

Cooking up the self

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Abstract

Food can be regarded as symbolic as well as a means of socializing. Furthermore, the media landscape is littered with cooking books and magazines, TV cooking programs, gastro blogs and websites, and a constantly increasing number of celebrity chefs. Giving voice to a series of consumers with a particular interest in food, this paper discusses symbolic and social dimensions of food that are central to these consumers. In particular, the interviewees point to food as an example of gift giving, caring, prestige and an important part of one's 'social self'. Moreover, the interviewees point to 'gastro-porn' as entertainment that allows for them to daydream about an 'alternate self'. The paper elaborates on these issues and hereby points to food as imbedded in social webs and the constructions of meaningful selves.

Introduction

Food structures what counts as a person in our culture (Lupton, 1996, p. 1).

Mary Douglas (1978) argues that taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled and thus, cooking says 'something' about culture and is also a way of expressing a sense of self that may mark boundaries between social classes, cultures etc. (Lupton, 1996; Douglas, 1978; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). However, in postmodern society creating a sense of self as well as eating practices are complex (e.g.: Lupton, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Smart, 1994; Jantzen & Rasmussen, 2007) and therefore, choosing what to eat/cook can be part of the difficult task of creating sense of self. The web enables the individual to search for recipes and social media coverage of food and cooking is widespread. Further, more and more TV cooking programs and cookbooks appear. This implies a shift from regarding cooking as mundane domestic work to almost seeing it as fine art (e.g.: Jensen, 2008; Christensen, 2008) as chefs give us advice on how to express our sense of self through food in acceptable, yet exciting ways. As such the meanings, discourses and practices around food (in our case domestic cooking and food consumption) seem to be topics of both theoretical and practical interest. Therefore, we wish to investigate whether and how individuals use food to create sense of self. This includes both studying the more symbolic and social dimensions of domestic cooking and looking into why some people watch cooking-programs and if they actually 'use' them, and if not, why do they watch them? The purpose of this paper is thus to discuss how food forms sense of self and how 'gastro-porn' inspires it. By gastro-porn we refer to the ways, in which TV-programs and cookbooks often portray food as perfect, using pornographic features and visual effects, and how this influences the choices made by our interviewees and the way they perceive themselves (Zukin & Maguire, 2004).

Theoretical framework

The theories introduced in this section provide an understanding of how the individual decides which actions are appropriate in the situation at hand (in our case food as everyday consumption). Consequently these theories provide the framework that guides data collection seeking to map out social and symbolic dimensions of food.

According to several authors (Giddens, 1991; Christensen, 2008; Beaudrillard, 2002), people face the burden as well as the freedom to construct their own identities. The postmodern individual communicates using systems, in which the values assigned to objects

refer to other values in a system comprised of 'a real without origin or reality' (Beaudrillard, 2002). Giddens (1991, p. 4) states that the question 'how shall I live' "has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat". This statement is interesting as it is concerned with the way the self can be formed by the choices we make regarding cooking and food. Therefore, the food we choose may reflect how we perceive ourselves or would like to be perceived (Lupton, 1996; Holm, 2003), or, as Fürst (1995, p. 74) phrases it: "Food creates the one who eats it. Thus, it is natural that the eater tries to create her or himself by eating". Although domestic food preparation and consumption is not 'socially visible' to the same extent as, for example, the clothes we wear or the car we drive, several authors argue that the postmodern individual through choices and decisions in all realms of life (and hence also food) create a sense of self (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Baudrillard, 2002). In postmodern society, making choices about who to be and how to live may be extremely complex, stressful and risky because information is fragmented, or, as Giddens (1991, p. 73) argues: "Taking charge of one's life involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibilities". Therefore, by choosing some objects (e.g. particular foods or cooking methods), others are discarded and what is acceptable to eat seems highly influenced by the social context. This might make it difficult for consumers to choose between food stuff because they have to decide whether a particular product is better than another - or in a broader sense, whether one type of diet or cooking style is better than another. This way, eating can be related to the risks of postmodern decision-making: We risk 'becoming' someone we do not want to be, according to what we eat.

