Culinary Tourism: An Exploratory Reading of Contemporary Representations of Cooking

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In Levi-Straussian terms cooking marks the “transition between nature and culture”. Yet the study of cookbooks as placed cultural artefacts is largely neglected by consumer researchers. This essay seeks to address this oversight, setting out to explore the potential contribution of a turn to cookbooks for enriching our understanding of the character of contemporary consumer culture. It weaves a line of argument that asserts the value of treating cookbooks as cultural products, as objectifications of culinary culture, as constructed social forms which are amenable to textual analysis. In this respect it declares that, rather than simply being understood as reflections of contemporary consumer culture, cookbooks should be understood as artefacts of cultural life in the making. That is, cookbooks contain not only recipes but inscribed cultural tales which can be understood as productive of the culinary culture that they pretend only to display, and performative in their attempt to do things with us. We reveal cookbooks to be sites of aestheticised consumption.

Keywords: Culinary Cultures; Culinary Tourism; Cookbooks; Gastroporn; Re-enchantment

Introduction

The commodification of contemporary culinary culture is big business, with its own oscars and galaxy of glossy stars and culinary gurus, celebrity chefs driven by the imperatives of media commerce towards marketable stereotypes of themselves. Walk through any large bookstore and you will find crowded shelves of cookbooks all busy wrestling to attract your attention and your spending power. In the UK alone, data provided by Nielsen (2003) show that the value of cookbook sales amounted to £38...
million in 2002, with Delia Smith’s *How to Cook* (1998) selling 1.7 million copies. During the same period, sales in excess of 500,000 copies were each recorded by Nigella Lawson’s *Nigella Bites* (2001) and Jamie Oliver’s *The Naked Chef* (1999), *The Return of the Naked Chef* (2000) and *Happy Days with the Naked Chef* (2001). A cursory inspection of Amazon customer reviews (2004a, 2004b) of these products of the cultural industries suggests that they attract an international audience and are typically given as gifts, often occupying the status of cherished objects within the home.

Several authors (cf. Campbell 1995; Symons 1998) have noted the potential of the general area of culinary culture as a legitimate object of social inquiry. Indeed, Symons remarks that “relative to its significance in human affairs, cooking remains under researched” (Symons 2002, 432). He argues that discussions of cooking’s place in social life are noticeably rare, citing exceptions such as the work of Goody (1982), Mennell (1985), and Symons (1998, 2000).

The dynamic of this essay is partly driven by curiosity about the apparent lack of curiosity regarding food, its preparation, presentation, serving, and consumption, which suggest themselves as interestingly constructed and contestable sites of knowledge about contemporary consumer culture. Moreover, if cooking is understood to mark the “transition between nature and culture” (Levi-Strauss 1970, 164), then it clearly suggests a potentially rich vein of social inquiry about how people construct their world in texts and talk, and what is done with those constructions. For representations are so bound up with our lives that they can be seen to do all sorts of identity work and are often the occasion for some pretty ambitious projects. Yet, regarding the sociology of culinary culture and consumption, Campbell (1995) notes the lack of empirical studies pertaining to what must be one of the most basic of all consumption activities, eating. Citing the work of Beardsworth and Keil (1990), Murcott (1984, 1988), Mennell (1985), Levi-Strauss (1970, 1978), and Douglas (1975, 1984), among others, Campbell argues that an adequate account of consumption will have at its centre an understanding of the sociology of food. Importantly, this perspective anticipates the family and the body as primary sites of consumption processes. It also raises a number of timely concerns with contemporary culinary culture, especially cooking practices and dietary regimes, given the growing number of global threats to health arising from obesity and the consumption of particular foodstuffs.

Appadurai (1988) suggests that framing culture as “text” offers one way forward for an adequate empirical study of culinary culture and its naturalised forms of representation in cuisine and commodity cookbooks. After Miller we argue that “goods [cookbooks] represent culture because they are an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society, our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices. The authenticity of artefacts as culture … derives from their active participation in a process of social self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others” (Miller 1987, 215). Like others (cf. Cook and Crang 1996, 132) we follow Miller in understanding culture as “involving processes in which cultural life is objectified, in which objects are constructed as social forms, and hence in which cultural
artefacts have to be understood in relation to their social and spatial contexts” (Miller 1987, 215).

Studies that take this line of inquiry can be found within the disciplines of cultural studies (Pilchner 1995), feminist studies (Zafar 1999), history (Tobias 1998; Neuhaus 1999), and philosophy (Heldke 1992). Such work demonstrates the potential of cookbooks, not only to illuminate, but also to situate cultural developments. For instance, Neuhaus cites the work of Storace, arguing that “Every cookbook, more or less consciously is a work of social history … [offering] vivid examples of what we might appropriately term a cultural text: recipes are loaded with meaning particular to their time and place” (Neuhaus 1999, 536). In a technical way, Goody (1982) makes a similar point when he claims that the representations of cookbooks as placed cultural artefacts (i.e. as commodity cookbooks) speak, not only of structures of production and distribution, but of the naturalised “power base” (Elliott and Ritson 1997, 196), or invisible interests of class and hierarchy. The paper seeks to disrobe cookbooks of those interests, so to explore how the powerful symbolism of the publishing economy can be seen to objectify and position contexts of everyday culinary life.

