Making Pancakes On Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition

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When we think of family foodways as a kind of cyclic communal performance, each family member can be seen as a unique participant in the ongoing re-creation of the family’s traditions. Every family member is a consumer, but in Western societies the burden of actual operations in the performance of family foodways has been borne mostly by the woman. In the American nuclear family, Mom is nearly always in the culinary foreground; typically it is she who cooks, serves, cleans up, and informally instructs children—in the particulars of her realized culinary competence.

Dad is another story. He may be called the “breadwinner” because he either finances most food purchases or obtains foodstuffs himself from their sources in raw or ingredient form. But the very idea of male cookery often connotes relative incompetence. Humor based on the helpless male in the kitchen shows up not only in occasional cartoons, but also in pervasive mass-media advertising, wherein the man is depicted almost exclusively as an inept cook but an appreciative consumer of his wife’s cooking, which, though superlative, can always be improved dramatically by her adoption of the sponsor’s product. In media images, the male role in family food preparations is usually limited to a few carefully bounded

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skills. Dad can certainly mix drinks for a cocktail party, or carve the roast or Thanksgiving turkey, but he only takes complete charge of cooking operations when they are outdoors: on the campground or at the backyard barbecue. Amateur male cookery thus seems to be stereotyped as inept at the worst, limited at best, and rare in any case. Men can be stereotyped as good cooks too, for at the opposite end of the media spectrum is the professional male cook. Professionalism puts the male in a different light; his capabilities are assumed to be great, especially if he works under the name "chef."

Of course, American family men have cooked at home occasionally since at least the mid-nineteenth century. As late as the 1930s it is reported "a man who went into the kitchen to cook for the fun of it was in danger of being made a laughingstock," yet males who cook and who let their cooking be known are apparently on the increase throughout the United States. There are several reasons for the emergence of this tradition, as well as a number of important consequences.

Some popular writers on American foodways have explained the enlargement of the male cooking repertoire as a function of the post-World War II popularity of outdoor barbecues. In the 1930s the California magazine Sunset began to publish and widely distribute a catalog of plans for outdoor barbecue structures. By the end of the war, the idea of backyard barbecuing on an impressive stone or brick grill was coming into fashion throughout the country, and it was doubly acceptable to men by virtue of being outdoors and focused on meat. As one writer put it in 1962:

. . . the kitchen had come to be regarded as woman's sphere from frontier days onward, [but] cooking out of doors was different. It reminded grown men of Boy Scout days when they roasted hot dogs over campfires. Building up a good fire in the charcoal grill was thoroughly masculine. So was the cooking of a steak.3

By 1967, a regular writer for Gourmet magazine announced:

Some seventy percent of American men today perform at least some measure of the home food preparation. Much of their skillery is practiced over a barbecue unit alfresco style but more and more they

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3. Ibid., 326.
are moving their talents to the kitchen and are becoming aficionados of the more intricate items of cuisine.  

The amateur male cook seems all of a sudden to be evident everywhere, but what he cooks and how often seem circumscribed by the expectations of others. Even when cooking for the family, men may more readily attempt preparation of those foods and beverages which stereotypically are thought to be preferred by men: meat and potatoes, pie, coffee, and alcoholic beverages, and to some extent, breads made with corn, rye, or whole wheat. Moreover, many urban and suburban men seem primarily attracted as both eaters and cooks to those foods which are especially hearty, large, spicy, and complex—the colossal sandwiches Dagwood has made for forty years or more speak nicely to this point. But there are subtle countercurrents in tradition which are ignored in the media; older men living in the country or displaced from rural life may be disinclined to experiment with modern foods, preferring those which are "old-timey" instead.  

Men can always make cookery into an acceptably-masculine practice by emphasizing any one or more of the elements in this complex of features. For example, by engaging in what H. Allen Smith has called "hot pepper machismo," a man can lay claim to a realm of cooking that is all his own simply because his wife and family cannot take the heat, and he can. Once a recipe has been staked out as the man's exclusive territory, he may go so far as to assert that it cannot be properly cooked by anyone else:  

As a mere male [a husband] won't rate hell high around the kitchen unless he can occasionally come up with some masculine masterpiece that will leave the little woman all agog with astonishment. Such a dish is hashed browned potatoes. No woman ever did 'em right. Always, during the cooking, they've got to mush around the frying pan with a spatula or fork, and their forebodings over folding them onto a hot platter are pitiful to see.  

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Liberated male cooks are also more likely to spend substantial sums of money on fancy or special-purpose cookware. “Mom may make do with an old skillet for cooking omelets, but if Dad is into omelets, he’ll probably invest in a copper or French porcelain omelet pan.”9 If men want to purchase more exotic “gourmet” cookware—pasta-machines, barbecue forks, French-fry cutters, and aprons which aren’t frilly and which bear aggressive masculine images and messages—it is probably because they see in the technology of cookery a system which proclaims their interests to include much more than the edible product. To the wife who cooks regularly, food preparation is a task to be completed; to the husband who cooks now and then, it is a hobby to be exulted in and carried out with ostentatious finesse. Special cooking gadgets proclaim the special cook. Once Dad begins regularly to prepare omelets in their own special pan, they become a specialty recipe which he and all the other members of the family associate with him.

