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## Intentionality in Cooking

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Food carries an emotional charge which affects its flavor in a subtle way. I found that out more than forty years ago.

While I was growing up in Mar Del Plata, Argentina, we always ate at home - breakfast, lunch, and dinner. School was from 8 to 12, and my younger brother and I always went home for lunch. My family became vegetarian when I was 11, so in steak-loving Argentina our home-cooked meals were a bit outside the norm, with vegetable soups, salads, cooked squash and potatoes, wholegrain bread, occasionally cheese, and rarely, dessert. I was crazy for crepes with caramelized sugar!

Our lives changed every summer. We ran a hotel that was open 4 months of the year, so the whole family moved there to run it. The hotel, a couple of blocks from the most fashionable beach in town, also offered breakfast, lunch and dinner. But hotel food was very different from home food. Besides the fabulous breakfast croissants and white sourdough toast with fresh butter, there were such delicacies as *vol-au-vent* (puff pastry) with creamed chicken, filet mignon with parsleyed small potatoes, homemade gnocchi with fresh tomato sauce (or butter and cheese), and cannelloni à la Rossini. Everything was made from scratch - from the pasta to the sauces. Our vegetarian diet "went to the winds," as we used to say, and for about two weeks we gleefully partook of whatever delicious food was left after our appreciative hotel clients had had their fill of it.

But after about two weeks of gluttony, the family slowly gravitated back to simpler fare. I noticed that we lost interest in the *vol-au-vents* and the cannelloni. We made our own soup with squash, potatoes, and other vegetables, took that with some salad and wholegrain bread, and preferred what we called "family food" rather than the fancy dishes. This routine went on for about 6 or 7 years, until I left my parents' home to study in Buenos Aires. I often wondered why that might be, and pondered about it for a few years. Finally, I concluded that the intention behind the hotel food was diffuse and open to the public, while our own "family foods," the simple boiled potatoes and squash with parsley-garlic sauce, were intended just for us. The public, "unfocused" food, regardless of its delicious flavors, soon became boring, while the plain family food never did.

Years later, now a US immigrant and eventually a citizen, I got involved in a dietary system known as macrobiotics, started by George Ohsawa. One of its tenets, derived from Japanese Zen monastery cooking, was that the intention of the cook changes the “energy” (*prana*, *chi*, or *ki*) of the food. We were enjoined to cook with care and attention. *Who* cooked was also important. The idea was that food creates the human who eats it, and therefore its quality and “energy” is of utmost importance. Michio Kushi, one of the best known popularizers of macrobiotics, used to point out in his lectures that when families don’t eat the same food, they don’t harmonize. I paraphrase his thoughts: “If the mother eats at the taco place, and the father eats at the burger place, and they make a child, the child is then the offspring of the tacos and the burgers. People don’t understand each other.” By their cooking, mothers - or fathers, if they liked to cook - were seen in this cosmology as the prime creators of the family’s health and well-being.

There may be something to that notion. Intentionality, or the effect of intention on matter or organisms, has been studied extensively. A number of studies have shown that prayer has a healing effect not only on people (even when the praying person does not know the one prayed for) but also on bacteria and rats (Benor 2001), which certainly don’t know the meaning of our prayers to begin with. Other studies, notably Dean Radin’s (1997) with the random event generators (REGs), have shown that when large numbers of people (the “group mind”) focus on a single event (like the O.J. Simpson verdict or the attacks of 9/11), these REGs register unusual spikes. These events have given rise to the interpretation that something about group attention has an effect on the quick motion of these machines.

Prayer can be considered thinking with intention and good feelings, and the request for a specific outcome. Numerous studies have shown that prayer has a measurable effect on healing. In In consciousness and mind-body study circles, intention is now clearly recognized as having an effect on material events. If it does, the effect may not be limited to random event generators or studies of distant healing. The effect may be present every moment of every day in our lives, in their most mundane aspects.

Cooking could easily be one of these. If so, the intention of the cook will flavor the food as much as the herbs and spices. It could be said that food is the carrier of the intention. The bad mood of the chef may show up in the fights between those who eat his (or her) culinary preparations. Many years ago I was in a serious fight with my then-husband. We had just had dinner in a restaurant and started fighting. As we almost never fought, we took a moment and noticed how strange this was, especially because the fight was over nothing. Absolutely nothing! It was just words. We tried to figure out what had happened, and our only explanation was that the chef in the restaurant must have been in one lousy mood. That was the end of our fight.

Conversely, the good mood and good intentions of the chef can also have a noticeable effect. That understanding is behind the frequently used phrase “made with love” that graces many “healthy” foods and cookies sold in health food stores. I have frequently noticed that if there are good feelings in the cooking - as in the thousands of cooking classes I have taught between 1972 and 1998 -- after a disparate group of people finish eating, the conversations are lively and harmonious.

The epitome of intentional cooking is, of course, a meal prepared with the intention of seducing the one who consumes it. This is an ancient and very popular practice in many cultures. However, the variety of foods used for this purpose is staggering. For example, among aphrodisiac foods there was saffron in Spain, bird's nest soup in China, camel's hump among the Arabs, and cocoa for the Aztecs. (It was said, that Montezuma had 600 concubines, and to satisfy them he drank 50 cups of cocoa per day from a golden goblet.) Over time, almost every interesting or exotic foodstuff, particularly if reminiscent in any way of the male or female sex organs, has been used to inspire desire and stimulate performance: bananas, peaches, berries, figs, dates, asparagus, nuts, seeds, stuffed dates, sea urchins, to name a few. But was it the actual foodstuff that made the difference - or the intention behind it?

While we wait for science to do studies about intentionality in cooking, I believe it is a good idea to live as if it existed for real, just in case. Perhaps we can enhance poor energy in commercial meals of questionable healthfulness by blessing the food, putting our own good intention into it, or saying grace. Perhaps you always feel good after eating in a particular restaurant - it could have something to do with the mood or personality of the chef. Perhaps it is a good idea to let someone else cook when you are angry or upset. Mostly, cooking with love and good intentions cannot fail to make both the cook and the consumer happy, and who can fault us for trying?

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