

## THE KILLJOY OF COOKING

October 2008

I first became interested in food in a serious way in the 1970s. That was also the era when I first became a food snob. Becoming a food snob doesn't happen overnight. It takes years to learn the lingo. You have to read *Gourmet* and *Cook's Illustrated*. You have to be up on your sea salts. You have to know the difference between Valrhona chocolate and Callebaut.

The '70s were a good era, gastronomically-speaking. The Food Police weren't peering over our shoulder yet, and you could make a meal without fear of being run out of town if it wasn't ethically produced. I had dinner parties for twelve and served dishes like Beef Wellington and Crepes Suzettes. It never occurred to me to ask where the cow was raised. I made the crepes at the table in a copper flambé pan using half a pound of butter. Nobody noticed.

I was a good cook, never a great one, but what I liked even better than actually becoming a gourmand, was conveying the impression that I was one. To that end, I had an impressive set of copper pots and a cookbook collection with impeccable pedigree. I owned a Julia Child, a Craig Claiborne, and the weighty, double-volume *Gourmet* set, which sat imposingly on my kitchen shelf

like *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I also had an unbelievably pretentious French cookbook whose recipes began with instructions like “Catch a trout in the neighboring stream.” But my most prized possession was the framed menu that hung in my kitchen of a meal I’d eaten at a three-star Michelin restaurant in France that was founded by the father of nouvelle cuisine.

Over time, I became quite the foodie purist. When I had a kid, fish sticks never darkened our door. She grew up on buffalo mozzarella. On the whole, my daughter liked my cooking, although she did occasionally wish that I’d expand my repertoire. “Oh mom,” she whined at dinner one night. “Pasta with pesto *again?*” She was four.

Her complaints notwithstanding, she developed quite the sophisticated palate—a state of affairs for which she sometimes curses me now that she’s paying her own bills. A second-generation epicure, she too has discovered the dark side of foodie lust: once you’ve tasted Madagascar vanilla, you can never go back.

I don’t envy her the road ahead. Food snobbery has always been an expensive habit to maintain, but as prices skyrocket, what was once a fulfilling hobby now requires a hedge fund to pursue. As the headline for Daniel Gross’s lament on the subject read in online magazine Slate recently, “Basque cheese at \$22(US) per

pound! Olive oil at \$43(US) per litre! What's a gourmand to do?" (Canadians who shop at fine food emporiums are far from immune to sticker shock; prices north of the border are just as sobering.) But an even worse fun-killer than the prospect of going into hock over a sliver of artisanal cheese is the residual guilt one feels for lusting after a specialty food item whose brazen price is a censoring reminder that half the world can't put rice on their plates.

But say you do manage to rationalize the guilt. You still have to accept the fact that the bar is much higher than it ever was for food snobs. Once the mere possession of arcane culinary knowledge provided the aspirational foodie entrance to an exclusive club. And exclusivity was the point, really. You read cookbooks the way other people read novels. Your idea of a great evening out was debating the merits of smoked Scottish salmon over Nova Scotian. You were smug in the knowledge that, whatever happened, you could always win the next round of culinary one-upsmanship.

Well, those days are over. Culinary savvy has gone so mass market, even the guys who sell TVs at Future Shop know that goji berries are having a moment right now. Try staying ahead of the curve with competition like that.

Accordingly, an aspiring foodie today faces many brutal pressures. For instance, if I wanted to wow my guests as a novice amateur chef, all I had to do was prepare Duck à l'Orange; today, I'd have to hole up for a year in a shoebox kitchen like Julie Powell and make every recipe in Julia Child's *Mastering The Art of French Cooking*. The foodie lifestyle has simply become a much tougher row to hoe than ever before —and I mean that literally. You can't just cook with ingredients you buy at the market anymore. You have to build a grow-op in your basement and cultivate what you eat. And you'd better have a deep freeze to stash the half a cow you purchased from a certified organic farmer (the rock star *du jour* in the foodie world), whose cattle are spoon-fed pureed baby arugula and read to by their nannies.

But as much as I'm game to stay in the game, the prospect of foraging for righteous greens, eating raw food, or developing a taste for offal just doesn't set my foodie heart a-flutter. And therein lies my dilemma. A food snob must grow or die. If I don't stay current, I won't retain my foodie cred. Like the poor shell-shocked cupcake, I'll be tossed aside as so last year.

I can't believe I'm saying this, but the prospect is starting to look really tempting.

