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7 Information in the Hobby of Gourmet Cooking: Four Contexts

Jenna Hartel

Introduction

This chapter aims to characterize the information activities and information resources that underlie the hobby of gourmet cooking in America. Gourmet cooking has roots in French haute cuisine and is a manner of food preparation that entails high quality or exotic ingredients and advanced technical skills (Wilson 2003). It is featured today at many high-end or "white tablecloth" restaurants, associated with cultural icon Julia Child, and has been adopted by millions of Americans as a hobby. Given its complexity to execute, gourmet cooking is information intensive and generates a vast multimedia information universe. Altogether, this hobby is a rich setting in which to study information phenomena in an everyday life and leisure context.

For a decade I was an avid gourmet hobby cook, renowned among family and friends for my decadent chocolate soufflé. When I entered a doctoral program in library and information science, I was unable to continue the hobby, but as an alternative I opted to do a dissertation (Hartel 2007) on its informational features, which had not been the subject of academic inquiry in my field. Taking an ethnographic approach, I conducted fieldwork between 2002 and 2006 by participating in gourmet-cooking social groups, classes, online forums, public lectures, and farmers' markets in greater Los Angeles, California, a culinary nexus. Further, I interviewed twenty gourmet cooks in their homes to learn how they practiced the hobby and used its information resources. The participants lived in Los Angeles and Boston, Massachusetts. My sampling strategy was purposive and opportunistic, and I found subjects through family and friends, or I approached potential informants at culinary-themed events such as cookbook signings. I sought articulate, enthusiastic cooks with substantial experience in the hobby (at least two years), and I did not attempt to

examine sociodemographic variables in this exploratory study (Stebbins 2001a).

After the interview, each gourmet cook showed me their personal collections of culinary information in their home (focusing mainly on documentary items like cookbooks and recipes, and secondarily on multimedia and digital resources), which I photographed and diagrammed. I also studied popular and academic writings on gourmet cooking. Altogether, my data set amounted to several hundred pages of transcripts and fieldnotes, almost five hundred photographs, and volumes of literature. I analyzed these materials for patterns and themes using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and NVivo software. The results took the form of a fieldnote-centered ethnography (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) that showcased the actual statements of hobbyists (made anonymous to protect their privacy).

The chapter begins with a brief history of gourmet cooking, a vivid example of an actual hands-on episode, and theoretical concepts to specify gourmet cooking in its hobby form. Then, the information experiences and their associated information resources in the hobby are organized and characterized as four contexts— Living a Gourmet Lifestyle, Expressing Culinary Expertise, Staying Informed and Inspired, and Launching a Cooking Episode—presented in chapter sections. Throughout, tables summarize data and list culinary information resources. At the conclusion, there is a survey of Information Age innovations in the hobby.

The Hobby of Gourmet Cooking

The idea of cooking as leisure has only emerged in the last half century in America. Until then, cooking was largely feeding work[1] (DeVault 1991), the required family care and housework performed mostly by female homemakers. Starting in the 1950s, a confluence of technological, economic, and social changes shifted cooking from work to leisure for some populations.

Namely, breakthroughs of the Industrial Revolution changed the nature of domestic food preparation. Home cooks no longer faced arduous tasks such as baking bread and canning perishables, which left time for the more enjoyable finishing touches of assembling and serving meals. Food shipping and storage technologies brought a wider variety of fruit and vegetables, at the peak of ripeness, to consumers year round. Through both immigration and international travel, Americans were exposed to foreign cuisines and ingredients, and eaters became more adventurous. As outlined

in *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation* (Kamp 2006), charismatic educators such as Julia Child, Craig Claiborne, and James Beard, among others, championed sophisticated, artful ways to cook, eat, and socialize.

While the culinary landscape in America evolved, the amount of free time and disposable income steadily increased. Between 1965 and 2003 men gained six to eight hours per week of free time and women four to eight hours (Aguiar and Hurst 2006). Creative pursuits outside work, like hobbies, became components of identity and markers of a well-rounded life.

By the latter decades of the twentieth century Americans began to take up gourmet cooking as a hobby, and today there are several million participants. A proprietary report by market researchers Mintel Group (2005) calls the gourmet cooking hobbyist "the food enthusiast" or "foodie." Such sorts, "really enjoy cooking" and will "engage in more elaborate cooking from scratch on weekends or for special occasions." The sociodemographics of this community are apparent in the readership profile of *Gourmet* magazine:[2] middle aged (median age forty-nine), mostly female (74 percent), college educated (76 percent), professionally employed (33 percent), and wealthy (median household income around $80,000) (Conde Nast 2008).

Most gourmet hobby cooks have little or no experience in the restaurant industry, which is a form of paid work (Fine 1996). Rather, cooking as a hobby is a type of *serious leisure*, a free-time "activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a leisure career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (Stebbins 1992, 3; 2001b). For most enthusiasts it is a cherished, lifelong pursuit that engenders a deep sense of fulfillment and many personal and social benefits. It is not akin to throwing a couple of hamburgers on the grill when friends drop by, which is *casual leisure*, "the immediately intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it" (Stebbins 1997, 18). The hobby of gourmet cooking demands acumen and instead of an immediate and effortless reward, it takes perseverance.

For instance, one summer afternoon while on her weekly trip to the farmer's market in Providence, Rhode Island, gourmet cook Celeste purchased a variety of locally grown, perfectly ripe vegetables. Upon returning home she was pleased to find the latest issue of her favorite serial, *Cook's Illustrated*, had arrived. She flipped through the magazine, lingering on an article about vegetable torta—an elaborate loaf of vegetables baked together

with seasonings, eggs, and breadcrumbs. The article outlined the technical challenge of this dish: liquid had to be extracted from each vegetable to concentrate flavors and prevent the torta from being watery and bland. A domestic version of an Italian cheese, asiago, added tang and texture. The recipe piqued her curiosity, was an ideal use of her stash of vegetables, and would be a perfect treat for her son who was arriving home from an overseas trip late the following night. She made up a grocery list and planned to spend the subsequent afternoon on this cooking project.

In her kitchen the next day, Celeste carefully read the article and recipe again, studying its fourteen steps and multiple illustrations. She sliced, salted, pressed, and baked the eggplant. She roasted peppers until they were blistered and brown, and then peeled off the skins. She sliced tomatoes, salted them, and patted away seeds and juices. Because each vegetable required individualized treatment, she recounted, "This went on for hours!" As the vegetables cooked in the oven, Celeste whirled bread in the food processor to form fresh breadcrumbs, which were sautéed in butter, mixed with grated asiago, and pressed into the spring form cake pan to create a thin crust. Next, she made a binder that would hold the torta together: a thin custard of egg, cream, cheese, garlic, and chopped fresh herbs gathered from an herb garden in her back yard.

When all the elements were prepared, they were layered into the pan, one vegetable type at a time, interleaved with custard and more cheese. The torta was baked to an internal temperature of 175 degrees and the result of her effort was a dense golden loaf that, when cut, revealed colorful internal striations. Late the next evening Celeste warmed the torta in the oven, popped it out of the pan, proclaimed it "a thing of great beauty and joy!" and served it up to her hungry, delighted son.

Celeste's project is a snapshot of the unique ethos or body of knowledge, values, and practices native to the hobby of gourmet cooking. As mentioned, it is characterized by food preparation using high quality or exotic ingredients and advanced technical skills. Further, the approach is marked by a refined aesthetic that showcases the intrinsic beauty of food and entails an elegant and orderly cooking process. Though usually executed independently by the gourmet cook, this hobby often takes the form of entertaining to please others. The experience is centered on the home, where the kitchen becomes a culinary workshop.

