

WHY WE COOK, AND THE HYGIENIC VALUE OF COOKERY.

By L. H. YATES.

"A true cook, be it remembered, is an artist."—*Theodore Child.*



AN American writer, to whom we owe many bright and wise things, speaking of nutrition in a large sense, has described it as "A stream of materials in motion, in the midst of which we live." "Our apparently solid bodies," she says, "are but processions of materials. While the procession passes a given point we live in it, that is all. Do not imagine that we are permanent objects through which dinners may or may not pass. The dinners are the fixed consideration, we the transient one. It is a matter of indifference to the dinner who eats it, or if it is eaten at all, but a matter of terrible importance to us."

This, at first sight, strikes us as a way of putting what is doubtless a truth that is not altogether flattering to human nature; if we go further into the thought we realise that the standing ground whereon we rear life, or physical maintenance, is indeed "little firmer than the rolling barrel on which the clown stands, it has to be kept going in order to support us at all."

Unless the business of supporting the body be carried on unflinchingly, no other business can be properly attended to.

The road from market to kitchen, kitchen to table, table to stomach, is a continuous one; it grows wider, more attractive, and more interesting as we pursue it, but the road which begins in the phosphates and carbons that the earth holds in reserve, is the same road that loses itself at last in the clear brain and tense muscles of our frame.

The herb and vegetable that grew in the soil ate of the substances of that soil, and developed; the sheep and cattle devoured the green things and roots and throve; man takes the vegetables and adds to them meat—or vegetables twice eaten—and secures his share of nutritive force. Here we have the elements of nutrition.

In addition to the elements man adds a process that is unknown to the animal, viz., the preparation and cooking of food. According as this process becomes more refined and perfect so it becomes more subtle and complicated, so much so that it demands the whole attention of a special functionary, who is every whit as important in society as the carpenter, the potter and the smith.

The necessity that makes cooked food essential to civilised man arises from the fact that his digestive system varies according to the amount of labour exacted from it, and according to the ease or difficulty with which the supply is furnished.

Food ready cooked is half digested, hence a saving of energy, time and force. Raw food takes an elaborate digestive system for its conversion into meat.

Far back in the earlier stages of civilisation it took all man's strength to get his food, a ceaseless effort to catch up with his food-supply, a constant "struggle for existence." As man conquered in the struggle he did not have to run after his food, he could make it grow, he produced it. In this ever-growing process of nutrition, man has so learnt to govern and manage his food-supply, that as long as our means of transportation and

distribution continue we shall live and develop the powers and faculties which our food-supply enables us to cultivate. We still have to "make our living," but our completer organisation has made it unnecessary for every individual to be absorbed in the process of preparing and producing his own food. Society, by setting apart certain members to do certain kinds of work, effects an economy of force, energy and material for the community.

While the primary reason for cooking food is undoubtedly that of saving energy in the consumer, the secondary one is that of the economising of the food-stuffs themselves, by enabling the greatest amount of good to be drawn from them with the least possible amount of waste. Scarcely subservient to these comes another reason, namely this—that as refinement of nature increases taste is developed, and the eye, the palate and the nostrils all require to be thought of. Hence we see how important is the education of that functionary who holds so important a place in our household organisation; no matter how fine the meat may be that the farmer and butcher supply, how rare the fruits and the condiments we receive from the grocer, or how choice the fish may be that the fisherman has toiled to get, the one pair of unskilled hands in our kitchen may ruin the whole procession of materials in a few minutes' time. At no stage in all the long road is there need for more energy or skill.

We are apt to forget that the art of cookery refers not only to the pleasing serving of food and maybe its dainty preparation, but the artist here has to have in mind food principles, and plan so that real nourishment be given at the right stage of life.

The building-up, more especially the keeping-up of a beautiful human frame lies in a great degree in our own hands. Raisers of cattle and breeders of poultry have long grasped this truth and acted accordingly, but while every fact that can be gleaned about methods of feeding stock is carefully tested by trial, the study of human dietaries is pursued only by those who have earned for themselves the title of crank and faddist.

Defective nutrition is at the bottom of half the evil and crime that debases human nature, as it is also the primary cause of deformities and disease. Under-fed or over-fed the result in either case is similar.

We need to realise how certainly the work of the cook and the housewife take hold of the very springs of life. The work done by them, the kind of work and the quality of it, makes or mars even the character and morals of those who come under their care, but especially does it make or mar those bodies which, as temples of the Holy Ghost, should be in line and form, fair, fine, strong and pure. Study, then, the laws of food, and by them build, not for the present generation's comfort alone, but for the well-being of the generation yet to come.

The more complex our modern human life becomes the greater becomes the strain on the human system; the outlay is not always the same; there are times when we are not called upon to great physical or mental exertion, then again there are periods of excessive strain; these varyings have to be met by varying supplies of nutrition. The handful of dates which will satisfy the Arab will not meet the needs of the brainy merchant, neither will the coarse abundance found on the table of the miner or labourer.

Cooking is variously regarded; in itself perhaps a "low" function, comparatively speaking, one of the traits which bespeak us as "of the earth—earthy," it is nevertheless an art, a science, a craft and a profession, or had we not better substitute service for profession, seeing that we entrust it to hands far from professional, leaving it too often to the least capable people to perform?

If ever cooking is to become worthy of the title of profession it must be pursued by those who are specialised for the purpose. It is a folly to say that all women should be cooks; we might as well demand that all men should be architects or doctors.

While cooking that is performed by a trained and intelligent functionary becomes possessed of all the dignity of a profession, it is also a craft because of the skill that must be acquired if it is to be perfectly handled; it is a science too, because it has laws of its own just as the science of medicine has. The work that the physician does is too often that of remedying the work that the cook has done ill. Alas, it is too often sadly true that the cook makes so ill that the physician's remedy is of no avail at all.

Cooking is also an art, in that its highest votaries are "born, not made," and that their work is open to the inspiration of genius. It is a vehicle for the expression of fancy, and of the colour sense.

At the latest exhibition held by the Universal Cookery and Food Association, one of the most interesting exhibits was the model kitchen of sixty years ago, contrasted with a model of a kitchen of the present date. It seemed a case where extremes met. The heavy, clumsy appliances, very few in number, of the early Victorian age, might explain the taste of the times for large, substantial and solid dishes; but surely we have added to our labour tenfold when we surround ourselves with such needless accessories as our modern furnisher would have us think are becoming!

Striking the line between these we shall arrive at something like a real idea of the value of saved labour and of helpful utensils.

While lined copper pans represent the acme of good housewifery in the eyes of the ruler of a large establishment, and in his *chef's* opinion, in the small household where labour is limited, they are a burden to life. Let glazed earthenware, "granite" ware, fire-proof china, and enamelled pans, take the place, and we have cleanliness ensured us, while the quality of our dish will not be changed.

Our Puritan fathers looked upon cooking stoves as an unrighteous lessening of the curse laid upon toil in the garden of Eden; and women's work has been handicapped for generations by something of the same narrow spirit.

We are wisely trying to substitute cooking stoves for the open ranges that have long been a bugbear to the middle-class English housewife. Other nations—the French, Americans, Germans, Austrians—all have long since found out better means and methods.

While there is much to be said in praise of both oil and gas stoves for cooking purposes, more especially for the latter, the excellences of which are so numerous that I could wish every housewife to be the possessor of a gas cooker of some kind, yet, personally I would place the American kitchener, or the French *cuisinière* before them all, for every purpose, indeed, except for the roasting of meat.