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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**4** Thesis Statement

**6** Why Cooking?: 6 Anyone Can Cook | 7 Cooking in Everyday Life | 9 The Cooking Sense | 10 Participatory Making vs. Passive Consumption | 12 Fighting Alienation Through Total Participation | 14 Build Your Own Damn House

**16** People and Cooking: 16 Human-Centered Research | 17 Navigating Needs and Desires | 22 Influence of the Childhood Kitchen | 24 Perceiving Possibilities | 26 Expression in Cooking | 30 Acquiring Culinary Knowledge

**34** What's Cooking?: Revealing Relationships and Subtleties | Canbake Pancake? | What's in a Word? | Investigating Essence | Flavor Matchmakers | Engaging the Cooking Sense | Understanding Levels of Engagement | Developing a Visual Language | Mapping Possibilities



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[www.thecookingsense.wordpress.com](http://www.thecookingsense.wordpress.com)

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## Thesis Statement

*This thesis presents the research and exploratory design work involved in the development of an interactive visual model for exploring culinary possibilities and techniques. The goal is to provide home cooks of all skill levels a personally directed means of expanding their cooking sense by encouraging the use of perception and intuition. Rather than presenting cooking as a set of static instructions or finished recipes, this model allows individuals to explore culinary possibilities based on immediate personal circumstances such as available materials, skills, time and physical or emotional needs. Such a model fosters a sense of cooking that promotes self-sufficiency and aids the development of ingenuity, personal expression, flexibility, and improvisation in everyday cooking.*





# Chapter 1

## PREP

### Why Cooking?

“Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds. Agriculture has done more to reshape the natural world than anything else we humans do, both its landscapes and the composition of its flora and fauna. Our eating also constitutes a relationship with dozens of other species—plants, animals, and fungi—with which we have coevolved to the point where our fates are deeply entwined. Many of these species have evolved expressly to gratify our desires, in the intricate dance of domestication that has allowed us and them to prosper together as we could never have prospered apart.

But our relationships with the wild species we eat—from the mushrooms we pick in the forest to the yeasts that leaven our bread—are no less compelling, and far more mysterious. Eating puts us in touch with all that we share with the other animals, and all that sets us apart. It defines us.”

– Michael Pollan

*The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006, The Penguin Press)

### ANYONE CAN COOK

Many of the benefits of home cooking are obvious, health and economics being two of them. However, cooking offers more subtle benefits as well. As a mode of making, cooking has the ability to reverse aesthetic and cultural alienation. It also functions as a form of silent communication, cultural preservation and rich storytelling. These benefits can have a profound and positive effect on individuals and their communities. Cooking calls upon our senses to work in ways that must consider context, emotional states, materiality and physical transformations. It forces an awareness and sensitivity to our own desires and the desires of others. As a practice, cooking has the potential to teach us about ourselves, each other and the world around us.

Arguably, we all possess the ability to learn to cook, which means we all have the power to understand and experience its benefits. Regardless if we cook a four-course meal or make a sandwich, cooking presents us with a whole range of benefits as mentioned above. I reject the idea that one must possess a ‘natural talent’ or certain aptitude in order to make good, tasty and healthy food. As with many things, the concept of ‘good cooking’ is subjective and open to one’s personal interpretation.

There are many economic, environmental and health-related issues currently surrounding food. Concerns about the chemicals in many processed foods have called for a reevaluation of their effects on our health. There are also concerns about the environmental effects of mono-agriculture and GMOs (genetically-modified organisms), which are used to produce many highly-processed foods and food additives such as high-fructose corn syrup and lecithin, an emulsifier. With the economic downturn over the past several years, more people are looking to save money by cooking at home. Frugality has

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become a trend as people look for more creative and efficient ways to use the foods they buy. Rather than try to tackle these issues directly, I chose to take a more foundational approach and to think about how individuals can address these issues through their everyday actions.

