

# **Refined Cuisine or Plain Cooking? Morality in the Kitchen**

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## **Introduction**

What does cooking have to do with morality? In exploring the connections between food and morality this is a question worth asking because almost everything that counts as food has been cooked in the sense that it has been subjected to multiple processes after harvest or slaughter, including though not limited to treatment with heat.<sup>1</sup>

Cooking is unique to humans and it is something that every human group does. Given how important it has been in human history, it is perhaps not surprising that from the first written records we find that philosophers, physicians and priests debating what cooking was and how it shaped human behavior, including the doing of right and wrong. For much of the history of Eurasia, say from at least 1000 BC to the eighteenth century, the literate elite who engaged the debate simply took it for granted that cooking had much to do with morality. They were, however, divided into two sharply-opposed camps about just what the relationship was. One camp held that the more refined the cooking, the more thoroughly processed the food, the more conducive to moral behavior. The other thought that the less cooking and the plainer the food, the better chance of creating an ethical society.

This essay brings together in a preliminary way hints about this long history that I have gleaned from my magpie reading on the history of cooking. I deliberately range widely across space and time because I believe the dichotomy between the two camps to have been widespread, persistent and important. I ask readers to bear with me as I ignore important differences in theories of health, body, soul or spirit, virtue and morality in an

attempt to uncover the essentials of this profound division about the nature of cooking and its consequences.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Refined Cuisine Camp**

The refined-cuisine camp in ancient Greece, Vedic India, and I suspect Zoroastrian Persia, defined cooking as bringing foodstuffs to perfection. This was equivalent to refining them or bringing them to full maturity. Cooking had two parts: mixing foodstuffs in the appropriate way and refining or cooking proper. This definition, representing the mainstream opinion of the literate elite, continued to be widely held in the West until at least the eighteenth century and it still persists in many parts of the world. I will deal with cooking and mixing in turn.

Cooking, on this view, was a basic natural process. What went on in the kitchen formed one link in a cosmic culinary cycle driven by the fire of the sun.<sup>3</sup> The sun's rays poured down on the earth, cooking seeds in the soil, grains of wheat or rice in the fields, and fruits on the trees until they matured. In the kitchen the fire in the oven or under the cauldron continued the process, cooking wheat and fruit into dishes fit for humans. In the belly, the process continued yet again, the fire there cooking, concocting or digesting—the three terms were equivalent—food into flesh and blood.

Fire, the chief agent in this cosmic cooking, was not thought of as the mere agitation of molecules. Rather fire was one of the elements, an actual thing as anyone who passed their hand through a flame quickly learned. Like the other culinary agent, water, fire cleansed and purified. Water, however, could purify only the surfaces of things. Fire was more powerful. It separated the pure, essential and permanent essence of what it touched by combining with it. It left behind the imperfect earthly dross with which the substance was combined in nature. Implicit in the thinking of the refined-cooking camp, therefore, was the

belief that in their natural state grains, flesh, vegetables, or other foodstuffs were sullied with all kinds of impurities. The only way to get to what they truly were, to their essence, was to cook them.

The refined-cooking camp saw parallels between the kinds of food that living beings ate and their position on the biological, social and moral scale. Beasts that ate only raw red flesh or uncooked green grass were slaves to their instincts. The poor who ate coarse, inadequately-cooked food were little better. “Many people see little difference between this class of men and the animals they use to farm our lands,” explained the author of an article in the French *Encyclopédie*.<sup>4</sup> The famous eighteenth-century English doctor, George Cheyne was equally dismissive. “Ideots, peasants, and mechanics” he said “have scarce any passions at all, or any lively sensations, and are incapable of lasting impressions.”<sup>5</sup> The barbarians, whom the settled peoples from Rome to China described as “eaters of flesh, drinkers of milk” were incapable of civilized moral behavior, thanks to their raw diet.<sup>6</sup> Only civilized peoples who ate foods such as white rice, white bread, meat stewed with tempering spices, and yogurt or butter, all of them highly refined, could reach their full moral potential. At the very top of the scale, the immortals dined on yet-more refined foods such as ambrosia, nectar, ghee, sugar, or most ethereal of all, the smoke from the sacrificial fire