We argue that the study of culinary culture, as represented in commodity cookbooks, is largely neglected by consumer researchers; however, textual analysis as a device for illuminating the meaning of social phenomena is not, nor is its important conceptual inversion asserting that texts read us, as much as we read texts, or, that they think us as much as we think them. Indeed Hebdige argues that “it requires a literary sensibility to ‘read’ society with the requisite subtlety” (1979, 8). By means of this line of argument interpretive consumer researchers can assert that society reproduces itself through a process of naturalisation, where particular sets of social relations, particular ways of organising the world, appear as if they were universal and timeless. They can investigate, among other things, the possibility of symbolically repossessing “objects” as placed cultural artefacts, in order to discern the veiled messages inscribed on their glossy surfaces and trace them out as “maps of meaning” (Hebdige 1979, 18); reading them otherwise (Bennett and Royle 1995, 162), for the possibility of “contrapuntal readings” (Said 1993, 78).

Interpretive consumer researchers are already sensitive to the useful insights gained from scholarship that situates its object of inquiry in the contested cultural dynamic of multiple representations. Indeed, Belk urges that studies of consumption can “no longer afford to ignore the broader consumption issues being raised in other disciplines” (Belk 1995, 62). So, for instance, consumer researchers have turned to literature (Brown 1996; Stokes 1997; Eid 1999; Fitchett 2002), film (Holbrook 1986; Denzin 2001), poetry (Holbrook 1990; Sherry and Schouten 2002), and art (Schroeder 1999; Brown and Patterson 2000; Fillis 2000) for cultural artefacts capable of rendering the curve of social discourse into an inspectable form.

This essay builds on these lines of thought, rendering cookbooks as cultural artefacts (commodity cookbooks) which have to be understood in relation to their social context. Appropriating cookbooks in this way from the forces which created them, helps make them amenable to textual analysis. For, as Miller observes, “appropriation consists of the transmutation of goods, through consumption activities, into potentially
inalienable culture” (Miller 1987, 215). In so doing, the wider ambition of the essay is to explore the potential contribution of the textual approach for enriching our understanding of contemporary consumer culture with regard to the preparation, presentation and consumption of food.

**Beyond Ornamentation (Towards Representation)**

I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there. (Barthes 1973, 11)

As indicated in the above quotation, the authors draw inspiration for this essay from the early work of Barthes (1973). Indeed, the starting point for the essay, like Barthes’ *Mythologies*, can be described as “impatience at the site of the naturalness with which newspapers, art, and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history” (Barthes 1973, 11). We agree that such naturalisation draws a veil over the complex ebb and flow of tensions within the processual character of contemporary society. In his book of essays, Barthes demonstrates the potential of an analytical method, rooted in linguistics, that is based on subjecting inscriptions of everyday texts and their systems of discourse to incisive literary critique. He employs the central framing concept of myth, the essential function of which is, he argues, to “naturalize the concept … to transform history into nature” (Barthes 1973, 156). It is his project to demystify naturalised, taken-for-granted, or goes-without-saying meanings of social phenomena such as a wrestling match, the Face of Garbo, the Brain of Einstein and Ornamental Cookery. As Hebdige notes, Barthes’ concern was to show how all the apparently spontaneous forms and rituals of contemporary society are “subject to systematic distortion, liable at any time to be dehistoricized, naturalized and converted into myth” (Hebdige 1979, 9).

We borrow from Barthes’ essay on “Ornamental Cookery” (1973) the device of comparative interpretive analysis, which in Geertz’s terms seeks to trace “the curve of a social discourse; fixing it into an inspectable form” (Geertz 1993, 19). In this essay Barthes reads off cultural critique from two competing women’s magazines of 1950s France, *Elle* and *L’Express*, both of which carry visual representations of culinary culture rendered as prepared food. For Barthes the apparent objects of inquiry were the staged, appropriated images of prepared food. The underlying line of critical argument focuses on the performance of those manufactured images as culturally loaded representations, as symbolic systems amenable to textual analysis. Barthes takes those representations to be not merely descriptive, in the sense of saying something about something, but also to be performative, in the sense of doing or performing something at the same time: texts can be performative in the most radical way—they can create “you” (Bennett and Royle 1995, 167). In this essay we argue, like Barthes (1973) and others, including Derrida (1986), that texts not only describe but perform: they do things with words and do things to us.

Consequently, Barthes is able to position his critique of 1950s French genteel ornamental cooking as: “a cookery which is based on coatings and alibis, and is for ever trying to extenuate and even to disguise the primary nature of foodstuffs, the brutality
of meat or the abruptness of sea-food” (Barthes 1973, 85). In his view the ornamentation of such cooking—its sauces, coatings, and glazings—situate the idea of cookery as a petit bourgeois art, as an elaborate form of trinketry. Thus the sediment of the raw food ingredients becomes no more than “the page on which can be read the whole rococo cookery” (Barthes 1973, 86).

In this way the unbridled beautification of raw ingredients such as mushrooms (“chiselled mushrooms”), cherries (“punctuation of cherries”), lemon (“motifs of carved lemon”), truffles (“shavings of truffle”), and fruit (“arabesques of glacé fruit”) produces a dream-like and fairy-land (mythical) reality of cookery (Barthes 1973, 85). In Levi-Straussian terms, cooking is understood to mark the “transition between nature and culture” (Levi-Strauss 1970, 164). And this distinction is also reflected in Barthes’ insightful commentary about the raw materials—the meat, the vegetables, the fish—being of secondary importance to its ornamentation via “incongruous artifice”, such as “replacing the heads of crayfish around the sophisticated béchamel which hides their bodies” (Barthes 1973, 86).

