



The Meaning of Cooking

Jean-Claude Kaufmann

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In 1785 James Boswell and Dr Johnson were trying to come up with a way of distinguishing human beings from animals. 'The beasts have memory, judgement, and all the faculties and passions of our mind, in a certain degree,' said Boswell, 'but no beast is a cook.'

Cooking is central to our lives, despite the fact that it never received the attention from serious scholars it might have had Boswell's definition caught on. The kitchen is in many ways the heart of the home, and the dining table is the family's little theatre where we all act out our parts. It has its script ('how has your day been?') and it is the setting for both the pleasures and the crises of couples and family life. Having to sit facing each other brings out the best and the worst in us. Eating a meal is an ordeal by truth, and it reveals the true state of our conjugal and parental relationships.

In this rich and highly entertaining book the French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann takes us into kitchens and dining rooms and deciphers the meaning of food, cooking and eating in the lives of families and couples. We get inside cooks' heads and come to know their innermost - and often contradictory - thoughts. Should they rustle up a quick and simple meal, or create something special? That's a difficult question, as they are forging social relationships as well as making meals. Through this meticulous exploration of the everyday, Kaufmann brings out the astonishing ways in which we create our most meaningful relationships with our lovers, spouses and offspring through the ordinary acts of creating and consuming food.

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