



by sarah bowen, sinikka elliott, and joslyn brenton

It's a hot, sticky Fourth of July in North Carolina, and Leanne, a married working-class black mother of three, is in her cramped kitchen. She's been cooking for several hours, lovingly preparing potato salad, beef ribs, chicken legs, and collards for her family. Abruptly, her mother decides to leave before eating anything. "But you haven't eaten," Leanne says. "You know I prefer my own potato salad," says her mom. She takes a plateful to go anyway.

Her 7-year-old son takes medication for ADHD and often isn't hungry until it wears off, usually right before bedtime. Leanne's 1-year-old daughter gets fussy when her mom cooks, and looks for attention. Her husband doesn't offer much help; his contribution involves pouring barbecue sauce on the ribs, which Leanne calls "working his magic." Leanne wipes her brow and mutters to herself about the \$80 she spent on ingredients. By the time she's finished cooking, she says, "I don't want to eat!"

In the fight to combat rising obesity rates, modern-day food gurus advocate a return to the kitchen. Michael Pollan, author of *Cooked*, and America's most influential "foodie-intellectual," tells us that the path to reforming the food system "passes right through the kitchen." *New York Times*' food columnist Mark Bittman agrees, saying the goal should be "to get people to see cooking as a joy rather than a burden." Magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and television personalities like Rachael Ray offer practical cooking advice to get Americans into the kitchen, publishing recipes for 30-minute meals and meals that can be made in the slow-cooker. First lady Michelle Obama has also been influential in popularizing public health messages that emphasize the role that mothers play when it comes to helping children make healthy choices.

The message that good parents—and in particular, **good mothers—cook for their families dovetails with increasingly intensive and unrealistic standards of “good” mothering.** According to the sociologist Sharon Hays, to be a **good mom today, a woman must demonstrate intense devotion to her children. One could say that home-cooked meals have become the hallmark of good mothering, stable families, and the ideal of the healthy, productive citizen.**

Yet in reality, home-cooked meals rarely look this good. Leanne, for example, who held down a minimum-wage job while taking classes for an associate's degree, often spent her valuable time preparing meals, only to be rewarded with family members' complaints—or disinterest. Our extensive observations

and interviews with mothers like Leanne reveal something that often gets overlooked: cooking is fraught.

feeding the family

Over the past year and a half, our research team conducted in-depth interviews with 150 black, white, and Latina mothers from all walks of life. We also spent over 250 hours conducting ethnographic observations with 12 working-class and poor families. We observed them in their homes as they prepared and ate meals, and tagged along on trips to the grocery store and to their children's check-ups. Sitting around the kitchen table and getting a feel for these women's lives, we came to appreciate the complexities involved in feeding a family.

Cooking is at times joyful, but it is also filled with time pressures, tradeoffs designed to save money, and the burden of pleasing others.

While Pollan and others wax nostalgic about a time when people grew their own food and sat around the dinner table eating it, they fail to see all of the invisible labor that goes into planning, making, and coordinating family meals. Cooking is at times joyful, but it is also filled with time pressures, tradeoffs designed to save money, and the burden of pleasing others.

Wanda and her husband Marquan, working-class black parents of two young girls, were constantly pressed for time. Both were employed by the same fast food chain, but in different rural locations 45 minutes apart. They depended on Wanda's mother, who lived 30 minutes away, for childcare. During the five weeks we spent with them, their car was broken down and since they did not have enough money to repair it, they relied on a complex network of friends and family members for rides. Their lives were further complicated by the fact that they didn't know their weekly schedules—what hours, shifts, or even days they would be working—until they were posted, sometimes only



EthanSportsSuburban

the night before. Once they learned their shifts, they scrambled to figure out transportation and childcare arrangements.

Wanda liked her job, but her unpredictable schedule made it difficult to cook regular meals the way she wanted to. This time dilemma was also hard for Leanne, who worked for the same fast food corporation as Wanda and Marquan, but in an urban area that lacked reliable public transportation. Sometimes, Leanne would take a taxi to work only to find out that business was slow and she was not needed. At other times, she was asked

work at home, women today have less free time than they did a generation ago; and, in line with heightened expectations of motherhood, they now report spending more time engaged in childcare than did mothers in the 1960s. It's not surprising that they struggle to find time to cook.

And, of course, cooking isn't just about the time it takes to prepare the meal. It also involves planning ahead to be sure the ingredients are on hand, and it means cleaning up afterwards. Samantha, a single white mother of three, was blunt when we asked her if she liked cooking. "Not really," she said. "I just hate the kitchen...having to come up with a meal and put it together. I know I can cook but it's the planning of the meal, and seeing if they're going to like it, and the mess that you make. And then the mess afterwards...If it was up to me, I wouldn't cook."

Though the mothers we met were squeezed for time, they were still expected to produce elaborate meals cooked from scratch. Even the middle-class women we talked with, who enjoyed regular work hours and typically shared the household work with a partner, said they lacked the time to cook the way they felt they should. Most got home from work around six o'clock, and then attempted to cook meals from scratch (as the experts advise) while their children clamored for their attention.