Gourmet cooking is just one of many hobbies involving food. The hobby of down-home cooking (a near opposite of the gourmet approach) aims to cook with inexpensive and common ingredients using simple or time-saving techniques (Wilson 2003). This cooking type strives for the

no-fuss sensibility with which a beloved grandmother might cook. There are also hobby niches that are centered on narrower styles of cooking like baking, barbecue, Asian, or vegetarian. This chapter focuses solely on the hobby of gourmet cooking, which has distinct information phenomena.

Four Information Contexts

In summer 2006, I began descriptively coding interview transcripts and photographs, and naming (coding) all information activity, meaning, any actions related to the acquisition or expression of culinary skill or knowledge. Twenty-four unique codes were produced, such as "watching television," "reading cookbooks," and "eating out." In time, it was apparent that some codes could be grouped together based on similar roles in the hobby; for instance, several pertained to "staying informed and inspired in the hobby" whereas others were relevant to "expressing culinary expertise." By applying obvious associations, the large set of twenty-four was collapsed into six[3] clusters or contexts of information activity; four are featured in this chapter.

In table 7.1 the contexts are numbered, described, and exemplified. They are listed in an order that begins as broadly underlying everyday life (Living a Gourmet Lifestyle), and incrementally lead to the heart of the hobby: hands-on cooking (Launching a Cooking Episode). In the following sections each cluster will be introduced and discussed along with illustrations drawn from the data.

Living a Gourmet Lifestyle

The first cluster of information activities proves that the hobbyists' passion for food and cooking permeates their daily lives. For instance, meals at restaurants or routine food shopping evolve into sessions to study food. Vacations are taken to destinations with interesting cuisines. Friendships become a venue to talk about food or do culinary things together.

Such everyday happenings (eating out, shopping, vacations, and friendships) are typically *not* factored into information research because they are not centered on documents or information systems. One groundbreaking study of everyday-life information seeking (Hektor 2001), coined the term for these *life activities* (activities that physically manipulate the artifacts of everyday life, not information) and placed them outside the research agenda. Taking a different stance, here I propose that some life activities *are* information activities when they set up a platform of knowledge for a

Table 7.1
Four contexts for information in the hobby of gourmet cooking (Hartel 2007).

Context	Description	Examples
1. Living a Gourmet Lifestyle	Everyday-life experiences in which the gourmet cook orients to the culinary dimensions and learns; not centered on documents or information systems	• eating out • experiencing foreign cuisines • adopting regional food cultures • visiting ethnic neighborhoods/markets • having "foodie" friends
2. Expressing Culinary Expertise	The expression of culinary knowledge, mostly to family and friends (in person), but sometimes in an online community or in public	• consulting • teaching • commenting online
3. Staying Informed and Inspired	Any effort to learn about culinary topics and to stay stimulated; centered on published multimedia culinary information and not motivated by an episode at hand	• reading cookbooks • reading works on gastronomy • reading culinary serials • watching television • surfing the Internet • taking cooking classes
4. Launching a Cooking Episode	The actions taken to select and organize a cooking episode	• exploring for ideas • searching home-based collections • searching online recipe databases • Googling for recipes • tapping a "grapevine" • comparing/modifying/amalgamating recipes

hobby. Since these activities blend almost imperceptibly into everyday life and become routines, they are called Living a Gourmet Lifestyle.

Eating Out

Americans love to eat out and gourmet cooks are no exception. However, unlike the average hungry and time-pressed consumer, hobbyists treat visits to upscale restaurants as educational experiences. While eating out, they study menus, food combinations, presentation styles, and flavors to expand their knowledge. Sara reports, "My boyfriend thinks it is irritating because I don't choose what is the most tasty, but what I can learn the most from. It's school, not pleasure!" Similarly, gourmet cook Nancy explains that when she eats out she selects items that are "a little bit unusual" and then proceeds to eat them "very, very slowly" in an effort to identify the ingredients and seasonings.

From the perspective of restaurant wait staff, gourmet cooks may come off as challenging customers who ask a lot of questions. Eric calls restaurants "a living workshop" and says, "I often ask questions . . . the more information you have about it [the meal], the more satisfying it is." Many gourmet cooks relish the chance to go into the kitchen and interrogate the chef directly. Eric continues, "I really want to understand the thinking of the chef in preparing this. I want to understand why they decided to use these specific ingredients to create this kind of flavor." Sara has learned strategies to access the kitchen and points out, "I find that if you are not dining on Friday or Saturday night, chefs are more than willing to talk to you."

Inspired by restaurant foods, gourmet cooks try to duplicate them at home. Hobbyist Katey explains that at a Mexican restaurant she and her boyfriend ate "this incredible chile" stuffed with finely ground beef, ginger, and raisins. It was topped with pumpkin seeds and cilantro and finished with a sauce containing a whiff of vanilla. In her opinion, the dish was "freaking amazing" and she said to her boyfriend, "We are going to figure this out!" Over the next three months Katey gathered, studied, and implemented stuffed chile recipes, while her boyfriend served as taster and provided feedback on their resemblance to the restaurant version. Some cookbooks, culinary Web sites, serials, or weekly newspaper food pages satisfy the gourmet cook's interest in restaurant offerings by publishing restaurant recipes.

Experiencing Foreign Cuisines

Gourmet cooks take overseas vacations and their culinary horizons are expanded. Camilla recounts that in her early days as a gourmet cook, "I

started . . . traveling a lot and really relating to the country I was visiting as much through my palate and gullet as through my mind and my eyes." Sara says, "If I travel, the first thing I ask is 'What is done with the food here? What do people eat for lunch?'" In keeping with their penchant for authenticity, gourmet cooks avoid tourist fare and favor highly regarded restaurants or out-of-the-way spots of the locals. Not all countries equally attract these discerning cooks, who generally take the strongest interest in France, the birthplace of the gourmet approach, as well as the Mediterranean region and Asia.

Back at home, these culinary adventures provide ideas and inspiration for months to come. Camilla continues, "It is really nice to experience the cooking of a country you are going to and then come back and incorporate that into your repertoire." For instance, gourmet cook Tom and his wife Alice returned from a trip to France and hosted a dinner party for neighbors with the theme "A Taste of Paris." The event featured a French menu of onion soup, pissaladierre (an appetizer tart with anchovies), escargot (snails), beef bourguignon (a beef stew in red wine), along with French wine and champagne. As the pièce de resistance, a poster of the Eiffel Tower was mounted in their dining room for the night.

In addition to new ideas, gourmet cooks obtain culinary souvenirs on their travels, to stock their personal libraries and kitchens. The most popular keepsake is a cookbook featuring the native cuisine. Memories from the trip are invoked when its recipes are cooked and served. Souvenirs also take the form of ingredients or cooking gadgets. Gourmet cook Nancy takes a keen interest in foreign foodstuffs and explains, "One of the things I do [on holiday] is visit grocery stores, for I love to see what other products are available." She has purchased "pesto bouillon cubes" from Italy that are not available in American supermarkets, spice grinders from Ireland, and an olive-pitting gadget from Italy.

