

## *Nutrition and Tradition*

The Science of Food and the Culture of Cooking

When George de Mestral went out for a walk on that Swiss summer day in 1941, he wasn't looking for an inspiration to invent the world's most famous fabric fastener; the germ of the idea just came to him—literally. Those seed-bearing burrs that clung to his pants and his dog's fur were, he saw when he came home and examined them under a microscope, covered with tiny hooks, which enabled them to cling perfectly to the loops in his pants' fabric and the dog's hair. And a few years later, with the help of a textile designer in France, the product now known universally as "Velcro" was born.

De Mestral's moment of discovery may have been instantaneous and was certainly marked by great ingenuity, but the millennia-long process that developed its inspiration was neither. The marvelous hooks on the burrs that stuck to his legs were the outcome of countless accruals of evolutionary accidents (first a bump, perhaps, on the seed casing; then a little needle; and finally a microscopic hook on the end), each preserved because it happened to help the plant spread its seeds or otherwise increase its fitness. The outcome of a biological process that did not even rise to the level of true trial and error was the inspiration for one of our century's most famous technologies; science imitated nature, but nature's route was as unscientific as could be.

This little anecdote carries with it any number of lessons, but in an age as professedly Darwinian as ours it's remarkable to observe the extent to which we've forgotten that *human* custom, too, in all its glorious diversity, is the product of the same sorts of selection mechanisms that gave de Mestral's burrs their sticking power. What we refer to disparagingly as "conventional wisdom" is wisdom indeed: not the kind of wisdom, whether real or merely apparent, dreamed up within the walls of the laboratory or the ivory tower, but rather the piecemeal accumulation of folk intuitions and commonsense tricks that encourage personal and societal flourishing in ways that abstract theories and appeals to first principles very rarely can. And it is often at our peril that we allow such conventions to be displaced.

Nowhere are the dangers of ignoring the wisdom of custom more evident than in the disastrous effects of our modern worship of the science—and pseudo-science—of food. As Michael Pollan ably documents in the opening chapters of *In Defense of Food* (2008), the reductive ideology that he follows the Australian sociologist Gyorgy Scrinis in terming "nutritionism"—roughly, the idea that we can fully understand the nourishing effects of foods purely in terms of the qualities of their component parts—has fared much less well than tradition and convention in

picking out the kinds of meals that are genuinely conducive to human health. Knowing how many fats, carbs, and calories one is consuming is all fine and good, but such knowledge is of little real use unless one knows, as we simply don't, precisely how those components work together with our bodies and the rest of the substances they are combined with in the intricate dances that are the preparation, consumption, and digestion of food.

Such challenges, however, are easily overcome when we forsake the parts for the whole and turn to the wisdom of the ages for dietary guidance. Consider the cases of margarine and Crisco (vegetable shortening), two eminently "scientific" foodstuffs that have solidly displaced butter and lard in most American kitchens. Both substances market themselves to the health conscious, yet both have turned out to be, thanks to the very laboratory processes that enable them to hold together, loaded with trans-fatty acids that are believed to increase the risk of coronary heart disease. (Crisco is now nearly trans-fat-free, but critics contend that the changes in its formula still don't make it healthy.) The vilified butter and lard, on the other hand, both teem with the sorts of natural micro-substances that our bodies need to be healthy, and of course they and the foods that we cook with them simply *taste* much better than the fake stuff, too. As is true in so many other cases, the centrality of the right sorts of fats to a truly healthy diet is something that modern science

has discovered, or rather *rediscovered*, much as de Mestral and his microscope discerned the adhesive qualities of the famous burrs. By contrast, the societies that have been eating this way for thousands of years stumbled upon the combination by accident and preserved the practice simply because it was found to work. Where once it was "Mom" who, largely by way of casual absorption, knew just what to cook and how to cook it, such knowledge is now the province of doctors and dietary experts, who of course would have us forget that since we began to worship their advice we've only become less and less healthy.