Cooking is one of the most direct ways in which people experience and interact with food on a daily basis. Through secondary research, I worked to gain an understanding of how cooking exists in the greater scheme of the world and how it might, as an everyday practice, address some of the societal issues mentioned above. Not only did this research serve to justify cooking's place in everyday life but it also shed light on the reasons behind my personal interest in the subject which included memory's role in cooking. While examining cooking in a more academic and philosophical sense, I also conducted studies utilizing several methods of human-centered design research. Constructed as a series of designed interventions, these studies explored ways to encourage interest and engagement in cooking among participants in my community. Instead of being presented as a cooking class or educational event, I often simply invited people to present their versions of specific foods or dishes. These participatory events were followed up by short interviews or requests to reflect on their cooking. This process helped me understand the techniques people used and what they liked or disliked about cooking at home. Understanding how people did or didn't engage in cooking was essential in designing a system that would provide individuals with the inspiration, confidence, encouragement and motivation to start their own journeys into home cooking.

## COOKING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Cooking has always been a factor in everyday life, especially in the lives of women. Over the past 60 years, cooking in the home has declined among Americans. In 2001, The Residential Energy Consumption Survey (RECS), conducted a study on household characteristics and residential energy consumption. From 1993 to 2001, the percentage of individuals who reported cooking "2 to 3 times a week" fell 3.8 percent. The percentage of individuals who cooked at least once a day also fell from 44.3 percent in 1993 to 40.5 percent in 2001. However, in the same study, people who reported cooking one or fewer meals per week increased on average 3.8 percent. ([www.eia.doe.gov](http://www.eia.doe.gov)). As these numbers show, it would be false to say that people don't cook. They certainly do, and sometimes even with extreme time and budget constraints, still manage to cook several nights a week.

What has really changed is what, why and how people cook (or don't cook). With the vast array of available ready-made meals, highly processed 'heat n serve' entrees, ready mixes and condensed or frozen foodstuffs, cooking no longer means spending hours in the kitchen preparing meals from scratch. Additionally, eating out has become a convenient alternative to cooking at home, and has expanded to include more traditional sit-at-home meals such as Thanksgiving and holidays. The National Restaurant Association association confirmed this trend with new data in 2002 which stated that one-third of Americans turn to prepared foods [principally side dishes and desserts] to help with their holiday meals (Raloff).





## Why Cooking?

It wasn't until the negative health effects of frequently consuming convenience foods and eating out became visible that at-home, from-scratch cooking appeared in the spotlight as a catalyst for addressing such issues. The newest USDA data suggests that people eat more and/or higher calorie foods when eating out ([www.open-site.org](http://www.open-site.org)). Considering that Americans eat from two to 21 meals away from home each week (that's 104-1,092 meals a year), this should give us reason for concern. The nutritional value of food consumed also has been seen to decline when eating out. In a study conducted by the USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and Harvard University, researchers found that children who consumed fast food took in more total calories, fat and sugars and less total vitamins and minerals than children who ate meals at home. ([www.allbusiness.com](http://www.allbusiness.com), 2004).

Dining out is an enjoyable and important part of our food experience. However, increasing the amount of time spent cooking at home promotes healthier eating habits by enabling better control over what goes onto our plates. Increasingly relying on meals prepared by third parties leads to a disconnection from what we are really consuming. When cooking food from scratch, we know exactly what's going into it. There is better control over content and we are free to choose cooking methods that best fit our wants or needs.

Beyond health benefits, there also lies a whole range of social, ethical, psychological, environmental, economic and cultural benefits of cooking at home. Proponents of home cooking have trumpeted its ability to strengthen family bonds and community relations and encourage cultural preservation. It brings people together in a common place for a collective experience. Food is presented not only as sustenance, but as a medium for sharing knowledge, nourishment and conversation.

Cooking encourages these types of shared social experiences and thus creates a sense of belonging and community within the individuals who participate. In this way, cooking is a vehicle for social, psychological and cultural well-being.

