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Sex and Food

Though it is not fashionable to admit the fact, food is more important in our lives than sexual intercourse. Those of us who live in the overfed world eat three times a day; I think it is safe to say that none of us over the age of sixteen has sex in any form three times a day. Though we may imagine that we are obsessed by sex, we spend a great deal more time thinking about food, what to eat, how to come by it, and whom to consume it with. The late Mary Ellman wrote in Thinking about Women that 'Only the digestive system, which is shared by the sexes, is not often sexually characterised.' This is probably because, though millions of words are nowadays written about food, very little at all is written about eating.

The eating habits of men and women can be contrasted from the first days of life. Studies of the feeding habits of newborns have found that little boys become more irritable and upset before feeds and go to sleep very soon after them; little girls demand food less aggressively and are harder to settle after feeding. In Talking with Children, Sheila and Celia Kitzinger point out that 'baby girls are breastfed less often, and for briefer periods than boys, and are weaned earlier. An Italian study found that eight-week old babies were suckled for an average of 45 minutes if they were boys, but only 25 mins if they were girls. Mothers stopped breast-feeding girls on an average three months earlier than boys.'

The meaning of such data is not easy to unravel. Italian mothers could be responding to an oedipal situation and projecting the boys' greater demandingness on to them, so as to begin the insidious process by which a boy becomes aware that he is a 'little man'. Perhaps little girls do feed less aggressively and the mothers feel rejected. What is certain is that girls are perceived as feeding less aggressively, and this is a pattern that will last their whole lifetime. Before we can decide that women are biologically less interested in food than men we would have to look at the demeanour of their mothers during feeding and their interpretation of the babies' behaviour. Studies done on women playing with babies have shown that the same behaviour on the part of the same baby is interpreted completely differently according to whether the mothers are told that the baby is a girl or a boy.

Girls are not only expected to show less interest in food and to eat less than boys, they are also expected to make less mess doing it and to be toilet trained earlier and more strictly. What this means in effect is that not only are baby girls weaned earlier, weaning is even more distressing and repressive for them than it is for boys. Weaning is the
beginning of a long anxiety-ridden process which places the meal table at the centre of all our social relationships. The table is in fact an altar 30 inches off the ground, an altar consecrated to the abilities of the breadwinner who presides over it like Mechizedek. Decent eating is carried out 'sitting up at the table'. Chairs do not particularly aid the digestive process, either when food is being ingested or the debris is being excreted, but they are considered part of the proper decorum of eating and of excreting. Chairs are a particular problem for children who can barely climb on to them and barely keep from slipping off them, while the edge of the table beetles over them and they are in constant danger of putting too much pressure on the side of the plate and upending the whole slew into their faces. I would venture to say that every child alive in England has had an accident involving the edge of a table and some have been died as a result. Every family either carries on the nonsense of getting children to sit up, keep elbows off the table, and ask permission to leave the table or lets the children hell around and under the table, at risk to themselves and others.

The child is inducted to the table via the high chair, which imprisons her at her own height off the ground, while her parent, no longer a warm enveloping shape but a huge opponent eye-balling her from a foot away, insists on shoving a loaded weapon into her mouth. If breast feeding was hurried, and little girls were lazy feeders, so that the tension mounted steadily from feed to feed, we can hardly expect the situation to improve when the child is trapped in the high-chair and assaulted by a harassed parent who has to get feeding done in even less time than before. With us toddlers do not sit between an adult's legs and pick from her plate, partly because we no longer eat at ground level but require the children to ascend the highchair. The situation reflects both ways; we do not embrace the child at mealtimes because we have the highchair; we have the highchair in order not to have to embrace the child at mealtimes. We wish to avoid mess.

The offering of food is the gift of love, but when the little girl taped into her high chair gags on an overloaded spoon, all tenderness has been purged from the operation. The child protests, smears food on the walls, flings it round the room, dashes it on the floor. The feeding parent zooms the spoon like an aeroplane, distracts the child and rams the spoon in while she is elsewhere involved, offers rewards for addressing the spoon kindly.