Adopting Regional Food Cultures

As an affluent and professional population, gourmet cooks move around a lot. They embrace and study the regional food cultures where they live temporarily. Rose explains that her husband's U.S. Army career has involved frequent relocations around the world and the United States, which inform her cooking. While in Germany, she was fascinated by the breads and pretzels and began to study baking. When she returned to the United States and lived in Arizona, she pursued Southwestern cookery. During a stint in Tennessee she "got into Southern food such as fried turkey and catfish." Now a resident of Colorado, Rose has learned to adapt to the impact of high-altitude baking. She reports, "Each time we move there is a change

in my cooking but overall I have gotten better and more confident." In the same way, gourmet cook Celeste lived in Denmark for eleven years and adopted the cooking and formal entertaining habits of northern Europe. Later, she and her husband moved to the country of Lesotho where she experimented with African cooking and traded recipes with other foreign aid workers from France, Russia, and Germany. She says, "We spent some time on the coast in Kenya and there is an Indian influence; we had access to Indian products and restaurants—that was really fun."

Visiting Ethnic Neighborhoods and Markets

In many cases, gourmet cooks need not travel far from home to step into a stimulating foreign culinary environment. Almost all American cities have ethnic communities, such as Boston's Italian North End or Chinatown, where markets feature imported products and an array of sights and smells. Katey and her boyfriend regularly host food-themed parties, such as a night of Jamaican or Russian delights. She reports that these events "always involve a couple of shopping expeditions, going to communities where there are authentic shops and immigrants. We'll go before to see what people are buying, and we'll get materials."

And while running workaday errands, cooks keep their eyes open for specialty food shops, to escape into a moment of hobby pleasure. Roland says, "I always look around for bakeries, farms and such." While killing time before a chiropractic appointment, he "discovered this nice vegetable garden and bakery shop, a surprisingly fantastic place." He was impressed by a bunch of fresh, multicolored Swiss chard, which became a featured item for dinner that evening. Even serendipitous visits to such places become a springboard for the hobby.

Having "Foodie" Friends

Over the course of the hobby experience, most gourmet cooks attract friends who share a passion for cooking. Such friends may go to restaurants together, cook for each other, and share recipes. Gourmet cook Celeste explains, "I have one foodie friend in particular and we often will share ideas and try new restaurants. We'll cook for each other." Claire's best friend since childhood also loves to cook and they talk by telephone often about food, and exchange favorite recipes via email.

A benefit of foodie friends is the mutual willingness to honestly evaluate the outcomes of cooking projects. Rose says, "If I made a cheesecake, I would give some to her [a friend]. Then I find out whether or not it [the cooking effort] is worth it. She reciprocates. If she makes a new type of cookie, she will bring one over and ask: 'What do you think?'" Similarly,

Sara reports, "Most of my friends are food-centered enough that they are willing to have a long discussion about: Should we change the flavor? Would it be better with a little this or that?"

Review: Living a Gourmet Lifestyle

The information activities placed under the banner of Living a Gourmet Lifestyle are distinct for being everyday activities that are not usually seen as information-related. Yet, by eating out, traveling to explore new cuisines, embracing local and regional food traditions, visiting ethnic neighborhoods and food markets, and maintaining friendships with other cooks, the hobbyist creates a life rich with culinary knowledge and sets the stage for the hobby.

Expressing Culinary Expertise

A second set of information activities entails what this chapter categorizes as Expressing Culinary Expertise to others. These behaviors are most common when the hobbyist has developed substantial ability. Here, the cook verbalizes his/her knowledge and enthusiasm for all things culinary and acts as an expert. This is a very social activity, since it is based on dialogue and requires an audience. Family and friends participate as listeners, respondents, clients, and students. While expression is the core of this set of activities, in the interplay of words and experiences, cooks acquire skill and knowledge as well.

Consulting

When gourmet cooks provide counsel to others on food-related issues, they are consulting. Usually this process is quick and problem-focused. Katey says, "I get a lot of phone calls—'Kaaateeey, HELP!' I like doing that." She continues, "I've got one friend who is very interested in cooking, she will send me emails or call me with questions, such as, 'Can I just melt the butter to stir it into the cookies?' And I say, 'No, you can't do that! *Please* don't do that!' This has been going on for twenty years. She keeps asking questions and I tell her the answers."

Other consulting projects are larger in scale and draw upon the cook's ability to conceptualize menus and events. Nancy recounts, "People ask me if I have ideas for something. My friend had a fortieth anniversary party and needed a good menu for her Italian family. I put together the menu and gave her the cookbooks." Like any business consultant or even a reference librarian, she has learned techniques for interrogating her "clients":

"I find myself asking questions about the types of guests, the nature of the event, whether they want light or heavy food, that kind of thing. I help to guide them into the foods that they like, presented for this setting. From there I might recommend recipes."

Teaching Cooking

Hobbyists sometimes teach others to cook. In its simplest form, teaching can be a demonstration, without instructional rhetoric. Tom explains, "At a party recently, I made deep fried strawberry and ricotta raviolis. Who would think that would be a good dessert?! It was delicious. I made them at home, brought the fryer to work, and made it in front of everyone."

Hobbyists with young children serve as teachers when they engage them in kitchen tasks; it is a way of blending the hobby with the demands of childcare. Rose's oldest daughter helps her prepare cake batters, and her younger ones shape bread dough. Anne bought a children's cookbook to use with her son and together they followed the recipe for roast chicken.

Going a step further as teachers, some cooks orchestrate cooking lessons for adult family and friends. Celeste designed three cooking classes for her college-aged son and niece. She featured delicious, simple, everyday preparations like lasagna, salad, and a fruit dessert. During the session, Celeste explained culinary principles and techniques, while her "students" received hands-on practice. Similarly, one Thanksgiving Nancy taught her sons and their girlfriends how to make filet mignon and Caesar salad; she explains, "It was such fun to do that together."

Commenting Online

Gourmet cooks can also express knowledge through online channels. For instance, Katey produces a food blog, The Seasonal Cook, where she writes about locally produced foods. Katey's blog enhances her interest in her hobby and, she says, "keeps me from drifting off. I've been doing that since June and found that it keeps me learning things, for I feel that there is always something I have to write and share." Indeed, today the Web is a site for thousands of culinary blogs, and many are authored by avid hobbyists.

A popular online forum is the Web site epicurious.com. Those who have executed an epicurious.com recipe may submit comments, which appear online. This addresses the critical questions tied to any recipe: Is it really good? Does it work? At epicurious.com, after trying a recipe a visitor rates its success using a one-to-four fork rating. The more popular recipes at this Web site have several hundred comments. These dialogues have proven so popular and informative that epicurious.com features the Buzz Box, which

is a direct link to a list of "recipes (that) have received the most comments and ratings from our users in the past thirty days." Most of the major online recipe collections feature similar social and interactive capabilities.

Review: Expressing Culinary Expertise

This cluster of information activity entails the expression of culinary knowledge, to family and friends in intimate settings, or to an online public. Cooks willingly serve as on-call troubleshooters or personal culinary advisors in the design of food-based events. As they mature in their hobby, many are motivated to teach. This can be as simple as demonstration cooking or involving a child in a cooking project. Sometimes, more structured lessons are offered to loved ones with a curriculum and hands-on instruction. Often hobbyists use online forums to register their opinions on a recipe. For the gourmet cook, these information activities are fun and natural expressions of their culinary passion.