While some wax nostalgic about a time when people grew their own food and sat around the dinner table eating it, they fail to see the invisible labor that goes into family meals.

to work late. Because of this, Leanne and her family had no set meal time: cooking and eating were often catch-as-catch-can.

Wanda and Leanne's situation is increasingly common. As real wages have stagnated, many households depend on every adult family member working, sometimes in multiple jobs and jobs with nonstandard and unpredictable hours, to make ends meet. Since the 1960s, working women have cut back on household tasks, including cooking and cleaning, according to sociologist Liana Sayer. Even so, balancing paid work and unpaid



James Vaughan



James Vaughan

between time and money

Greely, a married middle-class white mother of one child, had recently started her own catering company. She was working long hours during the week to get her business off the ground, and reasoned that taking time on the weekend to prep vegetables and lunches would help her create ideal meals. She explained, "I feel [that] when I have the time I enjoy cooking. And when it's so compressed and after a stressful day, it's kind of horrible. I feel like, because I'm not able to spend as much time with Adelle now, I don't want to spend an hour cooking after I pick her up from school every day. You know, like it's sometimes, but I want to be able to sit down and help her with her homework or help her finish her Valentines for her classmates or whatever that may be. I was supposed to soak black-eyed peas last night and I forgot."

The mothers we met who were barely paying the bills routinely cooked—contrary to the stereotype that poor families mainly eat fast food—because it was more economical. Isis, a poor single black mother, told us that she got tired of cooking, but continued to do so to save money. "If I don't cook then they'll go get something out to eat," she said. "But then that's wasting money."

Yet being poor makes it nearly impossible to enact the foodie version of a home-cooked meal. The ingredients that go into meals considered to be healthy—fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats—are expensive. A recent study of food prices around the globe found that it costs \$1.50 more per day—or about \$550 a year per person—to eat a healthier diet than a less healthy diet.

The cost of healthy ingredients is not the only barrier. Many of the poor mothers we met also lacked reliable transportation, and therefore typically shopped just once a month. As a result, they avoided buying fresh produce, which spoiled quickly. Mothers also struggled to prepare meals in small trailers or apartments with minimal space. We observed homes without kitchen tables or functional appliances, infested by bugs and

rats, and lacking basic kitchen tools like sharp knives, cutting boards, pots and pans.

The idea that home cooking is inherently ideal reflects an elite foodie standpoint. Romantic depictions of cooking assume that everyone has a home, that family members are home eating at the same time, and that kitchens and dining spaces are equipped and safe. This is not necessarily the case for the families we met.

During the month we spent with Flora, a poor black mother who was currently separated from her husband, she was living with her daughter and two grandchildren in a cockroach- and flea-infested hotel room with two double beds. They prepared all of their food in a small microwave, rinsing their utensils in the bathroom sink. Many of the families we met lived in trailers or homes with thin walls that provided little protection from the outside elements. Some homes had holes in the floor or walls, making it nearly impossible to keep pests out. Claudia, a married Latina mother of four, was battling a serious ant invasion in her

Being poor makes it nearly impossible to enact the foodie version of a home-cooked meal.

home. She watched in horror as the ant poison her 12-year-old son was scattering around the trailer's perimeter drifted through an open window and settled on the food she was preparing at the kitchen counter.

Still mothers felt responsible for preparing healthy meals for their children and keenly experienced the gap between the romanticized version of cooking and the realities of their lives. When asked what an "ideal world" would look like for her, Ruth, a widowed black mother of two, said she would like to have a bigger house that included a "bigger stove, and kitchen, and refrigerator so I can cook a little more and do what I need to do to cook healthier. Give me the money to provide for them a little healthier." With more money and space, Ruth could cook the elaborate meals she loves.



EthansSportSuburban

To our surprise, many of the middle-class mothers we met also told us that money was a barrier to preparing healthy meals. Even though they often had household incomes of more than \$100,000 a year, their membership in the middle-class was costly. While they did not experience food shortages, they were forced to make tradeoffs in order to save money—like buying less healthy processed food, or fewer organic items than they would like. For low-income mothers, the tradeoffs are starker: they skipped meals, or spent long hours in line at food pantries or applying for assistance, to make sure their children had enough to eat.

food fights

"I don't need it. I don't want it. I never had it," exclaimed 4-year-old Rashan when his mom served him an unfamiliar side dish. Rashan's reaction was not uncommon. We rarely observed a meal in which at least one family member didn't complain about the food they were served. Some mothers coaxed their children to eat by playing elaborate games or by hand-feeding them. One middle-class mother even set a timer, telling her son that he had to eat as much of what was on his plate as he could before the time ran out. Feeding others involves taking multiple preferences into consideration, and balancing time and money constraints.

Rather than risk trying new and expensive foods that might prove unpopular, many low-income mothers opted to cook the same foods again and again. They reasoned that it was better to stick with foods (often processed) that they knew their families would eat, rather than risk wasting money and food.

Giselle, a single black mother of two, worked two part-time jobs to make ends meet. There was little room in the food budget to experiment with new or expensive foods. When it came to decide what to make for supper, Giselle played it safe. She explained, "Because I don't want to cook something [they won't like] because I'll like waste the food. Right? Waste the food."

