1.9% and 4.2% respectively. The most significant difference is found, however, when comparing the attitude women have towards wanting to learn more (84.9%), to men's attitude, which does not exceed 40.2%.

The breakdown of learning to cook

The break with the conventional handing down of cooking knowledge is a consequence of two different, but complementary, circumstances. On the one hand, it is a consequence of the fact that girls do not spend as much time with their mothers at home (they study and work) and they therefore, do not have the opportunity to engage in this slow learning process, made possible through contact. On the other hand, it is stated that young girls do not want to learn either. Out of the various household responsibilities, it seems that cooking is the least appealing to women. Other responsibilities, independently of whether they are accomplished with more or less dislike, seem to be accepted with more devotion or resignation than cooking. The different 'value' that some tasks or others have had is presented by some women as an explanation of this situation.

- 'Women like us who have studied have reached a point... we have our husbands who are demanding, and we've had children. With the little ones we've had to get our act together, because you have to go to the paediatrician where they tell you this and that, and you don't have your mother beside you. I didn't have my mother's help at all'.

- 'Cooking is not valued. My mother loved cooking and, from my mother, I've hardly learnt anything. I have some idea from having seen her, but she used to tell me to go away and she just with it herself. I also found studying more worthwhile than to learning how to cook. It's just the circumstances'.
- 'The only thing my mother valued is for us was getting a degree. We didn't have time. When I was at university, I didn't have time to think about what to make or what not to make for myself. You didn't realize and didn't even think about food. I believe that this is the problem: we have valued other things more and we have left the cooking to our mothers'

The loss of cooking knowledge can be, at least partially, compensated by the great variety of resources that industries have presented homes with, to make nutrition and cooking less imposing. On the one hand, while it is true that studying has estranged young people from the home and from greater possibilities of culinary knowledge, it is also true that, in many cases this same estrangement 'forces' the young people to 'learn no matter how' and without 'teachers'. This allows us to suppose that nowadays young people are not only much more receptive to products that 'make things easier' for cooking but also, to the recommendations from the different types of experts who 'inform' them about nutrition. For all these reasons, it is relevant to ask ourselves: which is the relation between the different types of food knowledge (about food, cooking, diet, meals, etc.) and the different favourite products? In which way is this knowledge updated in order to adapt to the new social and family circumstances of the home and to the new needs of those in it (health, safety, etc.)?

- 'My children have found themselves studying away from home and since they have to cook for themselves, they go to the market. Now the salads come already cut, so you don't have to spend time preparing the lettuce. He eats healthy, good and cheap food, even though he eats quickly. He has boiled rice and a fish and some bread and cold meats. I find that it's easy and cheap. Obviously, if you have to study away from home it is not the same. I understand that he is not going to prepare some kinds of food for himself'.

In homes with children, only a minority of parents get their children involved in carrying out the shopping, preparation the food and serving it. Parents admit that children do little at home but that it is their own fault because they have given in again in this field and have let them "duck out." Among other things, they say it is because "there are not many options". Family roles, some say, have changed extraordinarily to keep up with the changes in society, and today children are not interested in the household tasks. This is the case not only with general household tasks, but particularly with food related tasks. They only seem to be interested in consuming the food or purchasing food they are willing to consume. The majority of parents say that their children are "hyperpassive" and that they show little or no interest in learning all the while assuming that these tasks are their parents' responsibility.

The picture some parents draw of their children is that of a son or daughter "living in their bedroom" consuming the fruits of other people's work and using common spaces to satisfy their own needs. It comes up with some reiteration that, after the age of twelve, children are at home on their own, while their parents are working. In this situation, the children "do what they like." If they want to watch television they do, and if they want to "nibble some food", they do, and "they eat whatever they like the most", etc.

- When they are alone at home they eat whatever they find... whatever they like.
- Young people have a really passive attitude. They stay in their rooms, out of their own interest, in order to have everything under their control and to avoid letting their parents have a go at them. They are lodgers everywhere: they don't go shopping and, if they do, it's to eat what they buy for themselves... If it's for them, yes, but if it's to participate and collaborate with what's done at home, no.
- My husband is the type of man who helps out, or at least he has that intention. Our son, however, does not. I don't know if it is because we have only one, and as an only child he has to grow up a bit more. His father says, 'it's because he has two servants: his mother and father'.
- From what I can see, young people don't lift a finger...

"Not lifting a finger!" This is more or less the general complaint from parents regarding their children. Furthermore, parents admit that they are responsible for this "great passivity" because "they have given in". In any case, they also admit that, at some point, they will start cooking because, after all, "we do have to eat..."

- I've told him. I've told him he has to get in the kitchen with me and learn how to make an omelette, and how to make a casserole. I do want to get on the case these holidays, which is when I have time.

Some parents believe that is necessary for children to participate in the household tasks even if it takes an *agreement*, to use soft terminology, or *blackmailing*, that is, threatening to take away all other benefits if they do not collaborate. However, the majority of parents say that "being a son/daughter" means "being selfish" and that one has to live with that. There are parents who say that to getting the children involved in household tasks is part of the process of socialization. What they end up doing or not doing depends the extent to which you make them responsible people, which might involve fights and conflicts between the different family members (parents/children, brothers and sisters between them) and making them contribute in the preparation of the different meals. As teenagers begin to have to deal with some of their food intake themselves, they also begin to participate in the preparation of more or less simple meals, such as pasta, meat, fried or grilled eggs. Others think that, because it is necessary and useful, this participation must not be imposed as a continuous activity on a daily basis:

- My daughters are always distributing the work between themselves: the dog has to be taken for a walk and the table has to be laid. They'll say, 'okay, one of us lays the table'. Because neither of them wants to take the dog for a walk, they stay at home to lay the table but, if they don't have to take the dog for a walk, neither of them wants to lay the table. They are the ones who wanted a dog, so they have to take care of him. What happens? Saturday or Sunday comes and their mother has taken the dog out so the only help that is left is to lay the table, which neither of them wants to do, so they fight to not have to lay the table. It is the same with house work. If one of them has made the bed, the other one will say, 'Miriam hasn't made her bed, so I'm not making mine'.

- My daughter, the eldest one, is quite old now and she is starting to cook. I have made an agreement with her whereby she cooks two days a week. You can't impose a continuous and daily activity on her; they have to be more sporadic things. The youngest one has had the duty to lay and clear the table, to put the dish washer on and to tidy up the dishes for years.

If we take into account the fact that those who express themselves in this last way are mainly young people, especially boys, we confirm the hypothesis that led to the statement of a partial/total cooking incompetence and, consequently, to the effects that can be derived from this, nutritionally as much as socially. Indeed, between the ages of 12 and 17, 23.6% of the people interviewed said that their knowledge is *virtually nil*; 20%, that *nobody taught them*; and, 21% know *just enough to get by*. Of these, only 27.7% say that they would like to learn more. In the following age group, composed of 18 to 24 year olds, the results are a bit contradictory. Although the number of people who claimed *not to be interested* (13.4%) or *to know just enough* (24.1%) increases, the percentage of young people who said that *nobody taught them* (9.9%) or that their knowledge is *virtually nil* (14%) decreases. Most importantly, the desire to *learn more* increases considerably in relation to the previous age group (42.3%).

As a general rule, the involvement of children and teenagers (10-13 years) is limited to tasks such as laying and clearing the table or partially participating in the shopping, (usually to get small items, such as bread or a drink) or to include little treats for themselves in the shopping basket when they accompany their parents.

- I buy things for myself. My mother gives me money and I buy phoskitos (a type of cake), coca-cola, ice-cream, sweets...
- We go shopping with my father and mother. On Saturdays, the three of us also go and do the shopping for the whole week, but my brother never comes with us.
- We go with my mother and we always get something for ourselves.
- When we go shopping, I buy sweets for myself, chocolate, tidbits, little packets...

A last comment

In Spanish society, children and young people are not gaining basic cooking abilities (abilities and/or knowledge related to what to buy, prepare and cook) in the general process of socialization. It is a relatively logical situation if we take into account that the majority of the population would like to learn more, admit their own limitations, and agree that cooking daily is an activity where one has to spend more time than one would like to or has. The transfer of skills is not taking place at home or at school, or only partially. At school, the food related transfer is taking place by adapting to the worries that prevail in this institution, that is, orienting food knowledge towards health (prevention) and, for those who eat in school, the acquisition of rudimentary table manners. This suggests that the knowledge and abilities passed on to the students are of a nutritional and/or behavioural nature and limited to relatively specific contents: groups of food, the more adequate quantities, possible diseases, hygiene habits, the proper way to sit or attitudes about food. It is not surprising, therefore, that despite gaining nutritional knowledge in more or less depth during their school years, the cooking knowledge is not guaranteed in children, and neither is the

correspondence between what they consume and what nutritionists, or the gained nutritional knowledge, would recommend. It is not surprising that, given the institutional emphasis on nutritional education rather than on diet, boys and girls show a similar and acceptable level of dietetic knowledge, gained at school, while their cooking abilities and knowledge (shopping, preparation, cooking) are nonexistent or very limited. Likewise, it is common for their consumption not to comply to that recommended by nutritionists or their gained nutritional knowledge.

The fact that there is proof of a break with and a dispersion of the passing on of food related knowledge in its usually oral and generational form, does not mean that, once women abandon the origin group to make a new one, individual or shared, they will not regain, this responsibility, perpetuating therefore, a model of gender division of the household work that is not very different from the previous one.