Staying Informed and Inspired

Gourmet cooks stay informed and inspired through regular contact with the culinary literature and media. These behaviors increase basic knowledge, keep the cook abreast of culinary trends, and supply a constant stream of cooking ideas. Such activities are *not* done for the immediate purpose of steering hands-on cooking and rarely occur in the kitchen. Instead, regular immersion in culinary information is a routine and is the cherished part of a hobbyist's everyday life. For instance, cooks read cookbooks in bed before falling asleep, enjoy a newspaper's weekly food section while relaxing at a coffee shop, or tune in regularly to a favorite television cooking show. Such behaviors differ from Living a Gourmet Lifestyle by being explicitly information based, and per Hektor qualify as unfolding, "continually directed attention towards an information system and the symbolic display it offers, for instance by looking and listening, and thereby taking part in a content" (2001, 170).

The extent to which cooks do this set of activities varies. Some make an effort to stay informed on a daily basis; others are less riveted to culinary media and may gain knowledge and inspiration simply by Living a Gourmet Lifestyle. This constellation of information activities is more prevalent, and pursued with greater zeal, by newcomers who face the steep learning curve of the hobby. Intensity can lessen as skill and knowledge accumulate. One mature cook reveals, "I don't really watch cooking shows much anymore. Every once in a while I get a new book and follow it through. I suppose I have my ideas at this point!"

Often, Staying Informed and Inspired focuses on a specific culinary subject. A topic such as homemade pasta or braising can capture the cook's imagination and temporarily focus their reading and learning. Sometimes hobbyists will follow a self-developed curriculum to thoroughly study a culinary subject area. To restate, these information activities are *not* immediately directed at hands-on cooking, which is a different context and set of information activities discussed next as Launching a Cooking Episode.

Because these behaviors demand focused attention on an information resource they are usually done individually. In fact, cooks may covet moments away from family and friends to savor culinary learning. At the same time, Staying Informed and Inspired has social implications because in these private moments cooks transfer information across the hobby community. Such exchanges are mediated via published or public artifacts like books, magazines, Web sites, and the like. Non-hobbyists (engaged in feeding work) and dabblers (those who infrequently partake in a hobby) may have an occasional interest in these materials as well.

The universe of information artifacts and resources within the hobby of gourmet cooking is vast; it is one of the largest popular information domains. Resources come in print, digital, and multimedia forms through various public channels. In 2007, 13.9 million books were sold in the food and entertaining category, according to Nielsen BookScan, which tracks about 70 percent of sales (Rich 2008). On a monthly basis, culinary magazines with nationwide circulation are mailed to several million households and also sold at newsstands and grocery checkouts. Most newspapers feature a weekly food column or section focused on the local culinary scene. Online, there are numerous gourmet cooking Web sites that serve as reference sources and portals to databases with upward of twenty-five thousand recipes. The Food Network cable channel supplies twenty-four-hour-a-day culinary programming to ninety-six million American households (Television Food Network 2009), while many other television channels feature cooking-themed content. Further, there are newsletters, newsgroups and radio broadcasts on a wide range of culinary topics.

Reading Cookbooks

Above all, cooks get informed and inspired by reading cookbooks. A hobbyist states, "Certain things like Fanny Farmer or Escoffier are just good reads, you don't necessarily do any cooking from them." Some cooks have a dedicated time for reading and a favorite location in the home. Nancy says, "Saturday morning is my reading time. I sit right where you are sitting!" (a comfortable chair in her dining room). Gourmet cook Celeste

settles into a loveseat in her den during the evening and reads while the television plays in the background.

Cookbooks are valued for offering the most extensive treatment on culinary topics. Sara explains, "I find that cookbooks go into greater detail than any other source. I have never been able to get someone to have an hour-long conversation with me about the 'emulsifying process' . . . but there are books that do this. Books give me the broadest and deepest information." For gourmet cook Ken, the contemporary cookbook offers much more than recipes: "I use them for background knowledge about cuisines, types of ingredients, menu planning, so it is not just to go and look at a recipe. I use them much more diversely."

The cookbooks used by hobbyists today have evolved over the centuries.[4] A millennium ago, the very first cookbooks were simple lists of foods and menus, often of the favorites served at court. Settlers to America carried European cookbooks across the Atlantic, and for decades these texts were used with modifications to accommodate the pioneer culture. The first cookbook *by* an American *for* the American kitchen was Amelia Simmons's 1796 *American Cookery*, which featured local ingredients such as cornmeal and recipes for native foods like Indian pudding and slapjacks. Throughout the 1800s there was a cookbook boom, spearheaded by reform-minded women whose texts championed American themes of economy and frugality, management and organization, diet and health, and temperance. At the same time, specialty cookbooks emerged, documenting the foodways of American regions like New England or the South. In the twentieth century, continued immigration and globalization contributed to cookbooks featuring cuisines from around the world.

The genre is still evolving and nowadays many cookbooks include personal, social, cultural, and historical discussions of food. Nancy says, "A lot of cookbooks are more like social studies . . . I like this trend; there is more background and depth. So I like reading cookbooks." Contextual information enriches a cook's understanding and motivates future cooking. During her interview, Nancy picks up a French cookbook, opens it to a chapter on olives and exclaims, "There are all these awesome recipes for olives, and it is not just about making it, but background on where it comes from. . . . Look at all this stuff about olives and olive oils! I love to read about this, like about home-cured olives. Then I will look for a recipe because I get excited about it."

The cookbook is far from obsolete in this digital age; it was the favored resource of cooks in this study because of exceptional content, ease of use, familiarity, and portability. A cook explains, "I like looking at books, Web-

crawling is not quite the same." Sara elaborates, "[Cookbooks] are a very convenient source. If I'm online, at the library, or at work, I can use them. I can use them while I'm watching a movie or whatever. I can carry them around with me so they are where I am. Also, I am a reader; it is what I'm most familiar with."

Reading Gastronomy

In addition to cookbooks, hobbyists read materials on gastronomy, a literary genre developed in France in the 1800s that addresses proper eating and cooking habits, culinary history and myth, and the "nostalgic evocation of memorable meals" (Mennell 1986, 270–271). Recently in the United States, gastronomy has been popularized through Random House's The Modern Library Food Series, edited by Ruth Reichl, cookbook author and former editor of *Gourmet* magazine. This collection features classic gastronomic works in translation, life stories of renowned cooks, and nonacademic culinary social history. Another popular type of gastronomy falls under the Library of Congress subject heading Cookery—Fiction. These novels present a cooking-themed story interspersed with recipes.[5] For instance, Laura Esquivel's 1995 bestseller, *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies*, features a love story that unfolds around the kitchen hearth in one Mexican family.

Some cooks in this study report being touched by gastronomy. Celeste says, "I read Laurie Colwin and got inspired. I wished I had her life! Laurie . . . was a food writer and wrote essays that were originally published in *The New Yorker*. She had an interest in culinary history and old cookbooks. She would write an essay about, say, gingerbread and then have a recipe. . . . I've always liked her and would love to do that kind of journalism but never did." Celeste went on to create her own culinary diaries in the same style as Colwin.

One work of gastronomy repeatedly mentioned by hobbyists was *Larousse Gastronomique*. This huge—1,350 pages, eight pounds!—culinary encyclopedia was written by French chef Prosper Montagné and first published in 1938 (and translated into English in 1961). It documents the history of the culinary arts in France through alphabetically listed articles on foods, techniques, and equipment, as well as significant chefs, restaurants, and cuisines; recipes are interspersed throughout. *Larousse Gastronomique* is known for its unsettling accounts of culinary practices now out of fashion, such as the preparation of animelles (testicles) and pig's head. Still, it is considered *the* authoritative source on gourmet cooking; hobbyist Dorene remarks with a wry smile, "Whenever we want to know

something *for sure*, my husband is the first to run in and get *Larousse Gastronomique*, to check that I'm not giving him the business."