In passing from eating lying down to sitting up at the table the child enters a mechanised, masculine dominated world. By far the worst aspect of weaning is coming to terms with cold steel. For some reason the rich world, in this imagining itself civilised, insists on presenting its food to itself at the end of metal implements, of which as many as twenty may be used by each eater in the course of a meal. This is curious in view of the fact that human beings have two prehensile instruments at the end of each arm, which are capable performing
virtually every culinary and feeding function. They are easily cleaned, even if one is not prepared to do as is done in India, to place the whole hand inside the mouth and suck. We are only allowed to use fingers, at the table, for very specific foods. For the rest we must adopt the surgical approach - dissecting and partitioning with sterile instruments. Some people, mostly men, according to my observation, will examine the operating tray laid out and polish the instruments themselves if any bloom should by mischance appear upon them. These same people have not necessarily washed their hands.

The hand is quite conveniently placed for access to the mouth, but we insist on holding it at a further remove and replacing it by less versatile instruments. The very expression 'hand to mouth' implies contempt for any compelled to live that way. Eating out of your own hand is bad enough; eating out of anyone else's quite unthinkable. One reason why we approach food with knives and poke at it is that we are deeply suspicious of it. We are right to be suspicious of the food we eat these days but treating it suspiciously once it is on your plate is not the way to make it safe. We are not displaying suspicion of food when at the table we lance it and peer at its tissues; we are displaying suspicion of cooked food.

The gift of cooked food is very different from the gift of raw food; in virtually all cultures cooked food is given by women. As everyone knows who has watched people peering and sniffing at her lovingly compiled handiwork before conveying to their mouths, suspicion of cooked food is suspicion of the cook. When one has spent half the day thinking about, acquiring the materials for and concocting a meal, the suspicious approach is particularly unwelcome. No wonder my mother always answered, if we were so unwise as to ask what was for dinner, 'Stewed eels and slow poison'. No wonder women, when they kill, choose poison.

Humans who eat with their fingers still outnumber humans who eat with metal. Cutlery, evolved from the daggers that men used to cut and to impale their meat, at a time when women and the lower orders only dreamed of it. When the men had finished eating sitting up at table, their wives and serving maids ate their broken meats sitting on the floor in the kitchen. The use of cutlery and sitting up at table are still fairly masculine preferences. I have it on the authority of M.J.K. Fisher that 'men do not like dips', and my own observation tells me that men do not like finger food of any kind. Sibylle Bedford spoke with disdain of her mother who liked to eat her take-away dinner on the floor by the one-bar electric fire, while Sibylle ate 'upright at a table properly laid... Her mother tried to laugh her out of what she called her clubmanly dinners, and Sybille replied that not bothering to sit up to eat was an appalling feminine habit... So it is, and so it is meant to be.
When we sit around the table each addressing our own plate, each wielding the correct scalpel for the operation, the providing of food as an act of love is all but forgotten; the cook contriving to give her children the most comforting food, the most reassuring, can express only in the faintest and least apparent manner the love that is her reason for going through it day after day. The psychic load being carried by the gift of cooked food is far greater than might appear, and this ought to be considered when women's reactions to loss of appetite or lateness for meals are taken into account. The worst aspect of women's enslavement to repetitive and meaningless food production is that whether they have any talent in devising meals or not they are obliged to express their love for their families in this way. All spontaneity is drained out of it. The woman who has a talent for preparing food is equally likely to find that her family will not allow her to express it; they do not trust her enough to 'let her experiment on them'. Many a good cook is wasting her life on fish fingers and oven chips because her children will not eat anything else. The anguish of the highchair must be revenged.

It is a funny thing that Freud attributed so much importance to toilet training, and paid no attention to the painful process by which the child's food got itself into the gut in the first place. No discussion I have read has treated eating disorders as a result of disordered eating, although it is well understood that obesity has its roots in overfeeding of infants in the early months of life. If a child's lack of interest in food is constantly overridden, for example, it seems likely that she learns to ignore the on-off switch in her mid-brain that tells her that it is time to eat and conversely that she has had enough to eat. Feeding which insists that children ignore the pleasure principle and swallow what they neither like nor want is force feeding. The discourse that accompanies the force feeding operation mostly treats food as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. You eat up in order to get big, or to get curly hair, and not because food is scrumptious. The meal must be got over with in order to do something else. The child in her high-chair learns to ignore the most subtle faculties she has, her senses of smell, texture and taste. She is not eating; she is eating up.