One of the most interesting aspects of male cookery in the family is the husband’s preemption not only of special dishes, but also of whole meals. In many families the weekend meal pattern is distinct from that of regular work days and school days; to use the old terms, weekend foodways are festal, while the weekday pattern is ferial. Even though weekend foodways as a whole may be characterized by a greater freedom of food choices, the male cook typically establishes sovereignty over a given weekend meal for which he always prepares the same foods. The diminishment of choice then marks that meal quickly as a family tradition constructed around Dad’s preparation of his specialty. For one male student of mine, the special weekend meal is always Friday night, when his father prepares any one of a number of recipes built around pork chops. Such limited experimentation with dishes is important to the weekend male cook, but whether the recipe is varied or not, the mealtime and its meaning within the family become sacrosanct. The very fact that Dad usually makes pancakes on Sunday is enough to make Sunday breakfast special to the rest of the family; a successful recipe helps, but is not essential.

The association between a male cook and Sunday breakfast seems especially longstanding; in some families a father has been in charge

of this meal for many years. Recalling his own father’s cookery, James Beard has written:

In later years he looked forward to the periods when my mother was away at the beach so he could live on his own cooking. Aside from this, he had a favorite late Sunday breakfast menu, which he produced every week, save in winter, consisting of deliciously sautéed chicken served with a bacon-and-cream sauce made in the sauté pan. With this dish there were generally hot biscuits, toasted crumpets, or just good toast. In winter the menu changed to sausage, smoked fish, or country ham. These expressions of my father’s culinary skill were memorable indeed, and whenever friends stayed with us on weekends, they used to request his breakfast.10

A Milwaukean named Val Krystofiak began to make whole-wheat pancakes for his family’s Sunday brunch beginning in the mid-1950s.11 While his first pancakes were made with commercial whole-wheat flour, he soon bought a small flour mill of his own—there’s gadgetry again—and now invariably waits until the last minute to grind the flour, ostensibly because “the vitamin E in the wheat is lost almost immediately after the grinding.” Krystofiak’s pancake recipe has been adopted by several of his grown-up children and his neighbors; it was even established in England by his son Tom, who taught it to several postgraduates at Cambridge University. The recipe itself can therefore be said to exist as an independently diffusable tradition, but for the Krystofiak family its central meaning is always tied to the ritual of Val’s Sunday breakfast preparation. Ritual may have as much to do with the weekly wheat-grinding as concern over vitamin E.

One of the most extensive and useful descriptions of this special pattern of male cookery appears in a small volume entitled Sunday Breakfast: A Cookbook for Men, published in 1971. The author, Craig Michaels, explains the rationale of the book in an introductory section labelled “Man to Man”:

Sunday breakfast, à la Dad, has been a tradition in my home for some 15 years now, and it is a tradition that is enjoyed by the whole family. Mother probably enjoys our Sunday breakfasts most, as she

gets a complete relief from her regular cooking chores. The children enjoy it because they get an opportunity to pitch in and help Dad do something special. And I enjoy it because it gives me an opportunity to do something creative and please my family at the same time.\textsuperscript{12}

Michaels goes on to make some other suggestive and interesting statements which help to qualify the Sunday-breakfast/male-cook tradition. For example:

Variety is the spice of morning breakfast with Dad.\textsuperscript{13} Pancakes . . . require little expertise and are extremely satisfying to serve. . . . The pancake will be a fun breakfast and one which will not leave you hungry.\textsuperscript{14}

On the other hand:

Since either cooked or cold cereal, of one kind or another, is eaten for breakfast Monday through Saturday in many homes, we do not regard it as a special Sunday treat.\textsuperscript{15}

Michaels also stresses the importance of culinary equipment; speaking of the proper way to serve hot breakfast beverages, he suggests that serving sets “would certainly make a nice gift for your wife, and would also add to your ability to carry off your Sunday breakfast with increased expertise.”\textsuperscript{16}

A good deal of additional evidence could be appended at this point to further establish the pattern. My own preliminary inquiries into male cookery have naturally yielded some blanket denials of any involvement with food preparation, and yet a surprising proportion of those men I’ve questioned tell me that they too prepare a limited number of specialty dishes, cook breakfast or brunch, or sometimes prepare supper on Saturday or Sunday, and some acknowledge that their own fathers did one or another of these things. There is much more information available in popular sources like the Better Homes and Gardens column “He Cooks,” which began in 1971. That column frequently, though not invariably,
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features amateur male cooks, and though not all of them stress an involvement with Sunday breakfast, their statements show how they perceive their own cookery in relation to the normative female pattern:

Please note that [my] emphasis on cooking after marriage was prompted by my desire to cook. My wife Eileen is and always has been an excellent cook.17

[Bob Israel's] cooking time is limited to weekends. Then he's in charge of turning out meals for his wife . . . and son. When the Israels entertain, the activity centers around food, and the men do the cooking while the gals retreat to the den.18

Although Leonard Smucker has always enjoyed cooking, he says he really got hooked when he started experimenting with bread-baking.19

I guess it's an indication of Baking Liberation that I get requests for the coffee-cake recipe from both men and women.20

I do not yet feel I am in a position to explicate completely the emerging Sunday-breakfast/male-cook tradition, but some of my tentative conclusions and further speculations deserve mention. It seems to me, for instance, that in a society which publicly values food "just like Mama used to make," any regular pattern of male cookery probably contains some elements of a symbolic inversion. Dad's cooking exists in evident contradistinction to Mom's on every level: his is festal, hers ferial; his is socially and gastronomically experimental, hers mundane; his is dish-specific and temporally-marked, hers diversified and quotidian; his is play, hers is work.

Each of these ideal oppositions is reinforced by the real behaviors of male cooks. The festal pattern of male cooking generates and maintains a celebratory attitude which shows up in the adoption of specialties, the preemption of weekend meals and guest-dinners, or greater inclinations to experiment. All of these effects are seen in the cooking of James Cain, a store manager in Lexington, Kentucky,

who specializes in uncommon Italian dishes like "Fried Spinach" and also cooks brunch every Sunday for his family. Cain enjoys trying to "be creative" with familiar ingredients:

It's the impulse of seeing things I can be creative with. . . . I think of all the things I can do with that . . . things I've never done before.21

Like many other male cooks, Cain has reflected on the differences between men and women which are revealed in their approaches to cookery: "Women don't look at cooking as relaxation. I cook when I feel like it and select the dish I want and it becomes a hobby, not a task."22 Despite Cain's assertions that he "follows no routine" and cooks when he "feels like it," his family does expect him to prepare brunch each Sunday.

Such expectations help to traditionalize male cookery, but they may also create a threatening routine. I myself generally make pancakes for my family on Sunday morning and serve home-made deep-dish pizza on Sunday evening. While I enjoy preparing both these meals, I find that I must constantly alter the recipes in order to keep my weekend role from degenerating into repetitive drudgery. Thus one of the immediate effects of my limited repertoire is a tendency towards experimentation. I'll make whole-wheat pancakes one week, buckwheat the next, buttermilk some other time, and lately I've been playing around with sourdough. "Playing around" is important; what my wife, child, and dog expect on Sunday mornings is pancakes, but what they get is always different enough from the previous week's fare that I can have some fun making it.

The tendencies to specialize and to experiment mark off most men's cooking as being less re-creative than women's, for women's cookery is still commonly seen as the standard. Eighty-six-year-old Harrison Caudle of Whitehead, North Carolina, understandably bragged to me, "I can cook as good as any woman,"23 simultaneously challenging and reaffirming the norm. But cooking "as good as any woman" does not mean cooking the same way. Wives may

22. Ibid.
act more to perpetuate recipes learned from their mothers and mothers-in-law than husbands do, not only because of the male tendency to experiment, but also because many contemporary male cooks come from homes in which the father was inept at or uninterested in cooking. My own parents were Viennese and seemed to reify the common Old World foodways pattern of their generation perfectly in that my mother was taught to cook by her mother and grandmother, while my father had as little to do with food preparation as possible. I therefore couldn’t learn to cook from my father and find now that only a small proportion of the cooking I do derives from my mother. I re-create very few of her recipes, and those usually undergo minor changes that I feel almost compelled to introduce. The same lack of intergenerational continuity was described by James Cain, whose “worst kitchen disaster” came about when he tried to duplicate his mother’s “Chicken’n’Dumpling” recipe:

After about half an hour of cooking, it was one big glob. It went directly from the stove to the garbage can. I never tried it again.24

Male cookery may ultimately build on longstanding and not entirely conscious patterns of meaning inherent in the cooking processes themselves. I have already noted the male affinity for outdoor cooking, in which the underlying process is a direct conjunction between the food and the fire.25 Roasting (whether done indoors or out) is for many people somehow a natural and masculine trait, in contrast to boiling, which is seen as a process of female cookery. A similar pattern might hold for other foods as well. Though the making of bread is often felt to be quintessentially female, pancakes seem to be thought of by many as a kind of bread that is cooked in an agreeably masculine way.

Male cookery appears to be on the increase, perhaps because we all have more leisure time, because more wives now hold jobs outside the home, or because the breakdown of traditional sexual roles permits men to cook without fear of ridicule. All these ideas have

merit, but no one of them seems totally convincing; whatever the reasons for the patterned behavior that is male cookery, the effects seem to be far-reaching. The creation of a Sunday-morning/male-cook family tradition might be a neat solution to a number of interrelated challenges posed by the changing role relations in the American nuclear family.

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