Reading Culinary Serials

All the cooks in this study have subscribed to culinary magazines. Some actively had three or more arriving per month. Cooks eagerly await new issues, and one states that she "reads them from cover to cover every month." Serials contain articles about foods with recipes and menus; reviews of equipment and restaurants; and reader exchanges or recipes and tips, among other things. They arrive just in time to supply cooking ideas as foods come into season or as holiday meals loom. Roland explains, "I love the magazine *Bon Appétit*. I don't subscribe right now, but I'll pick it up, especially at the holidays." Monthly magazines also keep the gourmet cook abreast of fashions in the gourmet cooking social world, which is constantly championing new foods, techniques, chefs, and restaurants. Mandy attests "magazines are more innovative." As they arrive month after month, serials accumulate in the homes of gourmet cooks, who are hesitant to throw them away. Usually the most recent issues are kept at hand on a coffee table or bedside and later moved to a permanent storage shelf in an office, den, or garage, to function as reference materials.

Culinary serials have roots in the earliest American women's magazines. Founded in 1866, *Harper's Bazaar* had a primary emphasis on fashion, but devoted pages to recipes and household management. *Good Housekeeping* was launched in 1885 with a sharper focus on domestic life. In 1900, the magazine established a research unit that would become The Good Housekeeping Institute, in a move to test the performance of household devices and the purity of foodstuffs. Over the course of the century, the magazine and its institute were a force to police the home products industries and champion improvements to the American diet. *Good Housekeeping* had mainstream appeal (closer to the ideals of down-home cooking), and in 1941 *Gourmet* magazine was launched with a distinctly more continental, artful, and indulgent orientation to food and cooking. Today there are dozens of food-themed magazines with nationwide circulation, and hundreds of topical or regional publications of smaller scale that, for the most part, perpetuate the elements of the original *Gourmet*. Those favored by participants in this study are profiled in table 7.2.

One culinary magazine mentioned with enthusiasm by interviewees was *Cook's Illustrated*, a relatively slim, black-and white monthly publication with no advertising or glossy photographs. Feature articles in this magazine focus on a food concept (such as apple pie) and discuss the outcomes of

Table 7.2
Survey of popular gourmet cooking magazines, drawn from an article by Wilson 2003

Magazine (launch)	Paid circulation	Frequency	Points of distinction
Gourmet (1941–2009)	983,836	Monthly; no longer published	Placed a dual focus on food and travel, with attention to ethnic, regional, and seasonal foods. Most recipes required access to specialty ingredients.
Bon Appétit (1956)	1,371,495	Monthly	Known as "America's Food and Entertaining Magazine," most articles feature menus and entertaining ideas; geared to a range of culinary skill levels.
Food & Wine (1978)	958,348	Monthly	Puts equal emphasis on food and wine; recipes utilize predominantly upscale ingredients and are designed for more advanced cooks.
Cook's Illustrated (1992)	600,000	Bimonthly	Contains no advertisements or photography, and features a strongly educational and scientific tone; emphasizes cooking technique through master recipes.
Fine Cooking (1994)	240,000	Bimonthly	Focuses on holiday and seasonal preparations and is geared to all skill levels. An emphasis on hands-on cooking is conveyed through concise directions, photos, and tips for the amateur home cook.
Saveur (1994)	381,585	Nine times per year	Celebrates food and travel, and introduces world cuisines to the amateur cook. Known for striking photography and artful design.

different versions of recipes, explicating the impact of variables such as ingredients, techniques, temperature, and cooking times. To illustrate, an article entitled "Chocolate Mousse Perfected" from the May 2006 issue described how different proportions and handling of four basic ingredients (chocolate, eggs, sugar, and fat) influenced the results. These articles lead to a recommendation for an ideal or master recipe. *Cook's Illustrated* has popularized a scientific approach to cooking and sparked a trend among publications to focus on culinary technique and principles, instead of lifestyle, and this serial is now widely imitated.

Watching Television

Television has become a popular medium for food and cooking information, and emerged from a radio model.[6] The first multimedia culinary sensation in America, Betty Crocker, was invented by flour purveyor Washburn Crosby Company in 1921. At first, Betty (actually, a team of home economists) responded by letter to homemakers with baking quandaries. In 1924 she became the star of a radio program about cooking. American gastronome James Beard is credited as the first TV cooking show host. No footage remains of his fifteen-minute program, *I Love to Eat*, which aired from 1946 to 1947 on WNBT-TV in New York, but in one surviving audio recording Beard discusses a luncheon for skiers. Another pioneer was Dione Lucas, who was the first female graduate of Le Cordon Bleu cooking academy and a renowned culinary educator; she presented *The Queen's Taste* and long-running *The Dione Lucas Cooking Show*, both broadcast in the United States by CBS. In February of 1963 public television station WGBH in Boston debuted *The French Chef*, featuring the tall (six feet, two inches), no-nonsense, and very good-humored Julia Child. Her program was a breakthrough that demystified French cuisine for regular home cooks and attracted a huge new audience to gourmet cooking.

On November 22, 1993, the landscape of culinary television changed forever, when Food Network was launched by E. W. Scripps Company with twenty-four-hour-a-day programming about cooking (Meister 2001; Ketchum 2005). At first, shows on Food Network followed the conventions set by Lucas and Child. Later in the 1990s, the concept was broadened to "all things food" such as leisure and travel, as well as reality-show formats. Food Network has contributed to the rise of chefs in popular culture. Multiple Food Network hosts with larger-than-life personalities have become celebrities with their own brand empire, such as Emeril Lagasse and Bobby Flay. Today Food Network is one of the most successful lifestyle cable channels, though recently its programs have been losing audience share to imitators as food-themed broadcasting goes mainstream.

Most of the gourmet hobby cooks in the study were enthusiastic about culinary television, in particular Food Network and its stars. Gourmet cook Roland claimed to be in love with Rachel Ray, the latest Food Network sensation. For Mandy, a turning point in her hobby career was when her parents got cable and she had access to Food Network. She says "I became a Food Network addict. I watched so much of the Food Network and I learned a lot. Not just about technical things but about combining ingredients. It was inspiring more than anything." Ken values programming on Food Network because "watching a good chef cook, watching how they use heat in a pan, *that* is what I'm looking for when I'm watching television—it is the techniques, not a recipe." At the same time, some found the Food Network shows too far removed from reality; one cook says, "I can't relate to it in my everyday cooking. It is interesting and entertaining, like Emeril, but I would not go cook their ideas." Another concurs, "I used to like Emeril but I don't like him so much anymore, he is too glitzy for me now."

Surfing the Internet

The Internet provides access to a plethora of food- and cooking-themed Web sites and online communities, which many of the cooks in this study use for inspiration and to stay informed. The heaviest user, Dorene, was the oldest at age seventy-three. She keeps an elaborate hierarchy of bookmarks in her AOL Web browser that link to her "favorite places" online. She has bookmarked collections of general culinary Web sites, newspapers with food sections, companies offering gourmet products, Web sites affiliated with culinary serials, and topical areas such as breads, chefs, pressure cookers, and restaurants. She surfs the Internet for one or two hours every day, following culinary news and gathering recipes that spark her interest. Katey participates now and then in Chowhound, an online discussion forum designed "For Those Who Love to Eat"; she reads their restaurant reviews and posts comments. Gourmet cooks in this study were more likely to use the Internet when on a mission to find a recipe, a different type of information activity discussed shortly as Launching a Cooking Episode.