Low-income mothers tended to avoid using recipes, because the ingredients were expensive and they weren't sure if their families would like the new dishes. Instead, they continued to make what was tried and true, even if they didn't like the food themselves. Sandy, a white mother of two, tried hard to cook around her boyfriend's preferences. She liked fish, but her boyfriend didn't. So she ignored her food interests in order to "do something for my whole house." Sociologist Marjorie DeVault also found in her book *Feeding the Family* that women considered men's needs, sometimes above all others, when it came to preparing meals.

For middle-class mothers, cooking was about more than negotiating preferences for certain foods. They felt that offering



new foods was crucial for developing their kids' palates—even if the process sometimes led to food fights. Their stories suggest that cooking like Pollan and other experts prescribe is time-consuming and stressful. Some spent significant amounts of time reading the literature on the latest and best healthy foods, seeking out and trading new healthy recipes, and **reworking the food budget to include more organic food—leading to greater anxiety about cooking and serving food.**

For Elaine, a married white mother of one child, cooking involved high stakes. She and her husband worked full-time, and Elaine's efforts to make meals from scratch rarely ended happily. She spent time prepping food on the weekends in order to cook ideal meals during the week. She explained, "When we get home it's such a rush. I just don't know what happens to the time. I am so frustrated. That's why I get so angry! I get frustrated 'cause I'm like, I wanna make this good meal that's really healthy and I like to cook 'cause it's kind of my way to show them that I love them, 'This is my love for you guys!' And then I wind up at the end just, you know, grrr! Mad at the food because it takes me so long. It's like, how can it take an hour for me to do this when I've already cut up the carrots and the celery and all I'm doing is shoving it into a bowl?"

Even the extensive prep work that Elaine did on the weekends didn't translate into a relaxing meal during the weekday. Instead, like so many mothers, Elaine felt frustrated and inadequate about not living up to the ideal home-cooked meal. Their stories suggest that utopian family meals are nearly impossible to create, no matter how hard mothers try.

thinking outside the kitchen

The vision of the family meal that today's food experts are whipping up is alluring. Most people would agree that it would be nice to slow down, eat healthfully, and enjoy a home-cooked meal. However, our research leads us to question why the front-line in reforming the food system has to be in someone's kitchen. The emphasis on home cooking ignores the time pressures, financial constraints, and feeding challenges that shape the family meal. Yet this is the widely promoted standard to which

all mothers are held. Our conversations with mothers of young children show us that this **emerging standard is a tasty illusion, one that is moralistic, and rather elitist, instead of a realistic vision of cooking today.** Intentionally or not, it places the burden of a healthy home-cooked meal on women.

So let's move this conversation out of the kitchen, and brainstorm more **creative solutions for sharing the work of feeding families.** How about a revival of monthly town suppers, or **healthy food trucks?** Or perhaps we should rethink how we do **meals in schools and workplaces, making lunch an opportunity for savoring and sharing food.** Could schools offer to-go meals that families could easily heat up on busy weeknights? Without creative solutions like these, suggesting that we return to the kitchen en masse will do little more than increase the burden so many women already bear.

recommended resources

Alkon, Alison, Daniel Block, Kelly Moore, Catherine Gillis, Nicole DiNuccio, and Noel Chavez. "Foodways of the Urban Poor," *Geoforum* (2013), 48: 126–135. Argues that cost, not lack of knowledge or physical distance to food stores, is the primary barrier to healthy food access, and that low-income people employ a wide variety of strategies to obtain the foods they prefer at prices they can afford.

Cairns, Kate, Josée Johnston, and Norah MacKendrick. "Feeding the 'Organic Child': Mothering Through Ethical Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2013), 13: 97–118. These authors coin the term "organic child," and find that middle-class mothers preserve the purity and safety of their children through the purchase of organic foods.

DeVault, Marjorie. *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (University of Chicago Press, 1991). Argues that cooking (and "food work" more generally) is a form of care work that helps to maintain class and gender divisions.

Guthman, Julie. "Can't Stomach It: How Michael Pollan et al. Made Me Want to Eat Cheetos," *Gastronomica* (2007) 7(2): 75–79. Critiques proponents of the local food movement for reinforcing apolitical and elite values, while offering no suggestions for how to change the food system in an inclusive way.

Hays, Sharon. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Yale University Press, 1996). An important book on the expectations modern mothers face to spend intensive amounts of time and energy raising their children.

Sayer, Liana. "Gender, Time, and Inequality: Trends in Women's and Men's Paid Work, Unpaid Work, and Free Time," *Social Forces* (2005), 84: 285–303. Uses nationally representative time use data from 1965, 1975, and 1998 to analyze trends and gender differences in time use.

Sarah Bowen and **Sinikka Elliott** are in the sociology and anthropology department at North Carolina State University. Their current work focuses on food access among low-income families. **Joslyn Brenton** recently earned her PhD in sociology at North Carolina State University. This fall, she will be in the sociology department at Ithaca College. She does research on families, food, and health. This article was authored by all of them equally.