

Culinary Rhetoric and Rhetorical Cookery: Plato was Right After All

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Although scorned by Plato and by generations of scholars, cooking, a behavior unique to humans is deeply rhetorical. It may be, in fact, prior to and responsible for the emergence of *homo sapiens* as a species. The deeply rhetorical nature of cooking has been recognized since classic times, particularly in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, but the full potential richness of a deeper theoretical linkage between discursive scholarship and the culinary arts remains to be explored.

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The Rhetoric of Cookery at a Glimpse

According to scientist Daniel Clay (2011: 287), "The single largest human impact on our finite planet comes from producing food." Together, food and cookery form what is perhaps humanity's most important material rhetoric. Yet philosophers and discursive scholars from Plato on down seem to have preferred to concentrate on "higher things," leaving supposedly "trivial" questions like food and cooking to lesser beings.

As Lévi-Strauss pointed out almost half a century ago (1969: 164), "Since man [*sic*] possesses five senses, there are five basic codes. . . . One of the codes occupies a privileged position; this is the one connected with eating habits, the gustatory code, whose message is more often transmitted by the others than it is used to translate theirs." One of the ways in which humans encode and transfer something from the inanimate (fire and its effects on foodstuffs) to the service of life is cooking.

More recently, scientist Richard Wrangham (2009) argues that because the human digestive system is shorter than that of all similar-sized mammals, cooking and cooks are in fact what "made us human." This reality, he contends, allowed early hominids to evolve into anatomically-modern humans (*homo sapiens*). Cookery provides us with enough calories to support our extraordinarily energy-hungry brains and thus our intelligence and much-vaunted reason. A necessary conclusion is that cookery is effectively prior to reason, and perhaps even to speech. Wrangham dates cooking, "one of the relatively few uniquely human abilities," as far back as "the time of Homo Erectus, 1.9 to 1.6 million years ago" (Gibbons, 2007: 1558). Recent findings by Berna, Goldberg, et al. (2012) "strongly suggest that hominins had knowledge of fire 1.0 Ma" [one million years ago], forming "the most compelling evidence to date offering some support for the cooking hypothesis of Wrangham" (p. 6 of 6).

Cooking is thus one of humanity's primordial rhetorics. Eminent rhetorical scholar George Kennedy proposes that "Rhetoric is prior to speech," (1992: 4), and in fact exists in the animal world and even among plants (10) as well as among humans. He expands this concept in his 1997 book, *Comparative Rhetoric*. Here, while he agrees with Jacques Derrida that "Writing is prior to

speech” (13), Kennedy uses the term “writing” in an extremely broad sense, expanding it to cover marking with urine or with scent, and ultimately into “a kind of metaphor, that is, something transferred to the condition of life from the inanimate world where there is also a kind of *marking*” (13). In effect, for Kennedy rhetoric is any and all material or discursive communication that “stands out against the ‘noise’ of the environment” (16).

Together with tool-making (which is not unique to humans), cookery long predates other uniquely-human purposeful symbolic behaviors that “stand out against the ‘noise’ of the environment.” In contrast, the first bead-making, cited by Holden (2004: 369) as some of the earliest evidence that “humans were well on their way to complex, symbolic thinking,” dates back barely 75,000 years, and the “creative explosion” of “painting and jewelry in Europe,” that would include cave paintings would not begin until more than 30 millennia later. If the art of cooking predates *homo sapiens* as a species, a necessary conclusion is that it was not thinkers, hunters, warriors, inventors or explorers (or even scholars!) but rather, cooks who are quite literally responsible for making us human.

Such an assertion is not new: In his *Δειπνοσοφισταί* *The Deipnosophists*, XIV, 660e, written in the third century of the Common Era, Athenaeus quoted the playwright Athenio as praising the art of cooking (*μαγειρικὴ τέχνη*) in his *Samothracians*, for having “liberated us from a savage existence.” Four decades ago, Lévi Strauss wrote (1969: 164), “Not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined with all its attributes, even those that, like mortality, might seem to be the most unquestionably natural.”

Cookery is quintessentially rhetorical. Andreas Keller (2009), reviewing Wrangham (2009), writes, “Some of cooking’s consequences may be seen in human social relationships. One individual can cook for a group, and Wrangham claims that this is what led to the establishment of monogamous pair bonds between individual men and women in early societies.” And, as Jacobsen points out, “rhetorical tropes are essential for the conceptualization of food, food production and consumption” (2004: 59).

Even more fascinatingly, food itself is a material rhetoric, not simply in regard to taste, preparation, nutritional quality, additives or availability, but rather as text. In 1972, shortly before the dawn of recombinant genetics, psychologist and systems analyst A. Wilden (1980) quoted a colleague, C. H. Waddington, who suggested to him that “in so far as DNA is a set of instructions, coded in minimally reactive forms in the molecule which bears it, we should regard it as a text.” By 2001 this idea had become a trope, “a given in biotech research, as it is in textbooks and *popular* culture” (Thacker, 2001: 14).

And, like any other text, genetic text functions rhetorically. Scientist Chen-Yu Zhang (2011) argues that “we are not only eating ‘materials,’ we are also eating ‘information.’” He reports that “plant miRNAs could make into the host blood and tissues via the route of food-intake. Moreover, once inside the host, they can elicit functions by regulating host ‘target’ genes and thus regulate host physiology;” thus, as the author wryly notes, “providing a whole new dimension to ‘you are what you eat.’” Food as formal and not figurative text, food-plants (and food animals) as active rhetorical agents in and of themselves, and diners as their audience (and not simply audience for the chef or cook) are novel and challenging concepts worthy of further study.

