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## **Consumer Culture Matters: Insights From Contemporary Representations of Cooking**

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This paper sets out to explore the potential contribution of a turn to cookbooks for enriching our understanding of the character of consumer culture. We build a line of argument that positions culture as text and representations of culture as situated inscriptions. Commensurate with this argument, it develops an analytical framework based on the study of culinary texts as placed cultural artefacts, suggesting that this approach is largely neglected by consumer researchers but offers rich scope for broadening the way we read consumer culture. It argues that cookbooks should be read as situated cultural products, as constructed social forms which are amenable to textual analysis. In this respect it declares that, rather than simply being understood as reflections of contemporary consumer culture, cookbooks should be understood as artefacts of consumer culture in the making, texts which speak of magical cultural tales of transformation and re-enchantment.

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# Consumer Culture Matters: Insights from Contemporary Representations of Cooking

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## INTRODUCTION

The dynamic of this paper is partly driven by curiosity about the apparent lack of curiosity regarding food, its preparation, presentation, serving and consumption, which suggest themselves as interestingly constructed and contestable sites of knowledge about contemporary consumer culture. A number of useful ethnographic studies have analysed notions of homemade food (Moisio, Arnould and Price, 2004; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) and the practices of unbranding foodstuffs (Coupland, Iacobucci and Arnould 2005), paving the way for a focus upon representations of food and their attendant spaces of appropriation and practices. We build upon their lines of thought by arguing that cooking must be understood to mark the “*transition between nature and culture*” (Levi-Strauss 1970: 164). If this is so, then it clearly suggests a potentially rich vein of social inquiry about how consumers construct their worlds in and through texts and its attendant talk around food. For such representations we believe are so bound up with our lives that they can be seen to do all sorts of identity work and can be read as providing consumers with what we term *recipes for life* instructing them on the whys and wherefores of consuming, providing quick, easy and tailored solutions to time-strapped, harried consumers to resolve in an imaginary fashion the problems of contemporary life (Hewer and Brownlie, 2006).

This line of argument draws upon the work of Appadurai (1988) who suggests that framing culture as ‘text’ offers one way forward for an adequate empirical study of culinary culture and its naturalized forms of representation in cuisine and commodity cookbooks. But also, after Miller we argue that “goods [cookbooks] represent culture because they are an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society, our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices. The authenticity of artefacts as culture...derives from their active participation in a process of social self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others” (1987: 215). Like others (cf. Cook and Crang 1996: 132) we follow Miller (1987) in understanding culture as “involving processes in which cultural life is objectified, in which objects are constructed as social forms, and hence in which cultural artefacts have to be understood in relation to their social and spatial contexts” (1987: 215).

We argue that the study of culinary culture, as represented in commodity cookbooks is largely neglected by consumer researchers. However, textual analysis, as a device for illuminating the meaning of social phenomena is not; nor is its important conceptual inversion asserting that texts read us, as much as we read texts, or, that they think us as much as we think them. Indeed Hebdige argues that “it requires a literary sensibility to ‘read’ society with the requisite subtlety.” (1979: 8). By means of this line of argument interpretive consumer researchers can assert that society reproduces itself through a process of naturalization, where particular sets of social relations, particular ways of organizing the world, appear as if they were universal and timeless. They can investigate, among other things, the possibility of symbolically repossessing ‘objects’ as placed cultural artifacts, in order to discern the veiled messages inscribed on their glossy surfaces and trace them out as ‘maps of meaning’ (Hebdige 1979: 18); reading them *otherwise* (Bennett and Royle 1995: 162), for the possibility of ‘contrapuntal readings’ (Said 1993: 78).

Interpretive consumer researchers are already sensitive to the useful insights gained from scholarship that situates its object of inquiry in the contested cultural dynamic of multiple representations. Indeed, Belk urges that studies of consumption can “no longer afford to ignore the broader consumption issues being raised in other disciplines” (1995: 62). So, for instance, consumer researchers have turned to literature (Fitchett 2002; Eid 1999; Stokes 1997; Brown 1996), film (Denzin 2001; Holbrook 1986), poetry (Sherry and Schouten 2002; Holbrook 1990) and art (Schroeder 1999; Brown and Patterson 2000; Fillis 2000) for cultural artefacts capable in Geertzian (1993) terms of rendering the curve of social discourse into an inspectable form.

This essay builds on these lines of thought, rendering cookbooks as cultural artefacts (commodity cookbooks) which have to be understood as part and parcel of their social context. In so doing, the wider ambition of the essay is to explore the potential contribution of the textual approach for enriching our understanding of contemporary consumer culture with regard to the preparation, presentation and consumption of food.

## TURNING TO COMMODITY COOKBOOKS

In our view such work demonstrates the potential of this form of critique to generate a disciplinary space from within which to begin to problematise representations of contemporary culture, including representations of contemporary culinary culture. Schroeder (1999) shows how to accomplish this problematisation, and thus to read contemporary society through the device of textual analysis. In this way, we argue, after Pilchner (1995), that cookbooks can be treated as a literary genre that is part of the fabric and expression of our culture and which, in an analytical sense, serves to reproduce culture. This view is echoed by Appadurai when he states that “we need to view cookbooks in the contemporary world as revealing artifacts of culture in the making” (1988: 22). Or, as Tobias writes, “Cookbooks contain not only recipes, but hidden clues and cultural assumptions about class, race, gender and ethnicity. They reflect many of the dramatic transformations that have come to define the boundaries of the modern public sphere.” (1998: 3).

This material establishes our central point that, from an analytical perspective, commodity cookbooks must be understood, not merely as instrumental texts, conveying, by means of recipes, information about ingredients, their assembly, processing and presentation. Rather, they also offer access to “unusual cultural tales” (Appadurai 1988: 3) which generate representations of food as a placed cultural artefact, suggestive of where we have been, who we are and where we may be going. This point is underlined in Pilchner’s research when he approaches cookbooks as voices, capable of speaking “unique tales of home and nation” (1995: 301). So, understood as a form of placed cultural artefact (Gagliardi 1990), we can conclude that commodity cookery books can then be studied for what they reveal about the constitutive effects of time and space (Neuhaus 1999), questions of identity (Zafar 1999), the construction of gender norms (Tobias 1998; Neuhaus 1999) and the reproduction of dominant culinary values (Curtin 1992).

Tobias (1998) analysed cookery books published in eighteenth-century America, concluding that they served to position women and define their role in society. Pilchner (1995) continues this theme in his analysis of Mexican cookbooks, arguing that they served as sources of ‘cultural capital’ for women in Latin American

society. Likewise, in her analysis of two black women's cookbooks, Zafar (1999) notes that they represent a space through which cultural identity is 'recreated'. In this way she likens her analysis to that of an ethnographic journal, providing a "reading of what we eat, to understand how we construct a self around the axes of food" (1999: 463). Zafar sums up the revelations of her analysis as placing "...African-American cuisine in a political context, record[ing] a social history that must not be forgotten, and relat[ing] the lived experience of the writer and/or her family." (Zafar 1999: 464).

Zafar thus suggests that cookbooks represent, or function as 'recoveries', or 'recastings' of the culture of African-American consumption, as signs of refusal and of forbidden identity. This use of cookbooks as cultural artefacts can also be traced in the work of Novero (2000). Her analysis of cookbooks published in Weimar Germany, between the First and Second World Wars, reveals how they function to "reconcile nutritional and economic precepts with an ideology of taste and a modern lifestyle" (2000: 163). This is most evident where she reveals how the representations situate cooking as a technical skill, mediated by the rhetoric of instrumental rationality and efficiency. For instance, in her analysis of a cookbook by Kopp, entitled *Bache nach Grundrezepten* (Bake with Basic Recipes 1933), Novero shows how its content, that is the recipes, are rendered as if they were "...formulas that have been tested and perfected" (2000: 167).

This scientific representation of cooking is further conveyed through the use of over five hundred black and white photographs illustrating the 'precise' stages of food preparation. It is clearly framed as 'rationalized work' (Novero 2000), and Novero struggles to find a place for any notion of 'pleasure' in the representations. In a study of the changing contents of food columns in popular UK women's magazines between 1967-1992, Warde arrives at similar conclusions. He observes a discourse of compliance, noting that: "Information is now given fairly routinely, not only about precise quantities of ingredients and cooking times, but also about preparation time, nutrient contents, sometimes shopping instructions too...science, measurement, the use of information derived from experiment, rather than trial and error and *ad hoc* judgement, appear more frequently in the food columns." (1994: 24).

This discourse of compliance contrasts with the notion of culinary practice as a site of resistance. Bracken's publication *The I Hate to Cook Book* (1960) is indicative of the social tensions of the late 1950s. It provides tales of the drudgery of cooking and the repression of women in male dominated society. In coded form the book suggests how women might avoid this drudgery through using processed foods and avoiding elaborate recipes, yet still be seen to fulfil the expectations of their defined role. This text functions in a subversive and liberating way to clearly contest and encourage resistance to the dominant gender norms of the 1950s.

### QUESTIONS OF METHOD

This essay has its origins in questions raised during a wider empirical study of attitudes towards food and cooking among young people in the UK.<sup>1</sup> During interviews and focus groups, informants suggested with noticeable frequency that two particularly popular TV cooks and their cookbooks performed a key role in making the routine and mundane everyday practice of cooking appealing and 'sexy' to them: Jamie Oliver's *The Return of the Naked Chef* (2000) and Nigella Lawson's *Nigella Bites* (2001).

Following Barthes (1973) and Zafar (1999) whose studies both drew on a critique of two texts, we also selected two texts (Oliver and Lawson) as an appropriate way to set off on a modest exploratory textual journey, intending, through the reportage of our contrapuntal readings, to generate information to help consumer researchers decide if representations of contemporary culinary culture do indeed have the potential to enrich our understanding of consumption. Our research thus maps out the three core themes to emerge from a reading of the cookbooks, these are organised as follows: re-enchanting the kitchen, stoveside pottering and culinary tourism.

### THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF THE KITCHEN

One of the key themes to emerge from the research is how the two cookbooks attempt to situate their various representations of culinary practice against the backdrop of contemporary events and social trends. This is accomplished in a number of interesting ways. First is in terms of how the contents are organized. That is, in eschewing the traditionally popular approach of organizing recipes by main type of produce, eg meat, pasta, or fish, Nigella's chapter structure is almost existential in its use of headings evocative of the angst of contemporary lifestyles. Chapters with accompanying images are positioned as envelopes for recipes, as soul food of therapeutic value for the following occasions: 'Rainy Days', 'Slow-Cook Weekend', 'Comfort Food' (arranged according to "our life, our timetable and our mood").

This is echoed in the aestheticized (Featherstone 1991) 'look' of the cookbooks where the focus is very much on design intensity, glossy, colourful and artful image-based communications of the kind found in lifestyle magazines targeted at the 'sophisticated and cultured'. Many of the images foreground the kitchen and its associated technological paraphernalia as key signifiers of lifestyle. For example, the image which heralds chapter one in *Nigella Bites*, entitled 'All-day breakfast', stages truth effects in support of a claim that our notions of breakfast are, or at least should be, undergoing considerable rethinking, as a site of resistance to popular notions of the stressful rushed breakfast. In this sense the stylised aspirational representations of culinary culture delivered in Nigella's book can not only be thought of coded responses to changes affecting the community as a whole. They can also be seen as an attempt to reposition and recontextualise the 'commodity cookbook', by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones—in this case as a site of resistance to contemporary cultural imperatives.

Throughout this cookbook, Lawson's poetic language literally engulfs the reader ("I want to be there in the kitchen with you; my words are merely my side of the conversation I imagine we might have"), as do the images of Nigella herself which precede each of the eight chapters in the book. Alongside, or more appropriately preceding such description the reader is presented with a full double page image of Nigella in long silk dressing gown, hair in curlers, pouring a cup of coffee, clearly with time on her side socialising with an imaginary friend/reader. On her kitchen units sit a number of unused stainless-steel utensils, each arrayed with their brand logos clearly decipherable. Providing further glimpses of an aspirational lifestyle statement, there is the liminal presence of a *Kitchenaid* Mixer and a *Dualit* Blender—both branded tools, representing the essential scaffolding of a lifestyle kitchen for the culinary guru. The subtle backgrounding of fetishized machinery and foregrounding of the beautiful female gastro-guru, reveals a discourse of recovery through distance and control which is at odds with the notion that human conduct is increasingly subject to forms of control and constraint delivered by machines. It reproduces notions of technology in its place, as a tool of power to be controlled

<sup>1</sup>This data was selected from a broader study of young people's living skills, in total twenty young people aged from sixteen to twenty-two years, living in the UK were interviewed during 2002.