Ethically speaking, home cooking gives us, yet again, more control over the types of foods, food products and producers we support with our business. It can be very hard to obtain products that match personal specifications in regards to environmental and ethical concerns when buying pre-prepared food or eating out. For example, we might be able to get free range chicken in a dish, but what if we also insist upon using organic produce or local dairy products? Making the food ourselves is the only way to control this.

In terms of the environment, there has not been sufficient study done on how "green" cooking at home really is. A study conducted by the Swedish Institute for Food and Biotechnology found a negligible difference in the amount of energy consumed via a prepared meal, cooking from packaged or semi-prepared products and cooking from scratch.

...they found no big difference between the environmental footprints of home-cooked versus ready-to-eat fare. Each means of putting food on the table has environmental advantages and disadvantages that, in the end, "even each other out," the researchers concluded. (Raloff)

Nonetheless, I would argue that cooking encourages more awareness of these types of issues by its call for engagement with the materials being used. Because we invest our time, energy and money into the preparation of the food, this eventually leads to heightened sensitivity and/or awareness of the issues that come

along with cooking such as food and packaging waste, carbon footprints of the materials used and energy efficiency. Although it cannot be proven that home cooking is necessarily “better for the environment”, I do argue that increasing cooking’s presence in everyday life leads to an increased awareness of how our food choices affect the world at large.

### THE COOKING SENSE

Cooking, like design, involves a variety of perceptual and cognitive functions such as calculating and sensing time, analyzing materials, utilizing our ingenuity and sensory perception. These functions work together to form what is referred to in this thesis as the ‘cooking sense.’ This sense consists of information about techniques and materials that is gathered over time and kept with us through a collection of memories and learned gestures. In part two of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Luce Giard outlines these functions as follows: the multiple memory, the programmed mind, sensory perception and cleverness. The multiple memory refers to the simultaneous recollection of a collection of memories that the subconscious perceives as aiding in the activity at hand. The programmed mind is the term given for the various calculations and strategic planning that one must conduct during cooking. These make up what he calls “ordinary intelligence,” ordinary in that it does not readily make itself visible but exhibits itself subtly through improvisational and nuanced actions. Ordinary as they may be, these functions work together to enable us to create things which serve our needs and the needs of those we love.

Each meal demands the invention of an alternative ministrategy when one ingredient or the appropriate utensil is lacking. And when friends make a sudden,

Essence study: mushroom / mixed media (see page 44)





## Why Cooking?

unexpected appearance right at dinner time, one must improvise without a score and exercise one's combinatory capacities. Thus, entering into the vocation of cooking and manipulating ordinary things makes one use intelligence, a subtle intelligence full of nuances and strokes of genius, a light and lively intelligence that can be perceived without exhibiting itself, in short, a very ordinary intelligence. (Giard, 157)

It is an intelligence that, if unused or overlooked, becomes flat and flabby, leaving us dependent on others for what we could do ourselves. Consequently, as we increasingly rely on others to perform a task for us, we forget what goes into that task. We forget, for example, what it feels like to make bread, stir simmering custards or whisk fresh egg whites. In essence, the sense of cooking is lost, and along with it a consciousness of what it means to prepare one's own food.

The cooking sense also refers to our ability to envision how things will taste, complement or perform in a proposed culinary idea. Cooking from scratch helps hone these skills by exposing us to the characteristics and possibilities of any given set of ingredients and how to best take advantage of their offerings. Each time we engage in cooking something new we add valuable knowledge to our multiple memory thus expanding our ability to envision what we want to make, what processes to use and how it will turn out. The ability to envision also increases confidence in the kitchen. It eliminates feelings of unpredictability and allows for more self-assured and self-directed decision-making.

Widening our cooking sense through experimentation and improvisation also benefits us by increasing our flexibility in the kitchen. Learning to use what is on hand or create at the spur

of the moment, for example when unexpected guests arrive, strengthens our ability to think in real-time and quickly take survey of immediate resources. This type of thinking produces a sense of flexibility and resourcefulness. Additionally, learning to create under these types of conditions builds the confidence needed for creative experimentation which leads to knowledge and understanding about new techniques, materials, interactions, and combinations. Many of my best cooking outcomes were the products of happy accidents that occurred while experimenting.