Popular culture is infused with food (Lupton, 1996; Fürst, 1995; Holm, 2003; O' Dell, 2002) and food seems to be everywhere; in newspapers and on the web, cooking shows and 'food travelogues' on TV. Since everyone must eat, *what* we eat becomes a powerful symbol of who we are. Once food becomes plentiful and varied, fashion takes over and the lure of novelty, the trendy become markers of identity, which are used to know and show who we are. Just as clothes indicate our trendiness, so does food. Not knowing about certain dishes or ingredients possibly marks one as a social failure and the welter of food books and food programs may make the postmodern individual feel guilty if (s)he does not keep up (Fox,

2010). Could this be one of the reasons for the apparent popularity of gastro-pornographic products?

Smart (1994) argues that glossy cookbooks and the televised celebrity chefs project images of what people can become, yet the expectations of gratification they inspire are never quite realized by the individual. Smart (1994) further argues that cookbooks with celebrity chefs are 'gastro-porn'; pleasurable to look at, but unattainable in practice. In the same vein, O'Dell (2005, p. 57) argues that "cookbooks or the like promote the sale of a consumption of food with pornographic features where the images are separate from the actual practice which here is cooking and eating". Could such gastro-porn represent another way in which sense of self is constructed? Christensen (2008) argues that lifestyle programs activate people's fantasy. Both the cookbooks and the programs revolve around our private sphere and around everyday matters like making dinner. It is factual entertainment giving us advice and inspiration on cooking "...through which we express and develop our identities" (Jensen, 2008, p. 38). This implies that 'gastro porn' affects the ways we express and develop our sense of self. Most cooking programs take a starting point in something ordinary and Christensen (2008) argues that it is an everyday situation that allows the viewer to daydream about something without having to take a stand, and that it is entirely up to the viewer whether (s)he wishes to engage in the activity and make a particular dish. It is argued that we mostly buy certain products because they fulfill a daydream (O'Dell, 2002). Does food help us flee from everydayness into a dream world? Hawkins (2001, p. 417) illustrates how a discourse is created through cooking programs as follows:

...learning how to fillet a fish, or scramble an egg is not just a lifestyle matter, it is about the production of a particular habitus: an arrangement of personal habits, attitudes and rituals that are informed by ethical values and principles: cooking for yourself and your family is being valued here, is being classified as good and, by implication, buying takeaway is bad.

According to Hawkins (2001), consuming 'gastro porn' is not just passive voyeurism. Instead the viewer sees a way of transforming her or his everyday chores into positive projects. We get a glimpse

of someone's personal, albeit staged reality. We find ourselves somewhere between back stage and front stage (Goffman, 1959) in a kind of middle region. It is a glimpse of someone's lifestyle, but it does not normally show his or her intimate relationships. It shows a personal issue, namely cooking, but in neat and clean surroundings. Investigating whether this staged reality influences our interviewees is the second theoretical building block by which empirical work is guided.

Several authors (e.g. Sahlin, 1974; Lupton, 2003) argue that gift giving is a way of validating social relations. Furthermore, gift giving might not only relate to the giving of physical objects but might also (or perhaps even more so) relate to more symbolic acts and practices and therefore, cooking for significant others might resemble acts of gift giving, the purpose of which is to validate social relations. As a result, cooking for others might be symbolic acts that signify an appreciation of guests, partners etc. Fischler (1988) touches upon this issue and argues that food consumption asserts oneness between those sharing a meal. Thus, apart from the oneness caused by joint food consumption that has been studied extensively in the context of families and the domestic dinner, private hospitality (i.e. the act or practice of being hospitable within the context of one's home) might also be a way of building 'oneness' with those, we invite into our homes and share a meal with. As a result, studying the communal meal as a symbolic act incorporating sharing, caring, closeness and/or oneness might add to our understanding of domestic cooking. Investigating whether cooking for others might resemble acts of gift giving that validate social relations is the third and last theoretical building block by which empirical work is guided.