Taking Cooking Classes

Cooking classes are offered in most American cities by community education programs, culinary arts institutes, and gourmet retailers. During cooking classes, a topic or recipe is introduced and then students execute it for hands-on practice; the resulting foodstuff is sampled and discussed. Often, students don't get a complete cooking experience because the educators eliminate time-consuming prep work. Roland reports, "The topic was weekend breakfasts . . . they gave us ten recipes to try. Each person

would get a recipe. We'd go back into the kitchen area and each had a workstation. Everything was all prepared and chopped up."

Some gourmet cooks in this study attended a few cooking classes, though not to the point of it being a routine. This may be because cooking classes cater to novices and this can bore the advanced gourmet cook. For instance, Nancy recounts, "The class was nice, good chef, but it was too basic, very broad for the newbie. . . . Our recipe was so easy I finished it, and then went to help others and was giving them advice and tips."

Review: Staying Informed and Inspired

To summarize, gourmet cooks stay informed and inspired through steady consumption of culinary-themed literature and media. They perform a constellation of information-intensive activities that are not tied to any particular hands-on cooking project. Rather, the experience of learning via the culinary literature and media functions as a routine and cherished part of everyday life. The extent of such activity varies across cooks and is most prevalent during the early stages of the hobby career. Above all, gourmet cooks read cookbooks and the occasional work of gastronomy and culinary fiction. Culinary serials are valued for their timely coverage of seasonal foods, holidays, and trends, while weekly newspaper columns cover local culinary scenes. Food Network provides twenty-four-hour-a-day food-themed instruction and entertainment; and the Web is yet another culinary resource. The most information-hungry gourmet cooks orchestrate all these mediums to stay well informed and inspired, providing a springboard for hands-on cooking, discussed next.

Launching a Cooking Episode

Thus far, I have presented how hobbyists develop, share, and sustain culinary knowledge. Now, I will focus on the role of information as gourmet cooks begin the hands-on cooking process.[7] Many life factors can influence the decision to enter the kitchen in hobby mode. A project may be tied to a holiday or social gathering, or inspired by a season and its produce. It could fill a window of available time such as a weekend, vacation, or snowstorm; or it could be sparked by serendipitously encountering a recipe.

Hobbyists with an itch to cook often seek *inspiration* first, not information. This may take the form of daydreaming about cooking possibilities, or browsing cookbooks, Web sites, magazines, or personal recipe files. At the start, the cook may harbor a vague sense of a food category, technique, or cuisine of interest, but there is no commitment or focus. A hobbyist

recounts this moment as, "So, I flipped through my various magazines and cookbooks . . . *what did I want to make?*" In this step, cookbooks and recipes are engaged superficially (sometimes just skimming the text or looking at pictures). The cook is in a mode of fantasy and an upbeat sense of opportunity. Nondocumentary forms of exploring are to visit markets or restaurants; ideas may come from a display of produce or a beguiling flavor encountered during a meal out. At some point the hobbyist's interest is piqued, and crystallized, resulting in a more precise vision for a cooking project such as duck a l'orange or pad thai.

Once hobbyists have committed to a food concept, they begin planning. Since gourmet cooking involves advanced culinary techniques, a necessary step is to obtain instructions—in other words, a recipe. Even for seemingly straightforward preparations, most hobbyists will consult at least one recipe. One cook explains, "I'll usually look up three or so recipes and see the common ways, then decide what to do." This sets up the moment of traditional interest in information science: the search.

A "Berrypicking" Recipe Search

Overall, the search for recipes resembles Bates's model of information "berrypicking" (1989). In this model, searching is an iterative process in which a variety of search techniques into different information repositories are used sequentially. In the same way, cooks attempt a variety of search strategies leading into different information collections. If one path fails to deliver, or if more information is desired, another is attempted. As in berrypicking, potential recipes are gathered "a bit-at-a-time" from each repository along the way. Bates asserts that during berrypicking the search query changes with each iteration. Likewise, in gourmet cooking the search experience may cause the cook to modify their original vision. For instance, a hunt for lasagna might end up with a recipe for the Italian casserole cannelloni, if along the search route a compelling reason arises to change.

Searching Home-Based Collections

A first stop for recipes typically is within arm's reach. Over the course of their lives, gourmet cooks build a culinary collection within their households. It contains cookbooks, serials, recipes, and other sorts of culinary ephemera gathered from many sources. In this study, these personal libraries varied in size from small (twenty texts) to large (one thousand-plus texts). Such a collection has advantages as the natural first stop. It is nearby and usually based in a room adjacent to the kitchen. It is relatively small and does not induce information overload. Materials have been hand

picked and organized into a schema based on the cook's own logic. The collection is familiar, since the cook has read many of the items while staying informed and inspired. Often these resources are marked with annotations, Post-it notes, bookmarks, or folded pages. Unlike a public library or bookstore, the collection is steeped in sentiment, sometimes containing cherished documentary artifacts passed through generations, such as a grandmother's recipe box.

As they go berrypicking for recipes in their personal collections, cooks apply a variety of search heuristics and techniques. They employ standard bibliographic metrics such as genre, subject, and author to isolate the most promising items to search. When they look into individual artifacts, they use tables of contents, indexes, and culinary-themed ordering principles to hone in on recipes. (An example of a culinary-themed ordering principle is the sequence of a meal—from appetizer to dessert—a common linear format for many cookbooks; another ordering principle is the seasons). A cook explains, "What happens is I'll look in the back of books, if there is a particular ingredient. I'll go through all the indexes, or look in my own recipe collection." With lasagna as one possible goal, various berrypicking strategies are:

- search within classic reference cookbooks (often this establishes a standard or benchmark), such as *Joy of Cooking*;
- search cookbooks of the appropriate subject area, such as all Italian cookbooks;
- search cookbooks of an author who is a subject authority, such as those by Italian cook Marcella Hazan;
- search personal recipe collections (on cards or pages) in fitting subject file, such as Italian, pasta or casseroles;
- search the months of serials that are appropriate (not effective for the all-season dish of lasagna, but for some seasonal foods);
- search in a personal file containing recipes that have been earmarked as promising, to see if there is a lasagna recipe.

Searching Online Recipe Databases

For some hobbyists, the Internet is the preferred resource for recipes and the starting point of a search. Millions of Web sites supply recipes posted by other hobby cooks, restaurants, product manufacturers, or ingredient marketers, among others; and most food-themed newsletters and magazines put their recipes online. Some repositories require membership fees, though most are free. Hobbyists in this study favor Web sites with recipes that embody the refined style of gourmet cuisine; a sample appears in table 7.3.

Table 7.3
A small sample of sources for gourmet-style recipes

chow.com
cookinglight.com
cooksillustrated.com
epicurious.com
foodandwine.com
foodtv.com
ichef.com
theworldwidegourmet.com
epicurean.com
marthstewartliving.com
saveur.com

By far the most popular online destination for recipes among cooks in this study is epicurious.com. It is the digital archive and index to the twenty-five thousand-plus recipes that have appeared in *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit*. Increasingly, the site serves as a clearinghouse for recipes from other magazines and cookbooks, as well as for more than seventy-five thousand recipes submitted by users. A hobbyist attests, "You can get anything online by going to epicurious.com. I do that often."

There are good reasons why epicurious.com is a favorite. Most of the recipes are rigorously pretested and employ consistent terms for ingredients, measurements, and techniques. There are striking color photographs for many items, a boon in a hobby that celebrates elegant food presentation. Frequently, recipes are presented in the context of a complete menu, geared to the gourmet cook's penchant for entertaining. Further, as already mentioned, the community of users ranks and comments upon recipes, which provides an additional level of information.