The cooking sense is a combination of emotion, intuition and analytical reasoning. Its social aspects makes it an important skill for us to exercise and develop so that it can serve as another way to build and maintain community. Our cooking sense makes us better able to meet our needs and the needs others through our self-action rather than relying upon outside systems. It also engages our senses in a way that brings us fully into the present, creating a real-time experience of being.

## **PARTICIPATORY MAKING VS. PASSIVE CONSUMPTION**

Having a more active role in processing food our own food for consumption brings us into closer proximity with food. Handling, organizing and manipulating food allows us to experience food on multiple levels. This full spectrum experience is lost when eating out or buying prepared meals because we only interact with the food in its final state to be eaten. Seeing, tasting, smelling, touching and hearing food as it goes through the various transformations in a cooking process opens up a deeper level of understanding of its inherent qualities. Much of what we experience in modern society closes us off from these qualities, and conditions us to experience food on a touch-and-go basis. The 'move in, move out' culture has done a great



disservice to the human sense of what good, healthy food looks and tastes like. Our sense of taste is naturally inclined towards the sweet and salty areas of the palate, and the industrial food industry has gone to great lengths to cater to those tastes. However, when variety is sacrificed for wants rather than needs, our senses become numbed and conditioned to crave only those flavors. This narrows our taste for variety and limits our range of sensory experience. Eventually, this narrowing causes us to fall into the habit of an unvaried diet, leading to poor health and a flat palate.

Consuming without being a part of producing fosters an attitude of passivity. When we become passive we give up control over the qualitative, quantitative, ethical and economic aspects of what we use. The implications of this passivity affect our personal health and the health of the greater social, economic and environmental spheres. Relinquishing control is assuming those who serve us share our interests. These kinds of assumptions are dangerous and open the door for abuse. This has proven especially true when involving large-scale or multi-national corporations. Although local cafes, markets and farmers also sell foodstuffs for profit, they tend to carry a greater interest in ethical and social concerns because they are typically members of the community they serve. This is generally not the case for large-scale and multi-national food industry establishments that produce on a mass scale. These large scale businesses are subject to extreme pressures exerted by the market to produce a constant increase in profits, further removing the industry from the individuals or communities it serves. As a result, attention to quality, purity and health are put at risk to fall by the wayside.

“I believe that, in any society, as conviviality is reduced below a certain level, no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society’s members.” (Illich, 12)



## Why Cooking?

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord discusses what happens with the separation of worker and product:

The general separation of worker and product tends to eliminate any direct personal communication between the producers and any comprehensive sense of what they are producing. With the increasing accumulation of separate products and the increasing concentration of the productive process, communication and comprehension are monopolized by the managers of the system. (Debord, 14).

Reversing this alienation involves realigning ourselves directly with producers of the things we consume, and practicing activities that utilize our senses in modes of transformative making. Seeing and being a part of the transformation of raw materials into complex goods helps us understand the dynamics of the process. This understanding, in turn, help us build and manage our own systems for production. Cooking is a form of transformative making through which we create our own systems of production. It utilizes the senses in creative and versatile ways, including exercising our ability to perceive changes in our environment through the body and understanding the resources that go into making something. Understanding what is required to make that which sustains us brings greater appreciation of those things.

When we value something, we take care of it; we preserve it for future generations. It is this kind of appreciation that is needed to change how we produce, acquire and use food. When we cook at home, we are more inclined to appreciate the food and pay deeper attention to what goes into

preparing meals. We become more aware of the characteristics of the materials used because we are in direct contact with them. This in turn, motivates us to exercise our voices in the methods of production of raw materials and, even further, make healthier, more socially conscientious choices about where we obtain our food. In a sense, cooking at home makes us agents in our own health and thus our future.

### FIGHTING ALIENATION THROUGH TOTAL PARTICIPATION

In the spirit of the Situationist manifesto of 1960, cooking introduces total participation and serves as a model for creating situations that address needs on a personal and meaningful level. Cooking with raw, whole, and minimally-processed ingredients lends itself to a fuller spectrum of participation in meal creation. Using minimally processed ingredients make meals that are fresh, nutritionally diverse, and good tasting. To quote Michael Pollan, “Don’t eat anything your great-great grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food.” (Pollan, *New York Times*, 13). This would mean using real cheese instead of processed cheese, real bacon instead of Bacon Bits™ or making a pizza instead of heating up a frozen one.

Cooking from scratch also allows customization on a very specific level. It opens up room to assess the qualities of ingredients that best fit our economic, emotional and physical needs. It creates flexibility to be as complex or simple as we wish, such as making Coq au vin or a simple tossed salad. These aspects are the key differences between eating pre-prepared meals and home cooked meals. They are personal and contextually specific to our daily lives, and because the ingredients used are minimally processed, we are able to experience how raw materials are transformed to create the things we enjoy.

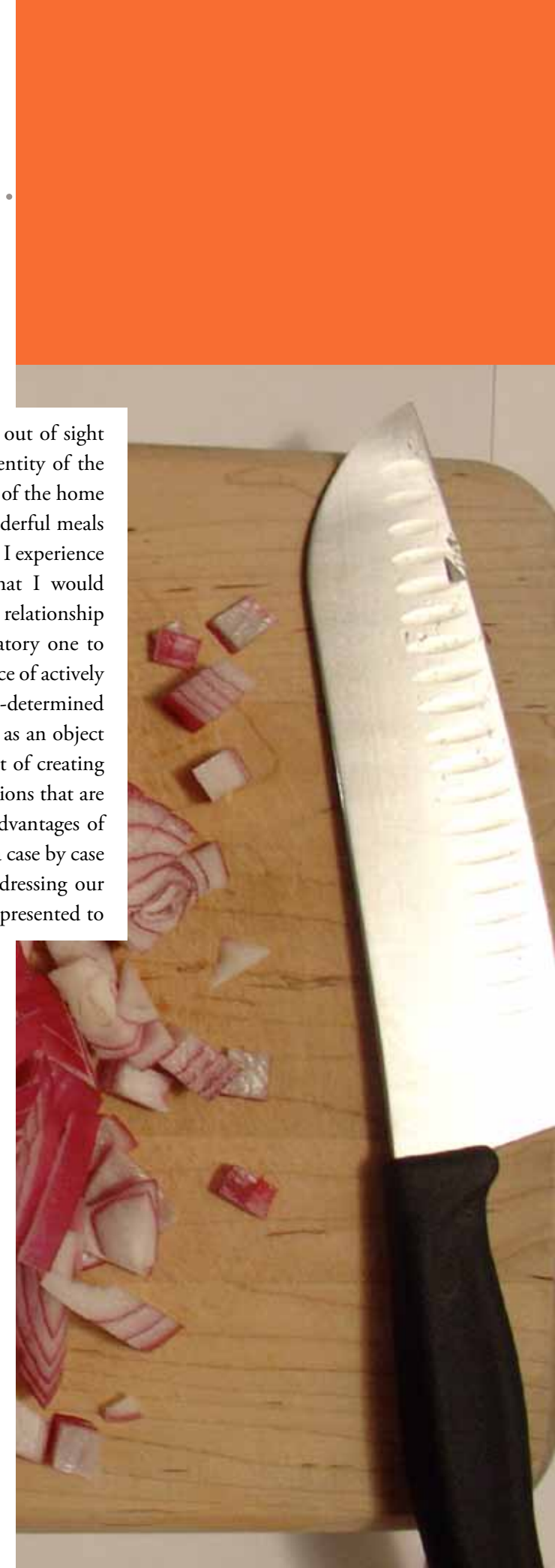
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Active making opens up the ability to experience things in various stages of completion, thus increasing the “experiential spectrum” of those things. To eat out or habitually consume ready-made foods is to experience food only in its completed end state. At this level of engagement, food is observed and experienced in a semi-static state that is directed towards serving a need through consumption. Cooking, on the other hand, requires real-time self-examination of wants and desires, which in turn informs subsequent actions. In this way, we become self-sufficient and able to address our own needs with more personalized decisions and methods. Making also means living alongside the life-cycles of what we use. Seeing and being a part of a larger portion of any given thing’s cycle of existence expands understanding of how and why it benefits us. Cooking makes us active participants in the life-cycle of food. Instead of interacting with food only at the consumption level we experience it in real-time; we live with it rather than for it.