**Framing Commodity Cookbooks**

In our view such work demonstrates the potential of this form of critique to generate disciplinary space from within which begin to problematise representations of contemporary culture, including representations of contemporary culinary culture. Schroeder (1999) shows how to accomplish this problematisation, and thus to decipher contemporary society through the device of textual analysis.

To elaborate, we argue, after Pilchner (1995), that cookbooks can be treated as a literary genre that is part of the fabric and expression of our culture and which, in an analytical sense, serves to reproduce culture. This view is echoed by Appadurai (1988, 22) when he states that “we need to view cookbooks in the contemporary world as revealing artifacts of culture in the making”. Or, as Tobias (1998, 3) writes, “Cookbooks contain not only recipes, but hidden clues and cultural assumptions about class, race, gender and ethnicity. They reflect many of the dramatic transformations that have come to define the boundaries of the modern public sphere”.

This material establishes our central point that, from an analytical perspective, commodity cookbooks must be understood, not merely as instrumental texts, conveying, by means of recipes, information about ingredients, their assembly, processing and presentation. Rather, they also offer access to “unusual cultural tales” (Appadurai 1988, 3), which generate representations of food as a placed cultural artefact, suggestive of where we have been, who we are and where we may be going. This point is underlined in Pilchner’s research when he approaches cookbooks as voices, capable of speaking “unique tales of home and nation” (Pilchner 1995, 301).

So, understood as a form of placed cultural artefact (Gagliardi 1990), we can conclude that commodity cookery books can then be studied for what they reveal about the constitutive effects of time and space (Neuhaus 1999), questions of identity (Zafar 1999), the construction of gender norms (Tobias 1998; Neuhaus 1999), and the reproduction of dominant culinary values (Curtin 1992).
Revelations as Culinary Culture

To illustrate the potential contribution to be made to studies of consumer culture through framing the representations of commodity cookbooks within textual analyses, we now review several appropriate landmark studies. Our discussion focuses on revelations illuminated through situating cookbooks as cultural artefacts within the context of the conditions of their formation.

Tobias (1998) analysed cookery books published in eighteenth-century America, concluding that they served to position women and define their role in society. Pilchner (1995) continues this theme in his analysis of Mexican cookbooks, arguing that they served as sources of “cultural capital” for women in Latin American society. Likewise, in her analysis of two black women’s cookbooks, Zafar (1999) notes that they represent a space through which cultural identity is “recreated”. In this way she likens her analysis to that of an ethnographic journal, providing a “reading of what we eat, to understand how we construct a self around the axes of food” (Zafar 1999, 463). Zafar sums up the revelations of her analysis as placing “African-American cuisine in a political context, record[ing] a social history that must not be forgotten, and relat[ing] the lived experience of the writer and/or her family” (ibid., 464).

Zafar thus suggests that cookbooks represent, or function as “recoveries”, or “recastings” of the culture of African-American consumption, as signs of refusal and of forbidden identity. This use of cookbooks as cultural artefacts can also be traced in the work of Novero (2000). Her analysis of cookbooks published in Weimar Germany, between the First and Second World Wars, reveals how they function to “reconcile nutritional and economic precepts with an ideology of taste and a modern lifestyle” (Novero 2000, 163). This is most evident where she reveals how the representations situate cooking as a technical skill, mediated by the rhetoric of instrumental rationality and efficiency. For instance, in her analysis of a 1933 cookbook by Kopp, entitled *Bachenach Grundrezepten* (Bake with Basic Recipes), Novero (2000, 167) shows how its content, that is, the recipes, are rendered as if they were “formulas that have been tested and perfected”.

This scientific representation of cooking is further conveyed through the use of over five hundred black and white photographs illustrating the “precise” stages of food preparation. It is clearly framed as “rationalized work” (Novero 2000), and Novero struggles to find a place for any notion of “pleasure” in the representations. In a study of the changing contents of food columns in popular UK women’s magazines between 1967 and 1992, Warde arrives at similar conclusions. He observes a discourse of compliance, noting that: “Information is now given fairly routinely, not only about precise quantities of ingredients and cooking times, but also about preparation time, nutrient contents, sometimes shopping instructions too … science, measurement, the use of information derived from experiment, rather than trial and error and *ad hoc* judgement, appear more frequently in the food columns” (Warde 1994, 24).

This discourse of compliance contrasts with the notion of culinary practice as a site of resistance. Bracken’s publication *The I Hate to Cook Book* (1960) is indicative of the social tensions of the late 1950s. It provides tales of the drudgery of cooking and the
repression of women in male dominated society. In coded form the book suggests how women might avoid this drudgery through using processed foods and avoiding elaborate recipes, yet still be seen to fulfil the expectations of their defined role. This text functions in a subversive and liberating way to clearly contest and encourage resistance to the dominant gender norms of the 1950s.

This section outlines previous research on the significance of cookbooks as objects of cultural analysis. It traces the curve of discourses of gender, technical-rationality, expert power and authority. Thus, at the same time as conveying information about food preparation, presentation, and consumption, cookbooks can also be seen to function as coded instructions regarding acceptable modes of performing social relations through culinary practices, for instance careful organisation, technical precision, predictability, and the medicalisation of foodstuffs and their consumption. In this way we concur with Warde when he argues that “Food is, to some degree, being drawn further into the realms of expert discourses (often medical, sometimes style) that present it as a matter of technical-rationality rather than of practical judgement” (Warde 1994, 24).