Both sexes are of course subjected to this pressure; the psychological results vary. Boys develop what I might call monarexia - monotonous tastes for food they can trust, that they can safely put inside them, and indeed must, in order to be fit and strong for doing whatever it is life is supposed to be devoted to. Girls proceed towards a never to be resolved tension between desire for food and terror of getting too big. It is understandable that both think of food as a kind of deposit and not as a volatile substance most of which will be excreted. Constipation is a crucial factor in the way we experience food; women are more often and usually worse constipated than men.
The low proportion of roughage in our refined diet, together with our addiction to sugar and salt, both affect our perception of the efficacy of excretion. All students of serious eating disorders note that the sufferers, who are 95% female, have a distorted self image, by which they mean that they see themselves as fatter than they are. They do not notice a galaxy of more insidious mistakes; not only do anorexics and bulimics think of themselves primarily as bodies, they think of those bodies as passive receptacles for an inert substance, food. The only way to get it out is to vomit or to push it out with laxatives.

Psychologists dealing with these patients never talk about the trauma of eating itself; rather they explain eating disorders as stemming from unconscious conflicts about sexuality, or pregnancy wishes, or fears of oral impregnation. Others argue that it is all mother’s fault, which is why it affects the children caught in the Oedipal conflict, the girls, rather than the boys. What is absolutely clear is that women are not terrified of food because men want them thin; men have not imposed anorexia and bulimia on women. The mechanisms of oppression are more subtle and convoluted than that.

Feminists have long argued that fat is a feminist issue, mostly with the aim of attacking the prejudice against women who are not slim; however there is an important difference between achieving the right weight, which by fashion norms would be stocky, perhaps, or robust, and piling up the excess weight which puts a strain first on the back, and then on all parts of the body. Overweight however is almost unavoidable for women forced by circumstance into sedentary lifestyles. Couch potatoes get fat; many women trapped in inadequate housing, without accessible, safe, recreational space have no choice but to become couch potatoes. It is no accident that this kind of obesity affects mostly women of the working class. Most female obesity results from a combination of enforced inactivity and malnutrition. Many English housewives are becoming shapeless on a diet of instant coffee and sweet biscuits. Obesity can be too, and often is, a rejection of the role of sex object and of genitality itself. Like all unpoliticised female revolt, defiant and dishonest over-eating is fundamentally self-destructive.

Another kind of obesity results from the need to consume food, any food, but most often carbohydrates and fats. Addiction is the negation of the pleasure principle. Compulsive over-eating has nothing to do with pleasure or self-indulgence; it is because eating is so disappointing that the overeater needs constantly to repeat it. Serious eating disorders grouped under the names anorexia and bulimia are widespread in the affluent world and their prevalence increases at about 10% a year. 95% or more of the individuals exhibiting them are female. In 1984 Glamour magazine polled 33,000 women of whom 41% were unhappy with their bodies; only 25% were in fact overweight and 30% were below the weight norm for their age and
height. 50% of the total number had used diet pills; 27% liquid formula diets and 18% had used diuretics. 18% had used laxatives for weight loss; 45% had tried fasting or starving and 15% had had recourse to self-induced vomiting. In the US 10% of ten-year-old girls say they are on slimming diets Newsweek 27 July 1987

Overeating, gorging and purging, laxative and diuretic abuse, induced vomiting, are only the clinical extremities of a much vaster spectrum of food abuse by women. If we include nail-biting, for example, and over-indulgence in candy, we can see how far most women have strayed from any rational, i.e. pleasure-centred eating habits. Gloria Steinem has been said, and the statement was never denied, to adore chocolate cake, and to binge on it occasionally. Mostly, as you can see by looking at her, she does not eat at all. She suffers from an eating disorder; if only because of the vast spectrum of delights that food offers, she is responsive only to something as gross and synthetic as American chocolate cake.

