

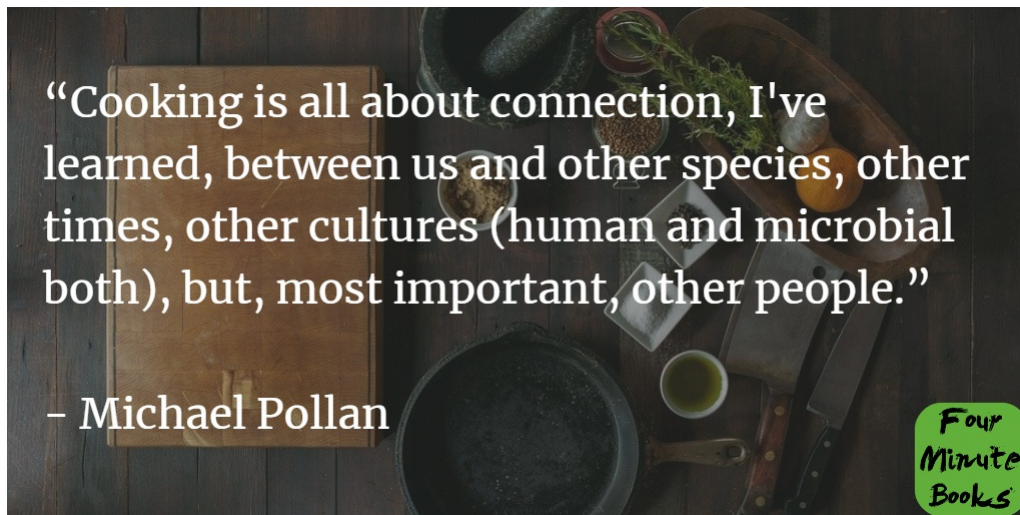
Cooked Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Cooked* is a historical exploration of the human relationship with food and cooking, combined with practical ideas on how to improve your diet by preparing more of your own food.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Cooking is an activity that we usually take for granted in our daily lives. But, as Michael Pollan rightly points out in *Cooked*, humans are the only animals that cook their food. What's more, this habit has connections with our evolution and civilization's history.

Pollan is known for his other best-selling books on human eating habits, such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma* or *In Defense of Food*. With *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, he shows that the way we prepare our meals has been a defining trait of the human race.

For example, cooked food has frees nutrients from grains, meat or eggs that were previously indigestible to us. Over time, this resulted in using crops and prey much more efficiently. Over time we've learned how to extract more nutritional value from smaller amounts on food. This helps us preserve time and energy to move our civilization forward.

Here are 3 lessons I found at the intersection of diet, culture and history:

1. Statistically speaking, the less you cook, the more unhealthy your diet is.
2. Bread is more nutritious than the sum of its parts.
3. Alcohol is enjoyed by many in the animal kingdom.

Are you excited learn how cooking has been shaping human lives for the past millennia?
Let's explore!

Lesson 1: The amount of time spent in the kitchen is inversely correlated with health issues.

For the longest time, cooking has made human lives better. It enabled us to eat and digest a wider range of foods. This too also helped us preserve them to be consumed at a later date. It also provided an occasion for social bonding and enjoying meals together.

In the modern world, however, cooking seems to have become redundant. As the processed foods industry exploded after World War II, people in Western societies have been bombarded by instant meals and fast-food choices. It was supposed to make our lives more convenient and save us time spent cooking.

But what good does it do to save a bit of time, when most instant foods provide close to zero nutritional value?

This is the case because food providers often "fill up" their products with loads of sugar, salt and fat – first, to lower their costs, and second, to make them taste better. The food industry is business like any other and the point is to make money. However, the profits often come at the cost of public health.

Pollan cites a Harvard study, according to which the more time people spend cooking their own food, the better their health. Conversely, consuming lots of processed food and hence neglecting to cook their own food was correlated with overall poorer health – obesity in particular.

It seems like the simplest way to ensure a healthy diet is preparing your own meals as often as possible.

Lesson 2: Baking bread "unlocks" nutrients that would be otherwise indigestible by the human body.

Bread is one of the most important staple foods in a lot of cultures around the world. And there are good reasons it ranks so high in so many people's diets.

In paleolith, our ancestors already consumed a variety of grains coming from wild grasses. These were the only parts of the plant that were digestible by the human body. But with time, early agricultural societies found that when seeds were soaked, mashed or roasted, they appeared to make for a more satisfying meal.

The true breakthrough, however, occurred in Egypt around 4000 BC, when a bowl of mashed seeds was once left in a warm place and started to ferment. Some smart chef – the inventor of the bread! – decided to put such dough in an oven to see what happens. That's how the first loaf in history was baked.

Soon enough, bread became a widely eaten staple. **That's because it was immediately apparent that grains processed in such a way provided a much higher nutritional value than when eaten raw.** Later on, modern science explained that it is the process of yeast fermentation that simply "unlocks" a lot of nutrients that the human body couldn't absorb otherwise.

It is important to mention at this point that it is *whole grain bread* that Pollan means here. White bread doesn't provide nearly the same nutritional value, as it is deprived of the most precious ingredients.

Bread, however, is not the only common product that people enjoy thanks to fermentation. Another one is alcohol.

Lesson 3: Alcohol is an indulgence well-known to the animal kingdom.

The natural process of fermentation allows people to enjoy bread, pickles and even coffee. It also enables humans to produce alcohol for all different purposes – entertainment being the primary one. **But the fondness to get tipsy is by no means a human domain – other animals enjoy it, too.**

Pollan says that alcohol is the most popular fermented food in the animal kingdom. The difference is that humans produce it on purpose, while other species simply find it in nature.

For example, when a durian fruit falls down from a tree and starts to rot, soon enough there are a lot of visitors coming to enjoy it – including rhinos, tigers and wild pigs. Some flowers in Malaysia also provide a daily portion of alcohol to their pollinators.

There is scientific evidence that, to some species, alcohol is more than just "entertainment" – they actually use it to their survival advantage. One study showed that certain flies use alcohol to protect their young ones from body snatchers. In another, laboratory rats that were given champagne performed better on memory tests.

Seeing that a variety of species in nature seem to benefit from small doses on alcohol may change our human perspective on drinking. Maybe it is perfectly natural and even beneficial to enjoy a glass of wine every once in a while? It seems that, like with many other things in life, the question of moderation is key here.

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Cooked Review

What a refreshing perspective on the seemingly simple act of cooking! Reading *Cooked* pretty much forces you to reflect on your eating habits and rituals, and uncovers a whole new world of possibility to enrich your diet. Additionally, it is infused with multi generational knowledge about eating well, which can inspire you to experiment in your kitchen in ways you have never done before.

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Who would I recommend the Cooked summary to?

The 32-year-old foodie who is excited about testing new recipes, the 51-year-old chef who is looking for fresh cooking inspiration, and to anyone willing to eat healthy without compromising on the taste of meals.