Methodology

The focus of this paper is the socially constructed meanings surrounding domestic cooking and food consumption. Values and beliefs surrounding food are therefore seen as constructed through discourses and affected by historical and socio-cultural processes (Lupton, 1996; Holm, 2003; Fürst, 1995; O'Dell, 2002) and realities are seen as multiple (Guba, 1990; Lupton, 1996; Douglas, 1978; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). The way we approached the topic was by means of qualitative interviews and through these in-depth interviews we try to understand what food means to the interviewees. As constructionists we see our interviews as meaning-making ex-

periences where knowledge is produced through collaboration between interviewer and interviewee (Hiller and Diluzi, 2003). In order to do 'good' interviews, we decided to only interview people, who were particularly interested in food. People without much interest in food may not have many reflections to share and may not find it interesting to talk about the subject. All in all, the study draws on 13 interviewees, who do not represent a 'segment' as such, but who all are very interested in cooking and make use of various forms of 'gastro-porn'. Included in the sample are both singles and people in a relationship; men and women; people without children and one couple with children.

In order to analyze our thick and rich data, we generated a meta-matrix including both themes originating from the theoretical framework and 'new' themes that emerged during analysis. Although these themes are not exclusive or definite, they constitute the basis for further analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), the key results of which we account for in the following sections.

Food as gift-giving, sharing and caring

The interviewees' enactment of food has much in common with the concept of gift giving as a way of validating social relations as proposed by Sahlin (1974) and Lupton (2003). Generally our interviewees expressed a profound appreciation of cooking for others and several of them argue that food is a sign of appreciation of guests, partners etc. They spoke of food as something you make for others and serve to show affection and one of the interviewees (Martin) explicitly compared food to gift giving as follows:

There is a gift in it [food], I mean there is symbolism (...) me and my friends have a football club and we take turns making something together or I invite four people and give dinner [...] then I'll spend time, love and money on making it. There is something ancient in us that when we receive food we receive something valuable. You automatically feel very thankful when receiving food.

Martin argues that giving/receiving food can be a way of demonstrating affection and he uses food to validate his relationship with his friends. Furthermore, he argues that one is thankful when receiving food; thus implying that *his* guests will also feel thankful

when he cooks for them. As social beings we seek to maintain social relationships and food seems very important in this respect. Relationships need to be validated and according to our interviewees, giving significant others a gift and cooking a meal for them are means to the same end; i.e. to validate relations to these significant others. In accordance with Fischler's (1988) argument that food consumption asserts oneness of those sharing a meal, interviewees emphasize the communal meal. To prepare and serve a home cooked meal may create an opportunity to feel closeness and oneness with others (Lupton, 1996; Holm, 2003). Therefore, food as gift giving seems to carry a double connotation as it both contains an external and internal oriented dimension. Accordingly, the food we choose to eat (and particularly the food we choose to serve for others) demonstrates our sense of self to both ourselves and to others.

Both the food we buy and what we do with it, i.e. cooking might relate to prestige. Prestigious food is often defined as luxury foods (Hayden, 1998). The interviewees all talked about prestigious food, but predominantly in connection with having guests over. Also relevant in this connection is Veblen's (1899) term 'conspicuous consumption', i.e. consumption of particular products with the intent to display wealth. According to this definition, conspicuous consumption is to buy and display expensive items. Although most interviewees mention prestige in connection with food, they do so in a different manner than Veblen as they discriminate between prestige as *knowledge* and *skills* and prestige in relation to *shopping*. As a result, serving luxurious and/or prestigious food for others is not only a matter of buying luxuries, but also depends on one's ability to turn these luxuries into a 'good' home-made meal. When our interviewees entertain guests, they often buy luxury products or as Martin phrase this:

There is prestige in food...inviting people over and serving something delicious, in this lies prestige [...] I can afford shopping in [a high priced supermarket], buying delicious things in specialty stores, I go and buy the delicious ingredients and serve them to my guests because I want to. I am going to show them that I appreciate them and that I can afford it (...) it is a way of showing your status.

Martin is very explicit about the conspicuousness of buying expensive ingredients and foods when he has guests. However, being able to afford expensive ingredients is not, according to the interviewees, enough as both Martin and the other interviewees emphasize that it is skills/competences as well as the high prices of these products that make a communal meal luxurious and/or prestigious.

Front, middle and backstage

As mentioned in the theory section we get a glimpse of someone's personal doings in a staged reality through cooking programs. We are not backstage and not strictly front stage but somewhere in the middle (Levy, 1959; Mick, 1986). This could perhaps also apply to communal meals? The guests see the private you, but perhaps a staged, private you. They see the dinner you create, but they do not see the process behind it. You can cook a meal and go "oh I just tossed this together in a jiffy" even if it actually took hours. But your guests do not know this if the work is done 'backstage'; they only see the finished product. Claiming to 'just have tossed something together' (which several interviewees admitted to do) projects a certain image. But one might also exaggerate one's efforts – depending on the role and image one wishes to create. But as guests get to taste the end product, there is a limit to how much one can create a sense of self based on the stories alone; the food, the serving and the context will probably matter more. Several interviewees mention that when entertaining guests it is important to make sure that there is a homely and comfortable atmosphere and this includes both the meal and the setting (i.e. serving/presenting the meal, whether the dining room is tidy etc.). All of this can communicate that one is in control, or as Mette explains:

Interviewer: "You said something about setting the table nicely?"

Mette: "Yes, that is actually quite important... it is like it is connected. I don't feel like making good food, which isn't going to be served properly."

Interviewer: "Like on paper plates?"

Mette: "No, that won't do. It is not like I am posh, but I like to make it cozy (...) so that people feel that it is pleasant [...] I would like to create some kind of illusion (...) about this is how we do it every night [laughing]"

As Mette says, she wants to create an *illusion*, make her guests *believe* that she can manage having guests over, preparing a delicious meal and keep the house tidy at the same time. She seems to know she is not showing an authentic situation as such, but more the middle stage – how she wants others to think they see the backstage. She is also very aware that she is trying to delude her guests, because she carefully plans which effects to put into use, for example serving the food especially nicely, which she would not normally spend time on. She (along with the other interviewees) thus seems to be aware of creating an external image, which contributes to the self she would like to express – to such an extent that they acknowledge that they seek to create illusions.

Recipes, confidence and inspiration

Across the interviewees, there is a clear pattern suggesting that those who are the most confident cooks also experiment more (e.g. looking at new recipes, trying out new ingredients, adding/removing ingredients). The less confident cooks seem to ‘stick’ more to a recipe *or* cook dishes they are very familiar with. Some of our interviewees express a wish to use recipes more often, but most of them fail to do so albeit they could not really say why as illustrated by Louise:

Louise: “I have a huge folder with recipes on my computer...I am never going to make any of those dishes”

Interviewer: “Why not?”

Louise: “I really don’t know and I would actually really love to be good at it [using recipes]”

Louise says that she does not really know why she collects recipes that she never uses. White and Hoffrage (2009) argue that you need a certain level of confidence before an option can be chosen. So when feeling confident in your own cooking skills and knowledge it is easier to make a choice. However, it is not only the less confident cooks that do not use recipes as some of the most confident interviewees do not use recipes or cookbooks. This is exemplified by Gunnar, who even laughs a bit when he is asked whether he uses cookbooks:

Gunnar: “No I don’t [laughing]”

Interviewer: "Have you ever used cookbooks?"

Gunnar: "Yes, I have sometimes, but it is very, very, very, very rare I use one...Inspiration comes by tasting something or seeing something and then making it your own way. It does not have to be done as the cookbooks or others dictate."

Gunnar experiments by creating his 'own' dishes and he does not seem to fear failure as he seems convinced that the recipes or cookbooks cannot dictate how food should taste. The overall picture is that the interviewees that were more confident cooks might use recipes as inspiration, maybe adding some ingredients or leaving some out because they are confident in their own knowledge. The interviewees who are less confident cooks leaned more towards either following recipes or doing the dishes they know well. The less confident cooks are also less prone to cook for guests and hence, invite people over for a meal less often than the confident cooks. Nevertheless, regardless of their confidence in cooking, all interviewees admit that they are more likely to follow a recipe when having guests and it seems that the safety inherent in following a recipe becomes more important when cooking for others. This implies a difference in the pressure to perform, depending on who one cooks for. Our interviews suggest that when cooking for people you know well, the ordeal is more relaxing, but as relations become looser, risk of failing increases. Eating is part of our socialization; we learn the codes of a meal very early in our lives and subsequently use them to assess the social skills of people (Lupton, 1996; Fürst, 1995). Food can be and is used as an important factor when expressing who you are, want to be or how you want others to see you. This could explain why the more confident the interviewees feel, the easier it seems to make a choice but as the stakes get higher the safety of following a recipe becomes more attractive.

Gastro-porn and daydreaming

O' Dell (2002, p. 58) argues that we often buy certain food products because they evoke daydreams and he continues to suggest that "it is not enough that the food tastes good. It needs to be fresh, trendy and new, just like we would like to portray ourselves". This statement aligns well with our interviewees, who argue that when looking at gastro-porn, they particularly enjoy being immersed into the gastro-

nostic universe on display. For example, Mette made the following remark: "I've always liked watching people cook on TV, I like the way their things are arranged all neatly in bowls. I like that whole universe. [...] It is very aesthetic. I think that's what I like to look at." As Mette suggests, she 'buys into' the entire (seemingly neat and tidy) food universe that is presented in TV cooking shows. According to Jantzen and Vetner (2008), food programs can help viewers realize their own capabilities as the televised chefs show how daydreams can become reality, and they encourage daydreaming by showing dream scenarios in a familiar setting such as the kitchen. Food is real, it is authentic, and it is for everyone – and so is daydreaming and imagining oneself in different roles and this might be a reason why cooking programs and books have become so popular. When we watch cooking programs we feel we get something authentic, even though it is a staged authenticity. However, while knowledge and the 'right' foodstuffs hold positive value to the interviewees, very few of them have tried to replicate the dishes on display. Talking about TV cooking shows, Jesper argues that he sees these programs because "...you dream about the unattainable I think". Although Jesper will never try to make the dishes he sees on TV, he still dreams about making them. When watching the programs the interviewees see a possible reality, which allows them to imagine themselves in that same situation; in another and attractive role. The most commonly voiced reason why the interviewees will not try to make the dishes on display is that they do not know whether they will succeed – will it be as easy as it seems to make the food? Most of the interviewees further argue that they perceive the programs as entertainment and that what they appreciate is the (day)dream of an alternative sense of self, or as Mette L.'s explains why she watches Camilla Plum: "I feel that I want to go there and visit that place where she lives... and it's like... I feel jealous that she has that herbal garden, and is able to make all of those things... it's probably more that it creates a feeling of... that it could actually be really cool if one was ...Camilla Plum" (laughing). Mette, and the other interviewees, watch these programs as part of imagining possible selves, of possible ways to express the self; not because they will actually cook the dishes on display. Accordingly, although the interviewees enjoy watching gastro-porn, this activity does not automatically affect their own cooking practices. Instead, gastro-porn is consumed because it allows the interviewees to daydream and thus, gastro-porn seems to inspire certain senses

of self. Therefore, watching gastro-porn becomes 'safe' as it allows the interviewees to 'cook up an imaginative self' while watching – an imaginative self that will never be 'put to the test' as long as they do not try to make any of the dishes themselves.

Conclusion

As indicated above, to the 13 interviewees the social dimension of food is crucial as food is used as a 'prop' in their 'doing' relations with others. As a result, food becomes symbolic as it represents gift giving, sharing and caring. As another result, much is at stake when interviewees invite people over for dinner and consequently, confidence in cooking becomes omnivorous. Those who are less confident either follow recipes carefully or stick to 'safe' dishes and set-ups whereas the most confident cooks are more inclined to rely on internalized knowledge and to experiment. Finally, although all of the interviewees watch cooking programs and read cook books, this relates to daydreaming more than it is directly used when 'cooking up the self' in the quest to use food to communicate with socially significant others. What is particularly interesting is that when discussing social and symbolic meanings of food, interviewees point to private hospitality/home entertainment. Obviously, interviewees also prepare and consume food alone and/or as part of everyday practices that do not involve guests. However, according to our interviewees it is particularly situations in which one serves food for guests that are infused with social and symbolic meanings. As a result, whereas everyday cooking for - and food consumption together with - our closest family and relatives might not be a big deal, the table turns, so to speak, when food is served for, and consumed together with, guests. In these situations, it is not the acts of cooking and consuming food that are the key ingredients, instead, the act of creating an illusion (in Mette's words) about who one is becomes the center of attention and thus, identity creation in the form of 'cooking up the self' becomes a much riskier task than simply serving a meal.

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