Contrapuntal Readings

… we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified. (Barthes 1973, 173)

This essay has its origins in questions raised during a wider empirical study of attitudes towards food and cooking among young people in the UK. During interviews and focus groups, informants suggested with noticeable frequency that two particularly popular TV cooks and their cookbooks performed a key role in making the routine and mundane everyday practice of cooking appealing and “sexy” to them: Jamie Oliver’s The Return of the Naked Chef (2000) and Nigella Lawson’s Nigella Bites (2001). Informants commented that those cookbooks showed them how to “cook properly”, and were also a source of “ideas” about how to be “more adventurous”. Although the caveat suggested by one young person spoke more of the likely everyday consumption of these objects: “Always open it [Jamie Oliver’s The Return of the Naked Chef] and you can guarantee that we ain’t got two of those ingredients so have to make up my own version of it”.¹

Following Barthes (1973) and Zafar (1999) whose studies both drew on a critique of two texts, we also selected two texts (Oliver and Lawson) as an appropriate way to set off on a modest exploratory textual journey, intending, through the reportage of our contrapuntal readings, to generate information to help consumer researchers decide if representations of contemporary culinary culture do indeed have the potential to enrich our understanding of consumption.

We have already problematised the realist notions of representation, which presume the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and naturalised link between sign and referent, or between word and world. We argue that our access to the world, in this
case the world of culinary culture, is always mediated by representations whose performative work is rendered invisible. In assembling material in a strategic way to accomplish certain effects—such as the aura of authenticity and authority surrounding the culinary guru—representations disguise the hand of the author, as well as the commercial interests of the media supporting her. By means of accomplishing this aura, celebrity chefs or gurus insinuate themselves into public consciousness, not only as keepers of contemporary culinary culture, but as charismatic and compelling leaders in terms of changing lifestyles. We argue that in this sense cookery books can be understood not merely as describing recipes and culinary practices, but as actively constructing social relations through the medium of representations of new discourses of culinary sensibility. In other words, representations of contemporary cuisine are productive of the culinary culture they pretend only to display, that is, they provide the armature around which the work of consumption revolves.

The closing remarks offered by Barthes (1973, 173) in his seminal text *Mythologies*, quoted above, resonate strongly with the emerging cultural and linguistic turn in consumer research. The interrelations of nature and culture, of food and cuisine, raise questions about social identity and how objects like cookbooks are among the strongest bearers of meaning. For those of us interested in the social meaning of things like cookbooks, the decoding of representations via textual analysis is one of the enduring qualities of Barthes’ work. Another is Barthes’ idea of intertextuality, where he insists that we search for relationships between texts, arguing that each text is, at least in part, a pastiche or set of quotations from previous texts. For this essay the idea of intertextuality, or what Said (1993, 78) refers to as “contrapuntal readings”, means finding expressions of relations between the representations of culinary texts, for example, where metaphors of one area of discourse migrate to another, as in the way discourses of fashion and celebrity have percolated into that of cuisine.

**Re-enchanting the Kitchen**

Not surprisingly, one of the first characteristics observed is how the two cookbooks attempt to situate their various representations of culinary practice against the backdrop of contemporary events and social trends. This is accomplished in a number of ways. The first is in terms of how the contents are organised. Eschewing the traditionally popular approach of organising recipes by main type of produce (e.g., meat, pasta, or fish), Nigella’s (Lawson 2001) chapter structure is almost existential in its use of headings evocative of the angst of contemporary lifestyles. Chapters, with accompanying images are positioned as envelopes for recipes, as soul food of therapeutic value for the following occasions: “Rainy Days”, “Slow-Cook Weekend”, “Comfort Food” (arranged according to “our life, our timetable and our mood”).

This is echoed in the aestheticised (Featherstone 1991) “look” of the cookbooks, where the focus is very much on design intensivity, glossy, colourful, and artful image-based communications of the sort popular in lifestyle magazines targeted at the “sophisticated and cultured”. Many of the images foreground the kitchen and its associated technological paraphernalia as key signifiers of lifestyle. For example, the
image which heralds chapter one in *Nigella Bites* (Lawson 2001), entitled “All-Day Breakfast”, stages truth effects in support of a claim that our notions of breakfast are, or at least should be, undergoing considerable rethinking, as a site of resistance to popular notions of the stressful rushed breakfast. In this sense the stylised aspirational representations of culinary culture delivered in Nigella’s book cannot only be thought of as coded responses to changes affecting the community as a whole. They can also be seen as an attempt to reposition and recontextualise the “commodity cookbook”, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones—in this case as a site of resistance to contemporary cultural imperatives.

Alongside this we are presented with an image of Nigella in a long silk dressing gown, hair in curlers, pouring a cup of coffee, clearly with time on her side. On her kitchen units a number of unused stainless-steel utensils are arrayed. Providing further glimpses of an aspirational lifestyle statement, there is the liminal presence of a *Kitchenaid* mixer and a *Dualit* blender—both branded tools, representing the essential scaffolding of a lifestyle kitchen for the culinary guru. The subtle backgrounding of fetishised machinery and foregrounding of the beautiful female gastro-guru, reveals a discourse of recovery through distance and control which is at odds with the notion that human conduct is increasingly subject to forms of control and constraint delivered by machines. It reproduces notions of technology in its place, as a tool of power to be controlled and used to support and facilitate human activity, not to dominate or constrain it. These objects are not mere accoutrements though. As aspirational brands they can also be understood as vital props, as wands for negotiating the jungle of contemporary culinary culture and achieving some of the new magic of the sexy culinary guru. They are also important symbols by means of which to imagine the re-enchantment of the commodity kitchen, perhaps as a site of unrewarded and unrewarding toil.