Plato, Cookery and Rhetoric

More than two thousand years ago, Plato dismissed cookery and rhetoric as “parts of the same practice” (1925: 462e). Of course, Plato, Aristotle and their misogynistic slave society deeply scorned “cookery and similar menial arts” (N. d.: I, 7.3), and one may reasonably propose that Plato’s intent was that of roasting Gorgias and the sophists by attaching to them the negative ethos of mere cooks, practitioners of a low, manual, “servile” occupation worthy only of women and slaves. However, what if Plato were right all along?

It is significant that in his *Gorgias* Plato uses two different words for “cookery”: “*οψοποιική*” (e.g., 463 B), and “*μαγειρικὴ*” (500 B). In his 1925 translation Lamb renders these two words

indifferently into English as “cookery.” While *μαγειρικὴ* is indeed the Modern Greek term for “cookery” or “cuisine” in the contemporary sense, *οψοποιική*, an ancient Greek word etymologically related to *ψωμι*, or “bread,” can be translated to English as fine or delicate pastry cuisine.

However, *μαγειρικὴ* (the adjectival form of *μάγειρος*) carried a radically different connotation in classical Greek than it bears in Modern Greek. According to Detienne and Vernant (1989: 8), “the cook, whom the Greeks call ‘mageiros,’ is indissociably both butcher and sacrificer,” that is, one who in butchering domestic animals conducts ritual sacrifice to the gods. In classical Greece all domestic animals were offered to the gods at the moment of slaughter, and the fat, bones and viscera were burned as a sacrifice to Zeus. Detienne and Vernant’s assertions are correlated at length in (and perhaps largely derived from) Athenaeus’ *Δειπνοσοφισταί* (Depnosophists, XIV, 659d-661d), in which that author quotes the playwright Athenio in his Samothracians: “Don’t you realize that the art of cooking has contributed more to pious practice than all the others combined?” Perhaps the fact that the *μάγειρος* was both “sacrificer and sacrificer” may have led Plato to assume that “*μαγειρικὴ*” [cookery] was inescapably implicated with the ancient, unreasoning rhetoric of myth and of soulless ritual that he saw as the prime obstacle in his struggle to advance civic consciousness “vom Mythos zum Logos” (Nestle, 1966).

Although Plato accuses both cooks and rhetors of serving pleasure over good, he was neither a doctrinaire Pythagorean (Havelock, 1963: 307) nor a pleasure-hating Stoic. His confabulation of rhetoric with cookery, though clearly intended as an insult, is in fact a valuable contribution to the intellectual heritage of humanity and can be embraced in the contemporary spirit of turning an insult into a boast.

Written nearly five hundred years after Plato’s time, the best (or at least the longest) extant late Greco-Roman rhetoric of cookery is unquestionably Athenaeus’ *Δειπνοσοφισταί*, a vast, rambling work in fourteen books, the title of which can be translated into English as “*The Dining Sophists*.”

In Book IX, 377f (1955) of this work, the author, after discussing the crucial role of invention, *kairos* and delivery in the culinary arts, challenges Plato by declaring that “a mighty sophist ... is the cook.” Turning Plato’s denunciation into an honor, this author writes: “*εἰς τοὺς σοφιστὰς τὸν μάγειρον ἐγγράφω*: (IX, 397b), ‘I include [inscribe] cooks among the sophists.’” The author then offers an extended discussion of his concept of the “sophist-cook”, (Book XIV, 658e and following) as summation and conclusion of *his magnum opus*.

It is fascinating to speculate how differently the Western discipline of rhetorical studies might have evolved had more of the rich and varied classical tradition of culinary rhetoric survived. Athenaeus (1955: XII, 516c,5) lists eighteen different classical authors who wrote cookbooks [*οψαρτυτικὰ*], and one, Artimidorus (XIV, 662d) who compiled a Greek-language *Glossary of Cooking*. Unfortunately, none of these works survived, Apicius’ *De re coquinaria* being the only complete text of a classical-era cookbook available to us today.

Although it is rarely admitted by rhetoricians, virtually all the familiar basic rules and categories of classical Western rhetorical theory (e.g., invention, audience, purpose and *kairos*, style, decorum, memory, arrangement and delivery, to name a few) are either identical or closely analogous to those of cookery. Considering the breathtaking degree of priority enjoyed by cookery, one must wonder how many Western discursive rhetorical concepts arose independently and how much we really owe to the culinary arts.

What is more, there are other gastronomical rules, concepts and categories that remain to be synesthetically applied to the field of discursive rhetoric to add more flavor to what we do as scholars (e.g., the potential richness that a well-developed rhetoric of “flavors” might offer to composition studies, or the profound implications that a rhetorical canon of “food safety” might have in political discourse).

Conclusion

Cookery is a “native” human rhetoric, a text accessible to all humans (even newborns cringe at bitter or sour, and respond positively to sweet or yeasty aromas or to the familiar flavor of mother’s milk). Culinary rhetoric is an obvious place to begin a journey toward a richer, more embodied and more delicious discursive scholarship. Let us begin our exploration here.

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