The search capabilities at epicurious.com are also state of the art, and they offer multiple access points to recipes. Searching can be done using keywords or an advanced template that makes it easy to tick off key facets such as dietary consideration, cuisine, meal/course, type of dish, season/occasion, preparation method, or main ingredient. Users can also browse through all the recipes for popular foods, or view a recipe slideshow of the best recipes in a food category.

Online resources such as epicurious.com have a number of benefits over home-based paper recipe or cookbook collections. They are free, quick, easy, and effective to search. A cook explains, "I go to the Internet. The problem with having so many cookbooks is it's hard to remember where

things are and look them up . . . [the other day] I needed a pumpkin soup recipe and just went online. I probably do that more often than not." Online recipes can be custom formatted (as cards or full pages) and then printed to use in the kitchen; these documents are treated as disposable and can be marked up, splattered on, and thrown away since it is easy to reprint next time. Conveniently, the Web sites can be accessed while away from home or at work. Sara says, "I use the computer more [for recipes] because it is in front of me at work all day. I'll do it on my lunch break or while waiting for a fax."

Googling for Recipes

Some cooks in this study use the Google search engine to locate recipes. Google functions more as an Internet portal, leading to other online recipe collections or to recipes directly. Sara says, "If I am cooking something unusual, I'll just enter it into Alta Vista or Google, and I can get so many hits, hundreds and hundreds of pages." Since these searches can return a mixed bag of hits, Tom prefers a Google image search. He explains, "I wanted to make cantaloupe soup. I went to Google, and if you do an 'image' search on Google, you get pictures and this ferrets out a lot of [irrelevant, low-quality] things. So the recipe is not mixed with other stuff. And clicking on the image takes you right to the site."

Tapping a "Grapevine"

In a minority of cases, cooks turn to friends and family to acquire recipes. Gourmet cook Claire calls this her "grapevine," which serves as a first stop during recipe searching. "I go to them for recipes. I love to eat their food. I know that if they recommend it, it will be yummy." When Roland sought to make a traditional French-Canadian tortilla (pork pie), he reached out to friends: "We collected recipes from French friends. I asked people to pass me their tortilla recipes. All the recipes were different, some with pork, hamburger, potato, and different spices. We gathered about a hundred different recipes, counting those from the Internet, too."

After the Search

Gourmet cooks gather several recipes through their searching and often compare them. Dorene states, "I like to check recipe against recipe and I'll know just what it is that I want." Recipes are not considered indelible and some cooks will change them in various ways, but this tinkering is likely performed more often by advanced hobbyists. Sometimes, two or more recipes can be amalgamated to bring together their best features. When

making a Thanksgiving dessert Rose recounts, "One recipe called for pumpkin cheesecake, plain. The other was chocolate pumpkin cheesecake with a pecan topping. I didn't want the chocolate. I thought, 'Why don't I follow the pumpkin cheesecake recipe and take the idea of the topping from the other recipe?' And I did that." Once committed to a recipe (or recipes, if a more elaborate project is planned), hobbyists go into the kitchen and continue to *use* culinary information in various ways—a distinct, complex, and fascinating practice that is outside the scope of this chapter.

Review: Launching a Cooking Episode

To recap, one of the most information intensive moments in the hobby of gourmet cooking occurs when launching a cooking episode. Fueled by a desire to cook and to have a life rich with cooking experiences, hobbyists explore the culinary literature and environments for hands-on opportunities. When a food concept captures their interest, they conduct a recipe search. They use a berrypicking strategy that entails multiple probes into different information repositories. Home-based collections are a typical first stop and the Internet is another favorite recipe trove; in a berrypicking mode, many cooks search *both*. Recipes that meet the cook's needs are gathered, compared, and sometimes amended before being implemented in the kitchen.

Information Age Innovations

Over the past decade, Information Age innovations have diversified the resources and tools available to cooks, and in turn they have generated new information-gathering practices. Already, this chapter has mentioned how gourmet cooks tap the Internet for recipes, and how the home computer is employed to follow culinary trends and communicate with other cooks. Practices such as these have been well assimilated into the hobby of gourmet cooking.

This exploratory ethnography did not generate any definitive statistics on the use of such contemporary approaches versus the "traditional" forms of paper recipes and cookbooks. In the sample of twenty informants, a few favored online resources almost exclusively, while an equal number displayed an attachment to paper sources. *Most* cooks in this study were strategic users of *both* mediums. Hobbyists tend to reach for the resource that suits the moment. To illustrate, if they are on a break at work, they may hop onto epicurious.com; on a lazy afternoon at home, they will curl up with a favorite cookbook. One thing is certain: the universe of culinary

information is constantly changing. In this final section a few of the latest innovations are profiled.

A new culinary genre has emerged: the "cook-through" blog (Gomes 2008). In this writing style, a blogger picks a seminal or noteworthy cookbook and implements every recipe sequentially and reports the adventure online. Readers follow the trials and tribulations in detail through both narrative and images. The first of this kind was The Julie/Julia Project, when in 2002 hobbyist Julie Powell cooked all the recipes from *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* by Julia Child and collaborators, and reported the experience online. Powell's blog gained a following, was adapted to a bestselling book, and later became a movie starring Meryl Streep as Julia Child. Today, there are hundreds of cook-through blogs and the Web site Cooking the Books (http://cookthroughblogroll.blogspot.com/) serves as a clearinghouse.

In some circles, Twitter, the social networking tool that broadcasts short messages about daily happenings, is being used to disseminate recipes (Downes 2009). The catch is that "tweets" (Twitter postings) must not contain more than 140 characters—far fewer than the typical recipe. The hobby cook who launched this trend, Maureen Evans, relishes the challenge of reducing the complex ingredients, actions, quantities, times, and temperatures of a recipe into the essentials, such as: ⟨*Strudel Pastry: cut2Tbutter/1cflour/mash tater. Knead w 2t yeast/2T h20; rise 1h. On flour cloth gently pull 17x25"; trim-1"/butter well*⟩. In their reduced form, recipes become a puzzle to decode, adding a playful challenge to the cooking process. Those of Evans's six thousand fans who actually implement the "tiny recipes" attest that they really do work.

The cell phone has become, for some, the ultimate cooking technology (Moskin 2009). Cooks use it to keep grocery lists, search for recipes, photograph handiwork, convert ingredients, keep time, and conduct research. Fans of the approach say it is handy, familiar, and a quick kitchen tool, and ever more software products and Web sites are advancing the trend. *Grocery iQ* and *Jot* are applications for making shopping lists and *Eggy* is a cute cell phone widget for producing perfect hard-boiled eggs. BigOven.com, a Web site with 167,000 recipes, has a free iPhone application that has been downloaded more than a million times. The most sophisticated phone technology comes from food manufacturer Kraft (not a favored supplier to the gourmet set); their *iFood Assistant* features a GPS that directs users to stores carrying desired ingredients.

New Web-based products are breaking down the traditional barrier between professional culinary knowledge and the home cook (Chernova 2006). *Chefs Line* is a service that links trained chefs with paying customers to troubleshoot kitchen problems in real time, take cooking lessons, and

design menus. On a smaller scale, the Web site Chef.com answers culinary email questions for free. Some restaurants invite Web-based communication with their chef as a means to build loyalty and encourage the love of food and cooking. Interestingly, the consulting role performed by professional chefs in these services is performed by hobby cooks to less skilled family and friends.