The most processed, the most thoroughly cooked, and the most refined foods seemed to escape corruption. Treated with fire, perishable milk turned into incorruptible ghee; perishable cane juices became incorruptible sugar. Both were golden, the color of the fiery sun itself. Eating ghee and sugar nourished the soul or spirit as well as the body. Right behavior included, for those who were fortunate enough to be able to afford it, choosing these refined foods that did not weigh down the body and soul with coarse, worldly dross.<sup>7</sup>

Refined foods became the symbols of many of the world's great religions: sugar and ghee for Buddhists and Hindus, bread and wine for Christians.

In this scheme, it was only natural that cooking became a metaphor for the purification of the individual. Perfected by cooking, humans escaped the fate of being “half baked.” Fifth century Buddhists described progress toward enlightenment as being like the refining of sugar. Later Indian bodhisattvas in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition had the ability by their appearance, their utterances, their touch, and even their taste to “cook living beings” bringing them closer to perfection.<sup>8</sup> As a way of summing up his moral and spiritual progress, Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian poet and philosopher said “I was raw, I roasted, and I burnt.”<sup>3</sup> Nuns in colonial Mexico used the progress of produce from its arrival at the gate, through the storehouses, processing, and finally cooking into exquisite sweets and sauces as a metaphor for their own spiritual progress from “raw” novices to holy women.<sup>9</sup>

Refined foods, indeed, even offered the promise of immortality. In an early Vedic text, the protagonist contemplates the bloody carcass of an animal that had been sacrificed to the gods. He says to himself: “Surely, if I add this (matter) such as it is to my own being, I shall become a mortal carcass, not liberated from evil. Well then, I will cook it with fire.” The narrator continues. “He cooked it with fire. He made it into the food of immortality. The sacrificial food which is cooked with fire is indeed immortal (or ambrosia).”<sup>10</sup>

Mixing was the second component of refined cuisine. Only by mixing could the ingredients be balanced so that they tempered the bodily humors. These humors, usually three or four, circulated through the body. What was cooked or digested affected the balance of these fluids. That in turn determined the temperament of the individual. By providing the right mix of ingredients the cook could shift a diner's temperament. Any sign

of weakness in a king sent Greek and Indian cooks scurrying to prepare meaty broths to enhance his courage, one of the indispensable kingly virtues. A desire for a life of contemplation made Buddhist monks seek out a diet with little meat or alcohol but lots of rice, ghee and sugar.

In Aristotelian theory, at least, virtues, whether moral and intellectual, had to be constantly practiced to be strengthened. One way to do this was by adhering to the right kind of diet, food mixed and cooked in the appropriate way.<sup>11</sup> The cook thus shaded into physician. Both worked to enhance moral as well as physical health. Chinese cooks prepared elaborate dishes that cured as they nourished.<sup>12</sup> The right meals could align the body with seasons and places and hence with transformations of Heaven and Earth. Islamic cooks put together divine medicines, cordials of rose water, pomegranates, egg yolk, saffron, juices of meat, wine, and spices that wafted their aroma, and hence their spirit, for years.<sup>13</sup> European physicians such as Rudolf Glauber pointed to the parallel making dishes and making medicines: “Vegetables, Animals, and Minerals with the help of any burning Spirit. . . . may be most highly purified, and reduced to the Highest Medicines.”<sup>14</sup>

To be a good cook obviously meant being technically proficient. For much of history, though, to be a good cook meant more than that. It meant rising to the challenge of producing refined cuisine, of giving diners the essence of foods usually concealed by base nature, and of thus facilitating a virtuous life. Their task was simultaneously ethical, aesthetic, and medical. Culinary finesse demonstrated virtue.

Like their confreres the alchemists, cooks shouldered a large moral burden. Cooks in Japanese temples had constantly to be of a “moral spirit.”<sup>15</sup> Indian Brahmins of the Vedic period had a duty “to cook the world.”<sup>16</sup> If cooks succeeded in their calling, they could obtain high office and great respect. In Rumi’s order of Sufis, the cook could rise to

the second highest position. He was responsible for training new initiates who in turn spent the last part of their 1,001 days of community service in the kitchen. Rumi's own cook, Ates baz-i Veli, on his death in 1285 was buried in a mausoleum of red stone that remains a shrine to this day.