**Gastroporn**

The strategic and liberal use of glamorous images invokes Smart’s (1994, 170) concept of “gastroporn” to frame the idea that what the reader of those cookbooks is being presented with is another instance of the imaginary or unattainable gratification of forms of pornography. As Smart (1994) notes, there are curious parallels between manuals on sex and manuals on cooking, in that both feature vivid glossy colour photographic representations and exotic ingredients to heighten authenticity, excitement and expectation. Yet, the excitement and expectations they generate are never quite met and in many respects unattainability is taken to excess.

Sexton argues “From being a method of sustenance, food is now the new pornography in which even our daily bread has become a vicarious experience” (Sexton 1998, 11). To illustrate this Sexton discusses “spectral meals” as what he terms “simulations of pleasure”, that is where the pictures themselves begin to act as substitutes for food. Similarly, Bywater suggests: “Gastroporn is to food what sexoporn is to sex. Both are double-edged; they first create a simulacrum of a desire, then a simulacrum of satisfaction” (Bywater 2001, 1).
For our two cookery books the characteristic mode of signification is image-based. The pleasures of consuming cookbooks are related only secondarily to the act of cooking, what appears to be far more important is their role in seducing the eye, in perpetuating the discourse of conveying one’s position, values, and ideals through lifestyle choices around the act of cooking and consuming. This is evident in the reliance upon image-based communication, but the cookbooks are interesting in the way that this mode of signification is combined with the narrative form to produce or reiterate new forms of meaning. One such is the endeavour to represent the practice of cooking, rather than to simply espouse unattainability. In an age of convenience, where the supermarket is king and the skills of cooking appear to be in decline (Lang et al. 1999) the cookbooks espouse a counter-discourse which for Oliver takes the form of purchasing ingredients from local shops and farmers. In his explanation of the term “Naked Chef” he suggests: “using the bare essentials of your larder and stripping down restaurant methods to the reality of home” (Oliver 2000, 12–13). This invoking of home, is explored further by Nigella. For Nigella, the home, or more specifically the kitchen, appears as a site of enchantment, as a site not simply of mundane consumption but a super-place where acts of extraordinary consumption can be conjured up. In the preface, Nigella adopts an almost confessional tone:

> I want to be there in the kitchen with you; my words are merely my side of the conversation I imagine we might have. (Lawson 2001, x)

In this light, we might suggest that for Nigella the kitchen is associated with the values of warmth, security and comfort. This notion can be linked to the work of Popcorn and her concepts of “anchoring” and “cocooning” (Catterall 1999) within contemporary consumer culture, that is the mythic return to more traditional values to “anchor” ourselves in the future:

> reflecting our strong desire to surround ourselves with the cosy and familiar in order to protect ourselves from the harsh, unpredictable realities of the outside world over which we have no control; “cashing out”—opting out of the competitive world and choosing a more fulfilling, simpler lifestyle. (Catterall 1999, 26–30)

In *Nigella Bites* this is evidenced in her talk of “comfort” food, to which she devotes a whole chapter of recipes, from “Mashed Potato” to “Chocolate Fudge Cake” and “Lemon Risotto”, which she explains in the following terms:

> If I’m being honest, for me all food is comfort food, but there are times when you need a bowlful of something hot or a slice of something sweet just to make you feel that the world is a safer place. We all get tired, stressed, sad or lonely, and this is the food that soothes. (Lawson 2001, 31)

Such narrative statements where the nature of contemporary consumption is invoked are important as they once again attempt to situate the practice within contemporary concerns, but also position culinary practice as an “enclave” from such troubles. An enclave to reaffirm one’s sense of self: “The way I cook, more than what I cook, is so much a product of the way my mother cooked before me, and most of what I feel about food comes from my family” (Lawson 2001, 153).
In the chapter entitled simply “legacy”, Nigella gives us “special recipes which I either ate as a child or which come from the family kitchen” for dishes ranging from “Granny Lawson’s Lunch Dish”, to “My Grandmother’s Ginger-Jam Bread and Butter Pudding” to “Custard”. In this way, the notion of nostalgia, or what she terms “retro-appeal”, is invoked as offering mythical or imagined “solutions” to the demands of contemporary living. The recipe for “Granny Lawson’s Lunch Dish” is accompanied by a close-up of Nigella stirring a pan wearing a gingham blue checked apron, reminiscent of the 1950s, in the narrative we are told that “Cooking isn’t just about ingredients, weights and measures: it’s social history, personal history” (Lawson 2001, 162).

Preceding this chapter is one entitled: “Trashy”, wherein the past is invoked as “kitsch”. The chapter contains such recipes as “Ham in Coca-Cola”, “Deep Fried Bounty”, “Southern-Style Chicken” which is described as “homage rather than imitation” and finally that icon of the 1950s, Elvis Presley, in a recipe taken from a cookbook entitled Are you Hungry Tonight? for “Fried Peanut-Butter and Banana Sandwich”. This illustration links to Jameson’s argument that postmodern consumers may seek to “return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again” (Jameson [1983] 1989, 116). Or as Brown, suggests: “The greying of the baby boom generation has prompted a psychic return to the comforts, certainties and conflict-free times of childhood or early adolescence, when people were polite, picket fences were pearly white and mom’s apple pie perpetually cooling on the stoop” (Brown 1999, italics added). Cooking practices and their representations can therefore be read as “recoveries” (Zafar 1999)—a means through which the security and “comfort” of previous times can be mythically re-enacted through recipes for Ginger-Jam Bread and Butter Pudding or a simple “Lunch Dish”.

Culinary Tourism

The idea of cookbooks as offering consumers some kind of easy made solution to the dilemmas of contemporary life is extended through a discussion of the game of distinction played out in the texts. Warde (1994) considers recipes as “messengers of taste”, a recipe provided by Oliver for “Seafood Broth, Ripped Herbs, Toasted Bread and Garlic Aïoli” serves to illustrate this point (see Figure 1).

The recipe occupies a full page 18 1/2 cm by 24 1/2 cm and is accompanied by a full-page intensive colour close-up image of the prepared dish, presented in a white bowl on what appears to be a wooden tablemat. What can be said about this recipe? The first aspect that strikes the reader is the wide range of exotic ingredients necessary to make the meal and the intricately constructed nature of the cultural diversity on offer. This is a recipe which talks not only about Oliver’s style of cooking, the way in which he invites you to creatively re-work exotic ingredients locally through providing sets of instructions—and thus the exchange of finance for access to intellectual property that, as Lash and Urry (1994, 270) argue, characterises the “cultural industries”. It also speaks of Oliver the celebrity product, the complex manufactured commodity, the strategically worked representation. This can be seen in the link which is made between
cooking and questions of cultural identity: “If a friend served this to me I’d be well impressed” (Oliver 2000, 90).

Here we are in the game of playing with what Goffman (1989) terms the presentation of self, but through the act of consuming. Note here the ending and the focus upon presentation, or what Barthes (1973) might refer to as “coatings”: As Jamie spells out:
“Serve the broth in big bowls over some toasted bread and, if you want to make it really pukka, add a big lob of garlic aïoli on top and a wedge of lemon” (Oliver 2000, 90).

Reference to the ingredient “aïoli” also appears significant: “The aïoli is not essential with this, but it is fantastic and you should give it a go” (Oliver 2000, 90). In other words, a game of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) appears to be being played out through the exotic ingredients included, a game which on the surface offers a choice, but which is constraining in its overall appeal due to its overly prescriptive nature. Aïoli thus functions to exclude and distinguish those without the cultural competence, or as Bourdieu prefers:

Consumption is … an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (voir) is a function of knowledge (savoir), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programs for perception. (Bourdieu 1984, 2)

To help understand how cookbooks stage and reconstruct cultural difference we invoke the following notions: culinary practice as what Cook and Crang (1996) refer to as the “local globalization of culinary culture”; and the cookbook as a site from which to experience that local globalisation and with which to participate in metrocentric global culinary culture. So, Nigella gives us “American Pancakes with Wafer Bacon and Maple Syrup” followed by “Asian-Spiced Kedgeree” followed by “Masala Omelette” followed by “Apple and Blackberry Kuchen”. The cookbook in this sense reads like the enchanted and enchanting tour guide for a grand tour across the world in miniature, from the US to Asia to Europe in the space of 14 pages. In this sense the cookbooks not only provide geography lessons. Through the deliberate use of enchanting streams of symbols of travel and exotic places, they also manufacture the global diversity of culinary culture and bring it to your doorstep. As Cook and Crang remark “the touristic quality of these constructions [is] particularly apparent when [it] allows consumers to bring the experience of travel to their own domestic culinary regimes” (1996, 136). So, you can think of cookbooks as offering you a holiday for your tongue which, as Lash and Urry observe, “encourages us to gaze upon and collect the signs and images of many cultures—to act as tourists in other words” (1994, 272). Therefore, even if the recipes are not made and the exotic food is not eaten, the reader can still gaze at colourful constructions of far flung places of the globe and achieve imaginary gratification (Smart 1994).

Culinary Practice and the Question of Identity

As suggested, the cookbooks appear to offer solutions through their images, narratives and instructions to consumers with respect to questions of identity. Warde (1994) argues that recipes can be understood as symbolic of social relationships. For Oliver and Lawson it is towards questions of social identity or more specifically forms of sociality that they turn. In *The Return of the Naked Chef,* Oliver’s main message appears to cohere around the pleasures to be had from consuming, or as he prefers “tucking in”. But the dominant representation is of food as a facilitator for social communication. In this respect countless images are presented of Jamie eating with others, but what is noticeable is the rule-breaking unconventional representations of the act of consuming. For example, the section titled “Morning Glory” which covers breakfasts starts
with an image of Jamie and Ben “tucking into” his “bacon sarnie my styliie” sitting on the kitchen floor consuming an over-sized bacon sandwich with a bottle of HP sauce uncapped beside them. Similarly, the section entitled “bevvies” has an image of Jamie and two friends, Peter and Ben, consuming a watermelon sitting on the back of a sofa dressed in casual attire. The message is one of the informality and joy to be obtained through the action of consuming. In this way, Oliver presents his recipe for “Seared Encrusted Carpaccio of Beef” with the following introduction:

The reason I like to make this dish is because, apart from being really quick and simple, it’s a sociable feast where everyone can tuck in and help themselves. I love all that. I always serve this on a large plate in the middle of the table, with crusty bread and a glass of wine. (Oliver 2000, 175)

What one takes from these descriptions is a sense of the link between food and social identity, and more specifically food and community. Food as a link to a specific type of consumption; food as a social bridge in its own right.