Finally, fantastical projects have been underway in the basement of MIT's media lab, by the Counter Intelligence Research Group (http://www.media.mit.edu/ci/research-index.html). This technologically oriented culinary think tank aims to produce the next-generation "smart" kitchen. The group's prototype CounterActive (Ju et al. 2001) is an interactive information system that projects recipes onto a countertop. The glowing recipes contain hyperlinks that lead to background details in an effort to "enhance the experience of cooking." The inventors claim, "This is the first computerized recipe system we have seen that not only expands on the conventional cookbook by incorporating pictures, audio, and video, but also deals better with being covered with spilled milk" (Bell and Kaye 2002, 55). Another innovative culinary technology (still in development) is the Living Cookbook (Terrenghi, Hilliges, and Butz 2007). In this system, cooks narrate and explain their cooking experience in the form of a "kitchen story" that is videotaped live and made available to others. The goal of Living Cookbook is to capture the social nature of cooking and to transfer culinary knowledge from one generation to the next. These futuristic technologies from creative academics and inventors may have uncertain outcomes, but they surely stir the imagination.

Conclusion

The hobby of gourmet cooking entails the preparation of food using high-quality or exotic ingredients and advanced culinary techniques. As a form of serious leisure, it is pursued by millions of Americans in free time and for pleasure. Gourmet cooks favor an orderly cooking process and strive for delicious, artful results that are often shared with family and friends. A vast multimedia information universe underlies this hobby. In an effort to make sense of the information phenomena therein, this chapter draws upon ethnographic fieldwork with twenty gourmet hobby cooks. Four contexts of information activities and their associated information resources have been outlined.

To review, through the context Living a Gourmet Lifestyle, routine events of the hobbyist's life are oriented to culinary matters. Trips to restaurants, vacations in exotic places, food shopping, and relationships with

like-minded friends are used as opportunities to learn about food and cooking. In the Expressing Culinary Expertise context, hobbyists share culinary acumen with family, friends, and the public. Cooks enjoy rescuing others from kitchen debacles and play a consulting role in the design of meals, menus, and parties. Hobbyists sometimes teach family and friends to cook through simple demonstrations or informal classes. Online communities and blogs are yet another means to opine about culinary matters. The Staying Informed and Inspired context involves frequent engagement with the literature and media of cooking. These activities are not preparation for a cooking event, but rather are self-directed learning for its own sake. The array of strategies is broad; gourmet cooks read cookbooks, culinary magazines, and works on gastronomy; they watch food-themed television and surf the Internet. Finally, a most information-intensive moment in the hobby occurs in the Launching a Culinary Episode context—the tasks that precede hands-on cooking. At this time, cooks conduct a berrypicking search in personal collections and online resources to gather recipes, formulate menus, and obtain specifications on techniques or ingredients. Though isolated here for analytical purposes, in reality, these four contexts overlap with one another, and blend into the hobby and everyday life.

A different perspective is to view information phenomena in this hobby longitudinally across the lives of individual cooks. All hobbyists experience a continuous leisure career (Stebbins 2001b, 9–10) with turning points and increasing ability. At the beginning is a steep learning curve, lasting a few years, in which cooks strive to master the fundamentals of ingredients and techniques. This often entails an experimental sensibility in the kitchen, repetitive hands-on practice, and voracious reading (elsewhere called Staying Informed and Inspired). Once hobbyists have mastered the basics, they enter a long-running period of deeper study of different cuisines, techniques, or ingredients, one at a time. For instance, cooks in this project described focusing on "Japanese cookery," "baking," or "chocolate" for a time, before moving onto another subject. These topical pursuits keep the hobby fresh and engage a constant stream of new information resources. During the later stages of the hobby career, when cooks are confident and accomplished, information consumption often declines, and attention shifts to sharing expertise with others.

Given these patterns, the hobby of gourmet cooking is an interesting case study into everyday-life information phenomena, and the nature of culinary knowledge, specifically. This project creates a vantage point to reflect on the informational issues tied to food, cooking, and eating outside the leisure context, a matter with huge cultural, social, and economic

implications. The past half-century has seen a steady decline in home cooking, and increasing consumption of less nutritious processed, take-away, or restaurant foods. As a result, upcoming generations have not witnessed cooking firsthand, and may experience "culinary illiteracy" and its associated health problems. It is timely to ask: What is culinary knowledge? Is it being lost? How can it be captured and disseminated? While this chapter did not focus upon these sweeping changes and important questions, it establishes useful concepts and a point of comparison to one population that savors culinary information and knowledge to its fullest.

Acknowledgments

This chapter is drawn from dissertation research and was made possible by my committee: Greg Leazer (chair), Mary Niles Maack, Leah Lievrouw, Sanna Talja, and the late Melvin Pollner. I am also indebted to Robert A. Stebbins for support and inspiration over the years. Thanks also to the editors of this collection for feedback and guidance, and to Ashleigh Burnet for help in preparing the manuscript.

Notes

1. Marjorie DeVault provides an introduction to the work women perform to feed their families in *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Several other texts offer sociologically oriented insights into cooking in its non-hobby form: namely, Short 2006, Symons 2000, Haber 2002, and Levenstein 2003.

2. Conde Nast stopped publication of Gourmet magazine in 2009, but continued the brand on the Web site http://www.gourmet.com/.

3. In addition to the four contexts discussed in this paper, my dissertation (Hartel 2007) described "Using Information During a Cooking Episode" (Hartel 2006) and "Managing a Personal Culinary Library" (publication forthcoming).

4. The history of the cookbook in America is a fascinating story. Starting points for this subject are Neuhaus 2002 and the online collection of Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project, http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/index.html, accessed May 1, 2009, a digital archive of seventy-six of the most important and influential American cookbooks from the late eighteenth century to early twentieth century.

5. The use of recipes in novels is the topic of an essay by Sceats 2003 and is included in a collection of academic writings on recipes available in *The Recipe Reader: Narratives, Contexts, Traditions* (2003).

6. This section draws from the detailed history of culinary television shows available in Collins 2009.

7. In Hartel 2006, I model the cooking process as a nine-step episode and describe the use of information throughout; this chapter focuses on the first two steps of the episode.

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8 The Transformation of Public Information in the United States

Gary Chapman and Angela Newell

Introduction

The United States has always been a country in which public access to government information has been both a widely shared value as well as a source of political conflict. What government information the public should be able to access, and what should not be shared, falls into the category of what political scientists call "essentially contested concepts," such as the character of democracy or the appropriate use of force. Struggles over sensitive information held by the government have long been part of the tumultuous political history of the United States, while at the same time public access to government information has dramatically expanded over the course of the nation's history. The United States is a world leader in freedom of information and has been the source of major revolutions in this concept, particularly in the era of the Internet, which was invented in the United States and originally launched with federal government funding. But this leading position in freedom of access to government information has also had the paradoxical effect of highlighting, by contrast, what the government withholds from public access, so that these cases tend to become more contentious and significant than they might be in a country with less open access.

This conflict, or constant friction, between open access to government information and cases of sensitive information withheld from public access, is entering a new and uncertain phase because of the effects of globally networked information on the Internet. President Barack Obama signaled the significance of this issue with his first official acts as president, when he signed two presidential memoranda on freedom of information and open government, on Inauguration Day, January 21, 2009. Since then, the Obama administration has launched several initiatives on the World Wide Web that represent new ways for the public to see and query what