and used to support and facilitate human activity, not to dominate or constrain it. These objects are not mere accoutrements though. As aspirational brands they can also be understood as vital props, as wands for negotiating the jungle of contemporary culinary culture and achieving some of the new magic of the sexy culinary guru. They are also important symbols by means of which to imagine the re-enchantment of the commodity kitchen, as a magical place to conjure up food which will transform the reader. A space in which the emphasis is strictly opposed to the logic of rationality, rather the emphasis is upon the kitchen as a space in which to dwell or inhabit to counters the strains of contemporary life. The chapter entitled *Templefood*, opens with the following suggestion:

“I think I’d better start by explaining what Templefood is: it’s my term for the soothing, pure, would-be restorative food I make for myself after one binge or late night too far. ‘Temple’ as in ‘my body is a...’ Well, mine’s not, but this is what I eat when I want to feel it is. And don’t think—as if—I’m counselling deprivation or restraint, but rather the holy glow of self-indulgently virtuous pleasure...” (2001, p.223).

The section entitled *Comfort Food* explores what we might term a *recipe for life*, which emphasises the idea of food as transformative:

“If I’m being honest, for me all food is comfort food, but there are times when you need a bowlful of something hot or a slice of something sweet just to make you feel that the world is a safer place. We all get tired, stressed, sad or lonely, and this is the food that soothes.” (2001, p.32).

Food in this sense is re-presented as embodying magical, enchanting and transformative potentiality, capable of soothing the weary consumer in times of strife, anxiety and doubt.

### STOVESIDE POTTERING, MAKING THE KITCHEN ‘HABITABLE’

The kitchen space is also part and parcel of this magical transformation as the text positions this site as stripped of drudgery, toil and failure, rather as a space of magical self-realisation and imagined social affiliation. For Oliver the practice of cooking appears to be very much secondary to the act of consuming. Many of his recipes in this respect focus upon the temporal dimension, justifying their use in terms of their speediness to prepare. For example, his recipe for ‘beef tomatoes, basil, ham and mild cheese on thick toast’ states “This brekkie or snack takes precisely 1 minute to make...Very simple, very tasty” (2000: 30). The recipe for ‘braised five hour lamb with wine, veg and all that’ starts with the lines: “This is a real hearty and trouble-free dinner. There’s barely any preparation, just a nice long cooking time which will reward you with the most tender meat and tasty sauce.” (2000: 174). Thus many of the images work hard to convey the pleasures to be had from the sociability that surrounds consuming and preparing food, or as he prefers ‘tucking in’. This view is reiterated in Nigella’s approach which elaborates upon the importance of home-made (see also and its powerfully evocative nostalgic potential. Granted we are given images of cooking as a ‘low-effort undertaking’ (2001: 190), but alongside such talk she suggests ‘stoveside pottering helps me unwind’ (2001: 55). Surely a recipe aimed especially to warm the heart of any world weary, time-strapped consumer. In her recipe for Lemon risotto this theme of ‘stoveside pottering’ is explored:

“This is comfort food on so many levels. For one, risotto has to be one of the most comforting things to eat ever. What’s

more, although everyone goes on about the finickiness and crucial fine-tuning involved, I find risotto immensely comforting to make: in times of strain, mindless repetitive activity—in this case 20 minutes of stirring—can really help.” (2001: 43).

We are thus told that for Nigella the act of cooking is symbolic of ‘temperament and habit’. This more care-driven and emotional approach attempts to deny the calculative rationality of weights and measures, in her recipe for mashed potato we are told: “I hesitate before giving quantities, so please regard the specifications below as the merest guidelines.” (2001: 32). Additionally, in ‘granny lawson’s lunch dish’ we are told “Cooking isn’t just about ingredients, weights and measures: it’s social history, personal history.” (2001: 162). A representation which attempts to imbue the act of cooking with extraordinary relevance. The practice of cooking in this sense is about making the space of the kitchen ‘habitable’, a scene for numerous ‘silent productions’ or ways of ‘making do’, if we adopt the poeticism of de Certeau (1984: xx). Images of the practice of cooking is thus much more than unspectacular mundane acts, it is where the ordinary is made extraordinary akin in other words to a form of *praxis* wherein, to paraphrase Miller (1991: 207-208) philosophical conundrums and contradictions are worked out but by other means.

### INVOKING CULINARY TOURISM

The idea of cookbooks as offering consumers some kind of easy made solution to the dilemmas of contemporary life is extended through a discussion of the games of distinction played out in the texts. Warde (1994) considers recipes as ‘messengers of taste’, a point reiterated in the work of Gallegos who read such texts as ‘manuals of taste’ (2005). A recipe provided by Oliver for: “*Seafood broth, ripped herbs, toasted bread and garlic aioli*” serves to illustrate this point. Let’s start with the title, reference to the ingredient ‘aioli’ appears salient: “The aioli is not essential with this, but it is fantastic and you should give it a go.” (2000: 90). In other words, a game of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) appears to be being played out through the exotic ingredients included, a game which on the surface offers to the consumer an apparent sense of the abundance of choice, but such choice is paradoxically constraining, especially if you lack the required vocabulary to understand. The term Aioli we might suggest serves to exclude and distinguish those without the required cultural competence, or as Bourdieu prefers: “Consumption is...an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (voir) is a function of knowledge (savoir), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programs for perception.” (1984: 2).

To help understand how cookbooks stage and reconstruct moments of cultural difference we invoke the work of Cook and Crang (1996), who refer to the ‘local globalization of culinary culture’. Herein, the cookbook becomes akin to a site from which to experience and practice such local globalization, a space from which to participate in metrocentric global culinary culture. To demonstrate this we are given the following gamut of recipes by Nigella wherein ‘American pancakes with wafer bacon and maple syrup’ followed by ‘Asian-spiced kedgeree’ is followed by a trip to the Orient in ‘Masala Omelette’ and then a trip back to Europe through ‘Apple and blackberry kuchen’. The cookbook in this sense reads like the enchanted and all too enchanting visitors guide for a grandiose symbolic tour across the world in miniature, that is from the U.S. to Asia to Europe in the space of fourteen pages. In this sense the cookbooks not only provide geography lessons, but

symbolically this world becomes the embodiment of McLuhan's 'Global Village'. We argue that through the deliberate use of enchanting streams of symbols of travel and exotic places, they also manufacture the global diversity of culinary culture and bring this difference to your tabletop. As Cook and Crang remark "the touristic quality of these constructions [is] particularly apparent when [it] allows consumers to bring the experience of travel to their own domestic culinary regimes" (1996: 136). So, you can think of cookbooks as offering you a holiday for your tongue which, as Lash and Urry observe, "encourages us to gaze upon and collect the signs and images of many cultures—to act as tourists in other words" (1994: 272). Therefore, even if the recipes are not made and the exotic food is not eaten, the reader can still gaze at colorful constructions of far flung places of the globe and achieve imaginary gratification (Smart, 1994) and transformation therein.

### DISCUSSION

This paper has follows in a long line of previous studies that have attempted to read consumer culture through its array of popular culture texts (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). We have sought to render cookbooks as cultural artefacts to thereby make them amenable to textual analysis, in order to counter their taken-for-grantedness amongst consumer researchers. It is further argued, that the turn to contemporary culinary practices and their representations serves to enrich our understanding of consumer culture, enabling us to illuminate not only dominant discourses, ie. with respect to notions of food as cultural capital and culinary tourism but also counter-discourses emerging forms of meaning. In this respect we seek to position and read off cookery books, as windows through which to glimpse and problematise representations of contemporary culture. But more, we want to suggest that through their representations are gleaned instances of culture in the making. Chief amongst these is the turn to what might be termed a discourse of compassion through which culinary culture is positioned as rather than simply consumption or production, but as a form of distribution through which emerge new patterns of sociality. In addition, we traced the emergence of what we might refer to as a mystification of the kitchen itself, as a pocket of resistance, a location for magical practices. The kitchen space represented as a site where acts of apparent mundane consumption assume the form of extraordinary consumption, a space for the practicing of what Fiske might term the little 'victories' (1989) wherein cooking, or at least through its representations and discourses, becomes a tactic to make the kitchen space habitable. A counter-discourse to all those notions of junk food and convenience, where the logic of *doing the right thing* is the order of the day. Such a line of argument concurs with the work of Firat and Dholakia who suggest that "...the social transformation of our day can be expected to occur through pockets of resistance, not in terms of a frontal attack or challenge...but in terms of ignoring authority and insisting on doing 'one's own thing'" (1998: 155). In this manner, we hope we have demonstrated that such cookbooks are never simply instrumental and instructional texts about ingredients, their assembly, processing and presentation, rather cookery books reveal and offer glimpses of very unusual tales of cultural transformation.

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