Nor do the consequences of this revolution in our understanding of food end with the declining states of our bodies. For cooking and eating are also essential parts of human *culture*, and the extent to which we have allowed a monolithic nutritionist ideology to displace the glorious variety of American food culture is genuinely shocking in retrospect. Gary Paul Nabhan's *Renewing America's Food Traditions* (2008), which provides a compendium of nearly-forgotten heritage foods from America's earliest days, offers one window into the riches of our quickly-receding culinary past, while Mark Kurlansky's *The Food of a Younger Land* (2009), which reprints essays on regional cuisine commissioned by the Works Project Administration, provides an even more detailed picture of the kinds of traditions within which such foods were embedded. (A couple of highlights from Kurlansky's

book: Eudora Welty on “Mississippi Food”—including recipes for stuffed eggs, seafood gumbo, and a “wickedly hot potato salad” served by the Hotel Vicksburg—and an unsigned overview of “The Mint Julep Controversy,” which notes that discussions at Derby Week center on two subjects: “horses and the correct way to make a Kentucky Mint Julep—the three or eight correct ways.”) Not all of these traditions and seasonal or regional variations are gone, of course: mint juleps and gumbo are still traditions in Louisville and Mississippi, corn on the cob remains a food for the summer and cranberries for the fall and winter, and it will forever be a challenge to find a good bagel outside of New York City. But there is no denying that such phenomena are increasingly being crowded out by a food culture that values uniformity and efficiency over tradition and variation, and takes many more of its cues from the U.S. Department of Agriculture than from a respectful deference to how things have “always been done.”

The replacement of gastronomic folk wisdom with the deliverances of an industrial food system that brings us prepackaged goods stamped with state- and doctor-certified seals of approval was not, of course, something that happened simply by accident. As the historian Harvey Levenstein has documented in *Revolution at the Table* (1988), it was only the perfect combination of faddish scientists and quack nutritionists, eager businessmen, and—of course—improvement-

minded government technocrats who could ever have pulled off the feat of enshrining nutritionism as America’s official culinary ideology. (As evidence of their success, consider the place in the public consciousness of the USDA’s famous “Food Pyramid,” which until recently reflected the supposed wisdom of several now-debunked theories by encouraging the only “sparing” use of fats and oils and the consumption of staggering quantities of carbohydrates.) For nature, human or otherwise, very rarely tends to revolution on its own, and the outcomes of millennia of natural selection stand to benefit very little from anything more than a tinkering around the edges. But now, in place of the understanding that one should, as Pollan helpfully suggests, try one’s best not to eat things that one’s grandmother or great-grandmother wouldn’t have been able to recognize as food, we find ourselves presented with a series of prepackaged edible goods that promise to salve our health-obsessed consciences while still making sure that we remain sufficiently nervous and guilt-ridden not to cease following the advice of the diet dictocrats at any point in the future. In such a context, it is tremendously hard for dusty old customs to get the respect that’s required for the hearing they deserve.

The modern diet is only one of a range of cases where the wisdom of convention has been forcibly displaced by our fascination with the new and allegedly scientific: think, for example, of the excitement over the return to

classical principles of urban design that is non-ironically referred to as the “New Urbanism,” or of the growing recognition that the interfering presence of hospital technology can be a hindrance rather than a help in a safe and happy childbirth. The ways we raise our children, too, are subject to similar pressures: our culture has begun to turn the corner on the values of breastfeeding in contrast to the allegedly superior qualities of laboratory-developed infant “formulas,” but as Ann Hulbert shows in *Raising America* (2003) we remain thoroughly in thrall to the dictates of parenting “experts” who are ever-prepared to supplant parental intuition and familial custom with costly tools and half-baked techniques drawn from the latest fads. Hence parenting, like cooking and shopping and eating, seems to us less a natural and age-old human activity

than a peculiarly modern challenge in which instinct and custom can provide no real help at all. And so does science assign itself, as if in the place of God, the task of making into foolishness the wisdom of the world.

Here, then, we find one of the central predicaments of modern man: we have at our disposal a huge range of facts about the ways things work, but by allowing those facts to replace too much of the received wisdom that is a kind of second nature for humans, we often leave ourselves knowing even less than before. “Eat food,” Pollan tells us, heed the intuition of your grandmother, and if you can’t pronounce the ingredients, better to stay away. If only we could let it be so simple.

—**John Schwenkler** is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley.