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When Men Started Doing It

Steven Shapin

- *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker and Apprentice to a Butcher in Tuscany* by Bill Buford

What's all this fuss about cooks and chefs? The how-to-cook sections of bookshops are as big as the how-to-be-successful-in-life sections; it's no longer clear where one ends and the other begins. Many of the books sell themselves not so much as sources of practical information – how to make a wild mushroom risotto – but as windows onto both the skills and the emotional life of a celebrity cook. Not just how to cook a mushroom risotto like Jamie Oliver or Nigella Lawson or Gordon Ramsay or Anthony Bourdain, but what it's like to be Jamie or Nigella or Gordon or Tony: *Happy Days with the Naked Chef*, *How to be a Domestic Goddess*, *In the Heat of the Kitchen*, *Kitchen Confidential*. And then – as if we need to know still more – there are the biographies: first, of past celebrity chefs (Escoffier and Carême), then of recent martyrs to perfectionism (Bernard Loiseau: two biographies), and now of domestic cooks or commercial chefs who've been on television or written a bestseller: Jamie (two), Gordon, Nigella, the clownish American TV chef Emeril Lagasse, Julia Child, Elizabeth David, Irma Rombauer (compiler of the American suburban kitchen bible, *The Joy of Cooking*), and even Delia.

In the US, the cable TV Food Network reaches 85 million households, guaranteeing financial success for its stars' books, videos and restaurants and making some of them so famous that they're stopped on the street for autographs and have their names chanted out by Bud Lite-drinking hard-hats when they're spotted on the sidelines at American football games. Friends whose dining-out experiences don't extend much beyond the American equivalent of a Berni Inn have told me that Lagasse is 'the greatest chef in the world'. (This is a

man whose tag-line, 'kick it up a notch', expresses his belief that all dishes are immeasurably improved by the theatrical addition –'Bam!'– of immense quantities of garlic, pork fat and his proprietary Cajun seasoning powder, Emeril's Original Essence™: $3.59 for three ounces.) There seems to be magic about them – from the hems of their aprons to the tips of their toques. The New York journalist Molly O'Neill has described the genre of 'food porn' – food writing which doesn't really seek to transmit knowledge but to show you, in erotic detail, just what it is you cannot do and cannot have. Well over half a billion books about food and wine are sold in the States every year and the circulation of glossy food and wine magazines goes up and up: *Bon Appetit* (1.3 million), *Food and Wine* and *Gourmet* (both about a million).

By comparison, the circulation of the *New Yorker* – which has instituted an annual food issue – was just short of a million in 2004. And now its former fiction editor Bill Buford has provided one of the most evocative testaments to our – and his – current obsession: *Heat* is a record of several years spent in willing servitude to some of the great chefs, and food artisans, of Manhattan and Italy. He wants to know what it's like; he needs to know how to do what they do. He wants the magic, and he knows that it can't be had through the reading of books and the watching of television shows, but only through the laying on of hands.

We used not to care so much. Plato thought that those who were greatly concerned about what they ate could never be suitable governors of the Republic. You had to eat what you were given and not spare it a second thought. Homer had it right, Plato reckoned, when he 'feeds his heroes at their feasts, when they are campaigning, on soldiers' fare; they have no fish, although they are on the shores of the Hellespont, and they are not allowed boiled meats but only roast, which is the food most convenient for soldiers, requiring only that they should light a fire, and not involving the trouble of carrying about pots and pans.' The corruption came from the Italian peninsula; Plato specifically disapproved of 'Syracusan dinners, and the refinements of Sicilian cookery'. Caring too much about that sort of thing was incompatible with a life of civic virtue. Citizens of the

Republic had to have salt and olives and cheese, onions and greens – 'the sort of thing they boil in the country' – and, for dessert, maybe figs, chickpeas and beans, accompanied by watered wine taken in moderation. That would ensure health and longevity, and that was all one should care about.

Aristotle specifically looked down his nose at cooks. Knowing how to cook was the sort of instrumental knowledge suitable for a slave. If you were going to live the life of virtue, you needed the right number and sort of slaves, but the idea that you would learn to be a cook yourself was absurd. From the Middle Ages onwards, Continental – more rarely, English – noblemen might, and occasionally did, value their skilled household cooks very highly. They might even make a display of how much they themselves knew about the culinary arts, but the number of gentlemen who sought to acquire cooking skills was small. The Princess Palatine, married to the younger brother of Louis XIV, expressed a certain surprise about the exotic ways of her crapulous son, the regent: 'My son knows how to cook; it is something he learned in Spain.' However well regarded your cook was, he was still your servant: why on earth would you want to do that sort of thing yourself?

But a 'kitchen slave' is precisely what Buford wanted to be. He chucked his full-time job at the magazine, and for more than two years indentured himself to the celebrity chef Mario Batali at Babbo, then the flagship of Batali's New York Italianate restaurant empire; for shorter periods, he studied how to make *pasta fresca* at a restaurant in Emilia-Romagna where Batali himself served an apprenticeship, and how to be a butcher and sausage-maker at the most traditional *macelleria* in Chianti. And it's a sign of our times that the general reaction – certainly mine – to Buford's adventure is more envy than wonderment. Buford paid a heavy price for the skills he acquired. At Babbo, he went through the degradation rituals of the prep and line-cook that have become familiar from the 'kitchen nightmare' literary and TV genre. Working for free, he was bumped, burned, bloodied and subjected to verbal abuse.

Starting with morning prep work, his dissection of a couple of dozen ducks was a disaster ('You *are* aware that these are going to be served

to people?'), as was the cutting up of pork for a ragù ('These are chunks, I asked for cubes'), and the 'fine dice' of carrots (tossed into the garbage). Chopping celery, Buford threw away the leaves, and Batali – making a rare personal appearance at his restaurant – was apoplectic: 'You're throwing away the best part of the celery! Writer guy – busted!' Buford nevertheless was making progress, and, after prep-kitchen boot-camp, he was elevated, first to the pasta station, where he worked the huge infernal pasta-boiler known as 'the bitch' ('nice touch', Buford reflected, on learning that behind his back he was called 'the kitchen bitch' – 'the kitchen bitch cleaning the kitchen's bitch') and then on to the crucial grill station. There he suffered serious heat-stroke and serial humiliation: 'Your pork is undercooked, and your rabbit is overcooked.' One night – just when he thought he was getting the hang of it – a particularly sadistic head chef decided that he had plated up the wrong amount of braised fennel: 'It's not fucking good enough . . . Do it again,' the chef snarled, and threw the hot fennel in Buford's face. All that pain in the service of all that pleasure.

Buford then took himself off to Italy to learn how to make fresh pasta and take apart pigs and cows. This involved much less abuse but not that much less frustration. Making mediocre egg pasta is not difficult, nor is using a sharp knife to chop up an animal into edible bits, but it is very hard to learn how to do either supremely well. You have to watch for a long time before you are allowed to try. *Pasta fresca* is just flour and egg, with maybe a little salt, water and olive oil. But it must be a good egg (hard to find and harder to define) and you mustn't use a food-processor or even a metal pasta machine but a *matterello* – a long, thin rolling-pin – working on a wide wooden board: wood on wood for the texture and 'that grainy-in-the-mouth feel'. In the Emilia-Romagna restaurant where, again, Buford counted himself lucky to work for free, the master was a tough mistress, and just when he thought he'd cracked the secret of working the dough with the *matterello*, she announced her disapproval with a blow on his shoulder: 'You look like an old woman . . . You will never learn if you roll it out like an old woman.' You have to make the sheets so thin you can see through them but not so thin as to tear, and if it tears you have to throw it away and start again. When are

they right? When they look like *this*. The mistress had one secret which was shown but not said: underneath the pasta board was a strip of wood that kept the board from sliding when the dough was being rolled; you made sure there was a flap of dough hanging over the strip and positioned your belly against the dough; then you could stretch away more efficiently. To make tagliatelle, the sheet of pasta must be 'dry, but not too dry'. How dry? Like *this*. To make tortellini – Buford had taken an oath not to tell Batali the secret – the ragù must include four meats (pork, chicken, prosciutto and mortadella), two eggs, some parmigiano reggiano ('How much? Enough to thicken it') and some nutmeg ('A little'). That was the filling; the mistress refused to show Buford how to wrap it into the pasta until his next visit – perhaps to test whether he had honoured his oath.

In Tuscany, he set out to 'learn meat' – 'how you prepare an animal as food'. Again, the cock-ups and the frustration: he cut himself (of course, and many times); he walked into a bin of meat and went flying; he set himself on fire. But finally 'the Maestro' – the establishment's taciturn Zen master – set him loose on the carcass of a pig: 'He took my knife, and his initial instruction went something like this. "*Guarda!* (Watch!) You do this (*cosi*). You do that (*cosi*). You cut these (*tagliale*) one by one. You work the spine loose, and *basta*."' And so Buford followed instructions, with the result that he chopped the tenderest and most expensive part of the pig in half. '"Oh, shit," I said in English. "I did that? Fuck." Then, remembering I was in Italy, I said (in Italian): "That was a mistake, wasn't it?"' The Maestro agreed that it was a rather big mistake: 'Non va bene.' Again, Buford made progress, and, by the time he returned to Manhattan, he was able to schlep a whole still-bleeding pig (only recently bereft of life) from the farmers' market back to his apartment, taking it up in the lift – together with an unamused Wall Street banker – and butchering it in the traditional Tuscan way: a tub of pork *confit*, chains of *salsicce*, a *rosticiana*, an *arista* (the aristocrat of roast, herbed rolled pork), vast quantities of *ragù*, brawn: 450 servings of food from one animal, skilfully dismembered.

Buford is a romantic, and what's gone wrong with the modern world – as he sees it – is the commodification of food and the loss of skill in

making and preparing it: not knowing what's at the end of your fork but especially not knowing how to make it, not knowing how to use your hands and your senses. Having spent his working life making intellectual artistic judgments, Buford wanted to be able to make sensory artisanal judgments: how much pressure to apply to the point of a very sharp knife when separating the muscles of a cow's thigh, and to the ends of a *matterello* when rolling out pasta for ravioli, how to gauge the proper resilience of dough, how to touch grilled meat to tell its degree of doneness, how to hear when the risotto needs more broth, how to smell when the fish is cooked, how to tell by sight alone whether the meat is good, how to taste on the roof of your mouth the difference between grass-fed and grain-finished beef, how the polenta looks when it's ready and how to judge when it doesn't need stirring. There are cooks whose aim is innovation and there are cooks who want to re-create and purify tradition: Buford is one of the latter. He wanted to know how to do the simple things and knew how hard it was to do simple things well: kitchen *sprezzatura*. He wanted, at least temporarily, to leave a world in which judgment was subjective and contestable – who's good enough to write fiction for the *New Yorker*? – for one in which judgment was objective and absolute, one in which everyone in the kitchen knew for a fact when you had done well and when you had fucked up. The word for craft used to be 'art', and it was the shift from art to 'art' that attracted him, from art that fed people's imaginations to 'art' that fed people.

Buford got good. The self-deprecating jokiness of earlier sections of the book probably hides just how good he got. He cooks at home now, but he was good enough to pass at the grill station at Babbo, which has been called Manhattan's top restaurant. Some restaurant skills are translatable to the home kitchen – how to use the water the pasta has cooked in, the value of seriously browned meat (for the taste, not to seal in the juices), the importance of keeping your knives very sharp, how to leave the risotto alone, how not to take recipes too seriously – but some are not: speed and consistency (neither of them big domestic considerations), arranging the 33 different items of your *mise en place* and keeping a map of it all in your head, how to keep track of the progress of half a dozen grilling seabass by changing their compass orientations. What he wanted was to be a very good cook, a

cook who was the steward of vanishing artisanal traditions: ‘I didn’t want this knowledge in order to be a professional; just to be more human’ – where more human is understood to mean less modern.

In fact, he got so good that, when he settled back in New York, Batali offered him financial backing to open his own restaurant: ‘Say, a small place in Italy, maybe in the hills. Italian for the Italians . . . Completely authentic.’ Buford thought about it, but thought not: he had never wanted a restaurant; he wanted to know what chefs did, not to be a chef. He was an ‘amateur’ – he did it for the love of it and not to make money – and that’s the spirit in which he approached his adventures. The Dante-quoting, ‘O sole mio’-singing butcher in Tuscany affected to be an amateur too, one who made money through his art but who despised the world of – spitting out the English with sarcastic emphasis – ‘bizzzness’: ‘I have a bad bizzzness. I am not interested in a good bizzzness . . . I do not want to be Mario Batali.’ The world went wrong by giving the customer what he wanted, especially when what the customer wanted was the cheapest possible food. In fact, as customers became more and more removed from the means of agricultural and kitchen production, they didn’t know enough to know what they wanted; if you were committed to your calling, you should understand that the customer was *un cazzo*, a dickhead, and should be treated accordingly. But Batali was an unapologetic professional and no romantic – ‘We make money by buying food, fixing it up, and getting other people to pay for it’ – and his business partner Joe Bastianich was blunter. Visiting the rustic Italian mountain restaurant where Batali had trained, Bastianich wondered why the owners weren’t minting it: ‘Mountains, schmountains, restaurants are a business: Why are you guys such fuck-ups?’ Yet what Batali was selling – what makes him a ‘brand’ and his bizzzness such a good one – is the Idea of Authenticity, of high-priced rusticity, of *nona*’s *casalinga* cooking. Batali was the access point for Buford’s adventures into kitchen-authenticity, but the only thing the ‘writer guy’ meant to sell was the book that described it, flesh made word again. The thing had come full circle.

Top chefs have now completed the transition from slave to celebrity, from people who worked cheaply for the rich to people for whom

some of the rich would gladly work free. The current fuss about chefs is a remarkable shift in our culture and its possible causes amount to an index of how we live now. First, domestic work got democratised: once, if you were well off, the cook was your household servant; with the emergence of restaurants in the late 18th century, you would occasionally pay – often quite a lot – to go to his place to eat the food he sold; then, with the decline of domestic service in the early 20th century and the subsequent emergence of new kitchen technologies, cooking became something that even fairly posh wives would do, so achieving a degree of legitimacy; and, finally, with the partial democratisation of the workplace and the partial triumph of feminism, men took up home cooking. And when men began to do the cooking it became worth thinking about and very much worth talking about.

Second, cooking skills got scarce. Urbanisation and industrialisation disrupted the traditional chains by which indigenous skills had been transmitted from hand to hand, largely from mother to daughter, and what everyone knew how to do eventually became what very few people knew how to do. In the main, the skills just disappeared or are on their way to disappearing: for many households, the cooked-from-scratch sit-down meal is a rarity, and few people will now be at all familiar with the look and taste of a genuine free-range egg. It would be wrong to assume that the passing of these skills is widely lamented. Getting and using them takes such a lot of time. But among those who do feel their loss – women as well as men – there are cookbooks, TV shows and, for the dedicated and very well-off, week-long cooking courses, because there are few other plausible ways to learn. This makes the skills interesting, while, at the same time, transforming some of those who possess them into stars. And so, while our current obsession with cooks and chefs is undeniable evidence of an upsurge of fascination with the kitchen arts, it is also testimony to their decline.

Third, the world got smaller, and, in the Anglophone world, which came to see little value in its native culinary traditions, this meant learning some other cultures' tastes and kitchen-skills. Cheap travel, mass immigration, and the proliferation of exotic foods at the

supermarket meant that many people were made aware of foods they might enjoy that their mothers never made or even knew about. You could learn how to cook these things, but, with rare exceptions, only through books and TV shows. I'm a bit older than Buford, but I can still recall with cinematic vividness almost every gesture involved in my grandmother's making of strudel, borscht and roast capon. However, I can have no memory of watching anyone make risotto with prosciutto and peas, grilled sirloin flap steak marinated in soy sauce, nuoc mam and lemongrass, or brandade – all of which I learned to make in the last few years and have cooked in the last week. And when you learn to do something pretty well you acquire an appreciation of what it is to do it very well and what it's worth to learn to do it that well. Maybe worth enough to be a slave and have hot fennel thrown in your face.

From the *LRB* letters page: [7 September 2006] C.D. Rose.

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