This image of consumption contrasts sharply with the acts of consuming evidenced in *Nigella Bites*. Jamie’s metaphor of “tucking in” contrasts with Nigella’s more problematic relationship with consuming, for example, her recipe for “Asian-Spiced Kedgeree” ends with the line:

This is one of those rare dishes that manages to be comforting and light at the same time. And—should you have leftover, which I wouldn’t bank on—it’s heavenly eaten, as all leftovers demand to be, standing up, straight from the fridge. (Lawson 2001, 15)

Nigella’s tales of “midnight pickings”, are therefore very much divorced from the people-infested tales in *The Return of the Naked Chef*, as consuming is represented as a solitary activity. However, Nigella too talks of food as a social bridge, but it is a very different image to that presented by Oliver, as her following thoughts convey:

The point about weekend food is not that you’ve got more time to cook it, but that you’ve got more time to eat it … Most of all, the food shouldn’t be about performance and high-strive presentation, but lingered-over plenty. (Lawson 2001, 199)

In this statement, Nigella expresses her philosophy as one of “lingered-over plenty”, which seeks to negate the stresses and strains of cookery. Similarly, in the recipe for “Three course dinner for 8” she states:

I don’t, as a rule, always bother with starters, but sometimes you want to go in for a fully-fledged dinner party … However important food is, it’s part of life, not the whole point of it. A good dinner party is one where people enjoy themselves: the last things you want is a tense and hallowed silence to descend as you, exhausted, slump some perfect creation on the table, desperate for their approval and admiration. The food—and the drink—are there to give rise to, not upstage, conversation and companionship. (Lawson 2001, 178)

Acknowledged herein is the notion of cooking as “hard work”, the ordinary everyday consumption of food and cooking, something which Nigella appears at pains to deny. But the notion of consuming and sociality is to the fore, for example when she discusses “kitchen supper”:

… what I mean is a dinner party that concentrates on getting friends round the table and feeding them well. There’s no starter, the main course is a vast bowlful of unkempt stew;
pudding, however elegant, comes in one big dish, to be plonked down and dug into unceremoniously. (Lawson 2001, 189)

Nigella’s adoption of what one might term Oliveresque language (“unkempt stew”, “plonked down”) is interesting, as in the adoption of the informal register in the colloquial expression “plonked down”. The significance is therefore revealed in how Nigella seeks to combine the two modes of consuming outlined by Bourdieu (1984). At one level we have her appropriation of this register, but in the same sentence she seeks to distance herself from this style, as in the expression of “unkempt stew”. The sense of the distinction between the discourses of Oliver and Nigella is therefore apparent. In summary, Oliver’s approximates to “plain speaking, plain eating”; whereas in contrast Nigella’s discourse seeks to appropriate elements of Bourdieu’s working-class sensibility for the creation of value (i.e. plonked down); but at the same time manages to distance itself from that style as when she describes the stew as “unkempt”.

Bourdieu in Distinction (1984) contrasts the tastes in food of the working class and the bourgeoisie: “Plain speaking, plain eating: the working-class meal is characterized by plenty (which does not exclude restrictions and limits) and above all by freedom. ‘Elastic’ and ‘abundant’ dishes are brought to the table—soups or sauces, pasta or potatoes … and served with a ladle or spoon, to avoid too much measuring and counting” (Bourdieu 1984, 194). Bourdieu suggests that this “free-and-easy” style contrasts with that of the bourgeoisie where the emphasis is placed upon formality and constructing a meal as a social ceremony: “The manner of presenting and consuming the food, the organization of the meal and setting of the places, strictly differentiated according to the sequence of dishes and arranged to please the eye” (ibid., 196).

**Stoveside Pottering**

The contrasting images of the act of consuming are matched by the contrasting tales they have to tell about the act of cooking. For Oliver, the act of cooking appears to be very much secondary to the act of consuming. Many of his recipes in this respect focus upon the temporal dimension, justifying their use in terms of their speediness to prepare. For example, his recipe for “Beef Tomatoes, Basil, Ham and Mild Cheese on Thick Toast” states “This brekkie or snack takes precisely 1 minute to make … Very simple, very tasty” (Oliver 2000, 30). The recipe for “Braised Five Hour Lamb with Wine, Veg and All That” starts with the lines: “This is a real hearty and trouble-free dinner. There’s barely any preparation, just a nice long cooking time which will reward you with the most tender meat and tasty sauce” (ibid., 174). For Oliver, we might argue that the dominant representation is one of attempting to make life easy (ibid., 14). A view which concurs with Warde’s (1994) argument that convenience rather than care is foregrounded in magazine recipes.

In this way, for Oliver the act of cooking is represented as a means-to-an-end activity, as in the depiction of the stages of “making tortellini” through four black-and-white close-ups (Oliver 2000, 118). This instructional approach to the why of cooking contrasts sharply with Nigella’s approach to the act where home-made and nostalgia are foregrounded. Granted we are given images of cooking as a “low-effort undertaking”
The notion of “stoveside pottering” is characteristic of her approach to cooking, in her recipe for “Lemon Risotto”:

This is comfort food on so many levels. For one, risotto has to be one of the most comforting things to eat ever. What’s more, although everyone goes on about the finickiness and crucial fine-tuning involved, I find risotto immensely comforting to make: in times of strain, mindless repetitive activity—in this case 20 minutes of stirring—can really help. (Lawson 2001, 43)

We are told that for Nigella the act of cooking is symbolic of “temperament and habit”, in addition:

The way I cook, more than what I cook, is so much a product of the way my mother cooked before me, and most of what I feel about food comes from my family. Every time I pick up a pan I am drawing on what I inherited. (Lawson 2001, 153)

This more care-driven and emotional approach attempts to deny the calculative rationality of weights and measures, in her recipe for mashed potato we are told: “I hesitate before giving quantities, so please regard the specifications below as the merest guidelines” (ibid., 32). Additionally, in “Granny Lawson’s Lunch Dish” we are told “Cooking isn’t just about ingredients, weights and measures: it’s social history, personal history” (ibid., 162). A representation which attempts to embue the act of cooking with extraordinary relevance.

Reading Off Gender

The previous discussion on the contrasting rationalities adopted by Oliver and Lawson for the why and how of cooking enable us to illuminate what they suggest about contemporary gender norms. On the face of it we might suggest that for all their contemporary appeal and attempt to locate themselves in contemporary times they are both positioned within a traditional framing of male and female gender roles. For Oliver, this can be glimpsed through the cultural stereotypes that he invokes through his narrative discussions. In this respect, Oliver appropriates cockney slang (Low 2001), or as Walsh (2002) terms his “hi-jacking” of “Pearly King cockney-droll”. The key images are those of traditional working-class values where the wife is affectionately referred to as the “missus” and friends are affectionately known as “blokes” coming round for “brekkie”. To expand upon this it is useful to turn to the rationales they provide for cooking. In the preamble narrative for the chapter entitled “Morning Glory” Oliver states:

The idea of this chapter is not necessarily to make you or your family start eating breakfast every morning. But quite frankly, after a week’s work, when the old Saturday and Sunday mornings come along, you don’t always have the imagination or the foresight to knock up a quick bit of interesting brekkie for yourself, your family or your partner. If you’re after some brownie points and you’re a bloke I would highly suggest breakfast in bed for the missus to give you a lucky day, and if you’re like my missus, sorry, the lovely Jules, you
should attempt a little bit of brekkie for your fella before asking him for a bit of cash for that dress that you’ve seen in Top Shop. (Oliver 2000, 23)

It is at this point that Oliver’s discourse reveals itself, the chatty conversational style rooted in the gendered ideology of a bygone age. Oliver’s ideal reader is also revealed (pictorially, at least) as thoroughly male, with the image of food as a means of social affiliation with other men echoed throughout (e.g. “bevvies” section with its accompanying image of “Peter, Me and Ben” consuming a watermelon filled with vodka whilst sat on the back of a well-worn red leather sofa). However, behind such a representation we still have Oliver’s more rational approach to the act of cooking, where calculative rationality is foregrounded.

In contrast, Nigella’s primary addressee is female, a recipe for Watermelon daiquiri thereby ends with the phrases: “tip back bangles jangling” and “just make it and drink it wearing mules to match”. Moreover, in an age of increasing female participation in the workforce, a period in which traditional gender roles are being increasingly questioned, Nigella’s counter-discourse is to posit the values to be had from a return to the kitchen, a point expressed through the title of one of her earlier cookbooks: *How to be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking*.

However, what joins the two texts is the presence of the author and the conversational style adopted by both. In Nigella, the reader is treated as akin to a friend, so that by the same token the act of reading becomes a means of social affiliation, verging on the confessional, a confessional which has at its centre the will to instruct, to guide and to provide resolutions to the dilemmas of contemporary living.

**Conclusion**

This essay has modest ambitions, chief amongst these is the attempt to render cookbooks as cultural artefacts to thereby make them amenable to textual analysis, in order to counter their taken-for-grantedness amongst consumer researchers.

It is further argued, that the turn to contemporary culinary practices and their representations serves to enrich our understanding of consumer culture, enabling us to illuminate not only dominant discourses, that is, with respect to notions of food as cultural capital and culinary tourism, but also counter-discourses emerging forms of meaning. In this respect we seek to position and read off cookery books, as windows through which to glimpse and problematise representations of contemporary culture. But more, we want to suggest that through their representations are gleaned instances of culture in the making. Chief amongst these is the turn to what might be termed a discourse of compassion through which culinary culture is positioned as rather than simply consumption or production, but as a form of distribution through which emerge new patterns of sociality. In addition, we traced the emergence of what we might refer to as a mystification of the kitchen itself, as a pocket of resistance, a location for magical practices. The kitchen, in other words, as a site where acts of apparent mundane consumption assume the form of extraordinary consumption, and where doing one’s thing is the order of the day, as Firat and Dholakia urge “the social transformation of our day can be expected to occur through pockets of resistance, not in
terms of a frontal attack or challenge … but in terms of ignoring authority and insisting on doing ‘one’s own thing’” (Firat and Dholakia 1998, 155). In this manner, we contend that rather than being simply instrumental and instructional texts about ingredients, their assembly, processing, and presentation, cookery books do indeed tell unusual cultural tales. Tales which are akin to confessional through which are proffered solutions to contestations about gender norms, questions of cultural identity and ways to live in consumer culture.

This approach also brings in to analytical inquiry, the further idea that possibly other areas of culinary culture demand to be foregrounded, for what they might equally illuminate about contemporary consumer culture. Amongst these we might spotlight supermarket recipe cards, restaurant menus, or indeed the personal notes which people themselves construct around the activity of cooking, that is, recipes, spoken and written, unpublished traces which are transmitted informally through the generations.

Note

[1] This data was selected from a broader study of young people’s living skills, in total 20 young people aged from 16 to 22 years, living in the UK were interviewed during 2002.

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