It is considered sad or even shameful to eat alone, yet many women have no choice. It is considered slovenly to eat out of the saucepan, or sitting on the hearthrug, or in bed, or standing up, yet most women often and some mostly do. Women who spend their lives feeding others can hardly be expected to go to the same trouble when they have only to convey some nourishment into themselves. If they are at home with young children they have their work cut out feeding them. And when they have eaten the unwanted end of the rusk, and the creamed chicken and the mashed banana that the toddler in the high-chair rejected, they hardly have the energy to put together a balanced lunch for themselves. If they are at work, luncheon time is when they shop for the family food.

Food has become the curse of adult women. When they are not shopping for food, preparing food for cooking, cooking it, serving it and eating it, they are cleaning up after it, washing dishes, laundring linen, polishing silver, putting crockery away... You may think that it has always been that way, but it hasn't. A system which requires that every adult woman prepare at least two complete meals every day for herself and/or her man and/or her children squanders female time and energy and imagination. Historically there was a division of labour not only between the sexes, but between women, by age groups and status, when it came to preparing food. Moreover, planning is easier where choice is limited. By far the most onerous part of a woman's domestic duties in our time is 'having to think about food'. In a society where there is no seasonal variation, no shortage of food at any time, menus must be skilfully varied especially as everyone coming to the table has different fads and phobias and hardly anyone has an appetite. In families where everyone eats at different times because of school, work, sport, etc. meals go on forever, and the thinking about food...
never stops. Even in those households where men cook, they are unlikely to break though the constant cycle of thinking about food.

The food that takes up most of a woman's intellectual energy is not itself highly regarded. It is merely the staff of life; it keeps the organism ticking over. The meal that the housewife puzzles her head over half the day is in competition with lunch, a meal of much greater significance. A working man needs a good lunch; at the pub he can get meat and two vedge for a price so low that it devalues even further his wife's day's work. Most pubs nowadays get their lunches delivered ready-made from mass producers during the morning and can afford to sell them at less than cost, because the pub makes its profit on the booze. While her husband eats his meat and two vedge, his wife eats the children's left-overs or Nescafe and a sweet biscuit in front of the telly. On her housekeeping budget she literally could not afford to prepare meat and two vedge for herself. Most of the workers in the catering trade are underpaid and female, otherwise hubbie's pub lunch would cost more than it does. The pub lunch poses yet another insidious problem for the woman providing the evening meal; she has both to compete with it and to avoid repeating it, without knowing what it was.

This scenario is not meant to describe the range of options open to British women vis a vis food, but simply to dramatise the contrasting ways in which men and women experience food. They are the outgrowth of the contrasting ways in which human beings have always manipulated food. In simple societies women supply what the community lives on, men supply prestige food, food that is used in ceremonial, or in sharing and interchange within the power structure. Every day Australian aboriginal women, the few of them who still live in the bush, go with their children to collect all kinds of vegetables, fruits, nuts, grains, roots, tubers, corms, bulbs, honeys, gums, nectars, worms, grubs, snails, crabs, snakes, lizards, turtles, shellfish, small animals and eggs. What the women bring home is just food, but when the men bring home an animal they have killed, it is a feast. Immense importance will be given to its preparation and to the sharing out of the parts according to seniority and patronage. From the earliest times women agreed to reflect men at twice their natural size. Not only did they make a tremendous fuss over the men's contribution to their diet, they then allowed the men to eat the best part and the best parts of it so that they could keep up their strength and courage in order to stalk and kill more of it.

Food supplied by men has great prestige by virtue of the fact that it is supplied by men; the chefs at the prestige eateries are practically all men. The diners in the prestige eateries are men. When men meet in the Caprice for lunch they are perpetuating the tradition. Networks are established, client relations strengthened or confirmed, by the reverent offering of expensive and elaborate food. Look about you in
any restaurant at lunchtime and you will see how few women have achieved access to the male feast and on what compromised terms. Some women may lunch each other in imitation of the men. Others are there like Wunschmadchen in Valhalla. The cheaper the restaurant the more likely it is to have female staff.