The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere. (Debord, 16)

Although eating in a restaurant is also a ‘lived’ experience, the difference is that the atmosphere, processes and people present food abstractly rather than directly. Rather than being

involved in creating what we need, food is created out of sight and presented to us as but a facet of the larger identity of the establishment. This is not to say that eating outside of the home cannot be enjoyable. I have experienced many wonderful meals in restaurants. However, my relationship to the food I experience is different from, and in some ways lacking, what I would experience at home cooking for myself. Again, the relationship between eater and food is shifted from a participatory one to one of passive consumption. It replaces the experience of actively creating food with simply gazing among a set of pre-determined items. In this gaze, we are left to contemplate food as an object rather than a product of our own will. Being a part of creating our own meals grants us the freedom to make decisions that are appropriate for our needs and lends itself to the advantages of having mobility and flexibility to address needs on a case by case basis. Cooking involves a total participation in addressing our wants and needs rather than simply taking what is presented to us by outside systems.





### BUILDING YOUR OWN DAMN HOUSE

In a small coffee shop named Trouble Coffee and Coconut Club in San Francisco's sunset district there lies a small manifesto on the counter in the form of a sticker. In that manifesto, the anonymous author states the following:

.....  
Trouble coffee company acts as a locus of resources in a network of information via word of mouth. We are local people with useful skills in tangible situations strong & Dependable. respect. skills. culture. commitment, guts and honor. Drink a cup of trouble. Eat a coconut. and learn to build your own damn house. We will help. We are building a network. The components of communication within the trouble coffee & coconut club are different than those of mass culture. With susTainED connEcT ions, mEmbErs DEvElOp EmoTional bonDs, inTEL lEcTual paThWays and a highEr capaciTy for criTical Thinking and problEm-solving. Drinking local trouble coffee sustains our skills and our city. a coconut {cocos nucifera} provides a nutritious source of m e a t , j u i c e , m i l k , a n d o i l t h a t h a s f e d a n d n o u r i s h e d p o p u l a t i o n s a r o u n d t h e w o r l d f o r g e n e r a t i o n s . W e l i k e f u n c t i o n a l .  
.....

This manifesto has stood as a model for what I believe lies at the heart of cooking's power to sustain life, not strictly on a nutritional level, but on a social, spiritual and cultural level as well. As a model, cooking enables the creation of independent systems of nourishment, pleasure and sharing. The knowledge, skills, talents and resources in these systems are personal and contextual and within them communities and cultures are

built and maintained. As with other forms of cultural information, cooking techniques, materials and tools are passed on from one individual or generation to the next. Embedded within these are narratives of people, places and events in which the culinary heritage exists. Preserving this kind of cultural richness through cooking practice strengthens the network of available contextual information for future generations to interpret, learn from, and build upon. It enables individuals to become participants and builders of their own history rather than passive spectators.

An an everyday activity, I propose that cooking is not just a method of sustenance but a tool that provides us with the ability to carve out our personal space within the world. Through it we are able to produce our own systems of pleasure without relying on capatilist or market forces to make us happy.

People need not only to obtain things, they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own tastes, and to put them to use in caring for and about others. (Illich, 12)