In late eighteenth-century Europe, the medical and philosophical foundations of the refined-cooking theory crumbled. Physicians abandoned the humoral theory for modern physiology and nutrition, disciplines that demoted food and digestion to a relatively minor role and said nothing about the behavioral, as opposed to the physical effects of different diets. Chemists and physicists described fire as the movement of molecules not as an element. Philosophers talked about morality as a matter of following moral rules or acting to ensure the greatest good of the greatest number rather than as the practice of virtue.

Eating well ceased to be part of a moral, scientific, economic and politic worldview. It is tempting to see the debates about gastronomy, and about whether there could be a science of taste, that took place at this time as the search for a new justification of refined cuisine now that it could no longer be seen as contributing to the moral standing of the diner. It was now merely an aesthetic matter, food for food's sake.

### **The Plain Cooking Camp**

For the plain-cooking camp, cooking had nothing to do with perfecting. On the contrary, cooking corrupted and falsified the foodstuffs created pure and perfect by God or nature. . Phrases such as “cooking the books” and proverbs such as “God sends the meat; the devil sends cooks” echo this suspicion that cooking is a bad thing.<sup>17</sup> In the Western tradition, the first exponents of this minority opinion about cooking were Socrates, the Spartans, and the Stoics. Outside the Western tradition, I suspect the minority view may have been posed

about the same time by, for example, Taoists, and later by Zen Buddhists though I have yet to explore this.

Socrates set the tone in the *Republic*. He wanted the citizens of his Republic to dine on simply cooked foods: wheat bread, barley cakes, salt, olives, cheese, boiled vegetables, followed by figs, chickpeas and beans, parched myrtle berries and acorns, not sauces and sweets. When criticized for this he detailed what happened when citizens demanded extravagant dining. The taste for luxury led to avarice. Avarice drained the state coffers (it was widely believed that the amount of wealth in the world was fixed). Empty coffers prompted states to go to war. War bred despots. In short, extravagant dining led to a “a city with inflammation,” war, and despotism.<sup>18</sup> Like other Greeks, when talking about elaborate feasting Socrates had in mind the Persians, the Greeks’ arch enemies. Their emperors were famous for their extravagant feasts that features huge roast joints, sauces, sweets, and undiluted wines, they also served then and for centuries later as the archetype of despots ready to go to war to enrich their coffers. If at first sight, this seems an over-reaction to refined food, it is worth remembering that food was both a scarce resource and the single most important item of consumption.

The Stoic philosophers teased out the individual consequences of a refined diet that paralleled the social consequences Socrates had described. Refined cuisine put humans at the mercy of their passions, or, as we might say, their emotions. Its delicious tastes and aromas, rich sauces and sweets, created an unnatural appetite. Unlike natural appetite that indicated that the body was ready to receive nutritious food, unnatural appetite stimulated the diner to continue eating long after his true needs were satiated.<sup>19</sup> Roman gluttons who indulged themselves in a similar way became stock examples of individuals who had let their passions get the better of them. Down the centuries, authors referred with disdain or

mockery to Lucullus, a Roman consul who used his war booty to underwrite his extravagant dining or to Vitellius, a Roman emperor, who stuffed himself at four banquets daily and indulging himself in pike liver, pheasant brain and flamingo tongue. Just as extravagant public feasting led to an “inflamed” state, so refined cuisine led to a diseased body. “Are you astounded at the innumerable diseases?” asked the Stoic, Seneca. “Count the cooks.”<sup>20</sup> It was to be a theme that recurred through the twentieth century. Gandhi argued that “To be rid of disease it is necessary to do away with fire in the preparation of foods. We must eat everything in its vital state even as animals do.”<sup>21</sup> And Hitler is reported to have said that “All the sicknesses of civilization are caused by man cooking food.”<sup>22</sup>

To return to the past, the Christian fathers adapted Stoic culinary philosophy to the needs of their faith, initiating a link between Christianity and Stoicism that would be regularly renewed over the centuries. Clement of Alexandria, for example, who wrote a guide to the Christian life in the first century AD, said that the good Christian should eat “roots, olives, all sorts of green vegetables, milk, cheese, fruits and cooked vegetables of all sorts—but without sauces.” And the meat, he suggested, should be boiled or roasted. A Christian should be “master and lord not slave of food.”<sup>23</sup> By the Middle Ages, gluttony, the inability to control the appetite was firmly established as one of the seven deadly sins.

Seventeenth and eighteenth century Protestants looked to the story of Adam and Eve as justification for a plain diet. In the Garden of Eden, humans lived on fruits and vegetables, God’s perfect creations. Cooking became necessary only after the Fall and thus was a consequence of sin. The famous scientist Isaac Newton believed that returning to eating raw foods would be a return to the Golden Age. Live on fruit, he suggested, and “you will be as innocuous as the [herbivorous] sheep.”<sup>24</sup> John Evelyn, another scientist and contemporary of Newton, sought to simulate the Garden of Eden on the large scale in his

vegetable garden and on the small scale on his vegetable plate.

The republican movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth century favored Stoic philosophy with its virtues of wisdom, courage, justice and temperance. The Dutch believed that French Cuisine would spell death to their political experiment. The French philosophes avoided the intimate dinners of the French court and aristocratic houses where cooks embellished food to create unnatural appetites. Instead they haunted the salons whose hosts and hostesses conspicuously did not serve refined cuisine.<sup>25</sup> Similarly many Americans, including Patrick Henry, thought Thomas Jefferson's enthusiasm for French Cuisine to be singularly inappropriate. For them the ragouts (rich sauces), fricassees and mousses of French High Cuisine were the contemporary version of Vitellius's pike liver, pheasant brain, and flamingo tongue. Many people believed that Count Brühl, a Saxon nobleman and state bureaucrat, who served up to a hundred dishes, including ragouts, fricassees, and mousses, on the most expensive dinner service ever made to guest lists of as many as three hundred, drained the coffers of the Saxon state.<sup>26</sup> This opened its way to conquest by Frederick the Great of Prussia, a man who knew how to curb his appetite and build a strong state.

The British, in the nineteenth century, thought that children, particularly the children of the well-to-do, needed to be sent to schools and fed in a way that would strengthen Spartan and Stoic values. To fuss with foods seemed an indulgence unworthy of those who were being trained to lead.<sup>27</sup> They received support from nineteenth-century nutritionists who preached that appetite-inflaming stimulants such as spices and vinegar were to be avoided, especially by children. Ideal foods included whole grains boiled as porridge or pudding, or baked as bread, roast or boiled meat, simply boiled vegetables, and fruits. Similarly, to return to mixing as a part of cooking, these same experts argued that mixing

foods together was bad for the digestion. It was better to serve meat, starch and vegetables separately on the plate.

It is worth noting that the distinction between refined cuisine and plain cooking did not map on to the distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian. There were, and are many who avoided meat yet dined on the most refined of cuisines. Hindu Temple Cuisine would be an example. When Gandhi experimented with a diet of sprouted wheat, he was abandoning the tradition in which he had grown up for the plain-cooking tradition he encountered in England.

Nor does the dichotomy between refined cuisine and plain cooking reflect a dichotomy between delicious food and coarse food. The proponents of refined cuisine have over the centuries relished the tastes of rich sauces and elaborate desserts. But those who favor plain cooking are equally enthusiastic about the taste and texture of whole wheat breads, crisp, fresh apples, and sweet corn rushed straight from the garden for a quick dip in the pot.

What the distinction between refined cuisine and plain cooking does parallel are two different attitudes to the relation between cooking and morality. Those who argued for refined cuisine thought that the manner of cooking itself could actually produce foods that made diners more or less moral. Those who argued for plain food saw virtue as being strengthened by controlling desire for food.

### **Conclusion**

In light of this brief survey, it seems likely that the distinction between refined cuisine and plain cooking explains much about the attitude of entire societies to what we call “gastronomy.” When the elite in an empire or state believed that refined cuisine enhanced the virtues then gastronomy flourished, as in, say, the Ottoman, Mughal or Safavid

Empires, or in pre-revolutionary France. When the elite chose plain food in the interests of strengthening self-control, then plain food ruled as in nineteenth-century England and America. On this account the long lament over the (supposed) poor quality of English cooking fails to take into account that this was not simply philistinism.

There were good reasons why many found refined cuisine objectionable. Lurking behind the decision about whether or not to adopt it were deeply held beliefs about the distribution of resources in a society and about the relation between food, individual morality and the ideal state. And, I suggest, many contemporary debates about food and morality draw, perhaps unconsciously, on these long-standing themes and arguments about what we do when we cook.

<sup>1</sup> For a similar broad definition of cooking, see Symons, Michael, *The Pudding that Took a Thousand Cooks* (Ringwood, Australia: Penguin Books, 1998), ch. 5.

<sup>2</sup> For body, soul and spirit in the Mediterranean see Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> For the European belief, see Laudan, Rachel, “Birth of the Modern Diet,” *Scientific American* 238 (2000), pp. 62-67.

<sup>4</sup> Weber, Eugen, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), pp.130-143.

<sup>5</sup> Cheyne, George, *Essay on Health and Long Life* (London, 1725), p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus, *Skythika* III, 99, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Sabban, Françoise, “Un Savoir-Faire Oublié: Le Travail du Lait en Chine Ancienne,” Reprinted for private circulation from *Zinbun: Memoirs of the Research Institute for Humanistic Studies*, Kyoto University, 21 (1986), p. 53; Buddhagosa, *The Path of Purification* (California: Shambhala, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Mrozić, Susanne, “Cooking Living Beings: The Transformative Effects of Encounters with Bodhisattva Bodies,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* (2004), pp. 175-194.

<sup>9</sup> Loreto López, Rosalva and Benítez Muro, Ana, *Un Bocado Para Los Ángeles: La Cocina en Los Conventos* (México: Clío, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> In the Satapatha Brahmana, a prose how-to text for Vedic religious services probably dating from no later than the 8th century BC and possibly much earlier. I have combined translations from Malamoud, Charles, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India* trans. David White (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23 and *The Satapatha Brahmana, Part III Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 41 translated by Julius Eggeling (London, 1894), 6.2.1.9.

<sup>11</sup> Sorabji, Richard, *Animal Minds and Human Morals* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Lo, Vivian and Barrett, Penelope, “Cooking up Fine Remedies: On the Culinary Aesthetic in a Sixteenth- Century Chinese *Materia Medica*,” *Medical History* 49 (2005), 395-422. Roel Sterckx, ‘Food and philosophy in early China’, in *Of tripod and palate: food politics and religion in traditional China* ed. Roel Sterckx (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, T. Sarah, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 18.

- <sup>14</sup> Glauber, Rudolf A Treatise concerning the Purifying Fire. Trans. Christopher Packe (London, 1689), p.1.
- <sup>15</sup> Yoneda, Soei, Good Food from a Japanese Temple (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1982).
- <sup>16</sup> Malamoud, Charles, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India* trans. David White (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23-53.
- <sup>17</sup> Symons, *Pudding* (1998), p 98.
- <sup>18</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 559.
- <sup>19</sup> Grimm, Veronika E., *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin* (London: Routledge, 1996), ch.2; Albala, Ken, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 54-56.
- <sup>20</sup> Seneca, *Epistle* 95: 15, 23; 1925: 67, 73).
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted by Stuart, Tristram, *The Bloodless Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), p. 377.
- <sup>22</sup> Stuart, *Bloodless Revolution* (2007), pp. 47; 439.
- <sup>23</sup> Grimm, *Feasting to Fasting*, 103-4.
- <sup>24</sup> Stuart, *Bloodless Revolution* ( 2007), p. 81,
- <sup>25</sup> See articles by Jaucourt in Diderot, *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1751--).
- <sup>26</sup> Young, Carolin, *Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), ch. 7
- <sup>27</sup> Mauriello, Tani, ““Feed Their Vile Bodies . . . Starve Their Inmortal Souls,”: Food as Moral Instructor in Nineteenth-Century Homes and Schools,” this volume.