The same disparity in the value given to food hunted by men and food gathered by women can be seen in the cooking of food. Usually when a man cooks, it is an occasion. There is no improvising, the ingredients must all be exactly as he wants them. Often he specialises in a dish, he does a very good steak and kidney pudding, or a mean boeuf en daube. He proceeds scientifically about his task, in a silent commentary upon the day-to-day food scramble in which the women are involved. This is how it is done, he seems to say, flourishing his spatula, resplendent in a blue and white striped apron, and the assembled company contemplates his dexterity and keeps up the applause, which accompanies the dish to the table, and every bite as it is swallowed, and is still lauds it as the guests (there are always guests) take their leave.

The barbecue is the most obvious example of the male cooking ritual. No redblooded man would dream of allowing a woman to preside over the preparation of the cooking fire, or the charring of the meat. The barbecue, which is a fixture on the patio beside the pool in every affluent home in Australia, is the stage for the nadir of exhibitionist cooking. The cook braves the smoke and sizzle and spears his smoking victims again and again, turning them for all the world as if he were still engaged in a struggle to the death before bringing them home across his saddlebow.

What is cooked in this way is of course red meat; in the words of Roland Barthes, 'Steak is the heart of meat, it is meat in its pure state; and whoever partakes of it assimilates a bull-like strength. The prestige of steak evidently derives from its semi-rawness... ' of of Norman Mailer: 'Take steak, assume it provides strength for the muscles. Or if not steak there must obviously be one or other particular food to provide such strength. Whatever the food may be which offers strength, we can be sure it is good for a man doing heavy work, and it is probably poor for a lady whose strength may depend upon the excellent demands of her weakness. For an intellectual beginning a program of conditioning exercises, steak ma-y be just a little too full of strength, it may fire his muscles into doing too much too soon...'

Though women are now allowed and even expected to eat their share of red meat, their share is considered to be rather less than that of a 'real man', who in the US might be expected to wolf twenty ounces of dead steer as well as an entire lobster at one sitting. This is courageous eating, eating as exploit.Norman Mailer’s Metaphysics of
the Belly is exclusively concerned with eating as exploit; the food is thought of as being in a sense alive, having a soul (simply because it is not decayed) and the Eater is attacking it, and killing it. His stool, which is the real subject of the interview, will tell him whether it was a clean fight or not. Almost the food mentioned is manly, calves' liver, steak, and, even, bull's balls. For Mailer to eat animals must bleed and die. Curiously manly food must also stink...

If Camembert is the King of cheeses
foul, corrupt, redolent of old uses, dirty royal feet...
Adventurers gargle with the sour blood of dukes
And eat me says Camembert...

Women have never understood the masculine approach to food. In 1756 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote to Francesco Algarotti castigating herself for pursuing a 'phantom of pleasure' through 'blood and Destruction,' i. e. hunting game for the table.

Her brilliantly argued attack on the slaughter of innocent creatures ends: "Is it right to look with horror on a Battlefield strewn with dead bodies, and with joy on a Supper for which hundreds of different species have been massacred?"

If real men are 'meat and potatoes men', and do or don't eat quiche, women have no way of defining themselves by what they eat. The stereotype in fact does not eat at all. Real men can down a yard of ale; real women aka ladies sip something pale and fizzy. When a boy asks a girl out to dinner he worries about how he will pay the bill, she worries about how she will manage the business of eating, of getting small enough portions neatly to her lips without splashing herself or her dress, about chewing without appearing wolfish or smearing her painted mouth. There is no feminine way of wielding a knife and fork, of chewing or swallowing. Indeed there is something faintly indecent about being seen to eat at all. No one likes to be photographed eating; in sixteen years of convent education I never saw any nun take anything by mouth. We ought not to be surprised then to discover that women in our own society have a tendency to eat messily and to eat in private. The there is some truth in the rhyme that says that boys are made of slugs and snails and puppy dog tails, and girls of sugar and spice and all things nice. The boys understand eating as a valiant attack on the lower orders of creation; little girls see themselves as feeding somewhat exiguously on powder and scent.

My god-daughter, Ruby, was not allowed to eat sweets when she was little. All we ever told her was that they were very bad for her, and honey and fruit were nicer and better for her. However one day I heard her explaining to the charlady who was always trying to smuggle sweets into her pockets, as she gravely gave them back, that 'sweets were for greedy boys'.

It is striking that in many cultures women, and very small women, think their primary duty is to feed others, even to the point of starving
themselves. When I was in Ethiopia we used to fill our jeep with bananas before going into famine areas; time and again I saw critically malnourished girls of ten and eleven breaking up the bananas and feeding them to their younger siblings. There was no way I could convince them that the younger children were in better shape than they were, and that they should eat their bananas themselves, until I took the girls upon my knee and fed them with the same care and tenderness that they fed the others. Later on I was fed by a colonel of the Ethiopian Army who chose the choicest morsels of spiced meat sauces, wrapped them in njera and put them in the mouth. This ritual was not sexual by the way; he was showing respect in a culture where respect is inseparable from tenderness.

The little girls who feed others before they fed themselves are preparing for a lifetime of eating leftovers. In most peasant cultures women feed their menfolk first, their children second, and then themselves. In all societies the sharing of food is organised and the principles of the organisation of eating are the same as the principles that govern the whole culture. The holders of power get 'the lion's share' regardless of whether it is the lionesses who have produced it. Most pre-industrial societies suffer periods of scarcity; at such times the subordinate members of the family go without. In every famine situation the female children fare worse than the males, the younger children worse than the older, and the older women worst of all. All the most serious cases of marasmus in Biafra were female. In some parts of the Indian subcontinent there is a marked superfluity of males, as a result of the high death rate of little girls through differential nutrition.

Perhaps because they belong to the sex that is convinced that it has a right to the best that is going, it is men who routinely open their sandwiches and sniff, or peer suspiciously under piecrusts and lettuce leaves; women tend to try their food in their mouths, rather than eyeing and sniffing it. Perhaps women have fewer prejudices about food because they are only too happy to be fed rather than feed. I have known men who declared categorically that they did not eat onions, or ate no vedge but peas and carrots, and for two years I lived with a man who was only happy eating as his main meal 'steak, one egg and salad'; I tried all kinds of delicious and interesting dishes on him but to no purpose. He ate my alternatives obligingly enough but he did not enjoy them.

Men often make policy statements about food; they don't eat onion, garlic, carrots, dried fruit or whatever, but often, if they are served dishes containing the forbidden elements, they eat them without complaint. Sometimes they claim to be allergic to the foods they wish to exclude from their diet, but, strange to relate, if they do not know that the maleficent items are present in a dish, the dyspepsia or nausea that they are supposed to provoke does not follow. How many
times does a man at dinner party ask why he never gets the dish he has just eaten at home, when it is he who has banned it? Most men in fact cannot identify the ingredients in a dish. I have served rabbit on many occasions to men who would not eat rabbit, and imagined that the stuff in the fricassee or casserole was chicken. A man who ate cous-cous in my house many times finally confessed that he felt little enthusiasm for it, because he did not like rice dishes in general.

All the tests for sex differences in perception agree that women have lower thresholds for detecting tastes, and greater discrimination in identifying them, and a far more acute sense of smell than men. Men's food preferences can be partly explained by this relative insensitivity. It is possible that eating is experienced by men and women in fundamentally different ways. In *Sex Differences in Human Performance*, Mary Ann Baker advances the fascinating hypothesis that 'it is possible that environmental stimuli have different 'meanings' for males and females. Thus it may be that males and females are essentially quite different creatures whose perceptions of the world differ markedly even when confronted with similar environments' The final irony is that women, the sex that eats in an irregular, disordered and joyless fashion, has a greater capacity to enjoy food than men. Again an analogy with women's potential for more intense and prolonged sexual pleasure suggests itself, for both capacities are largely unrealised. Many women endure sex without pleasure, because they may not express their potential for orgasm; as many women are eating in a crazy, unhealthy, self-punishing way, and experiencing cooking as drudgery rather than creativity. Perhaps it is time women stopped feeding the unhungry, and began cooking for each other, and eating for fun.
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