

Why you should cook to save yourself

Marriage in the village in the old days was a conspiratorial affair between girls, young men and their close friends.

Girls were deemed old enough if they could mash a boiled *mukimo* dish of greens, potatoes, legumes, maize and sometimes bananas in an earthenware pot without breaking the pot.

Breaking a pot when mashing was enough to cause the girl to be banished back to her mother for further instruction and training.

Sometimes this was serious and reason enough to annul a marriage. Roasting yams, sweet potatoes and bananas was common especially among boys as they looked after cattle, sheep and goats in the rural bushes — and with a gourd of sour milk, one's day was made. The roasted tubers would sometimes be cleaned using partly burnt maize-cobs.

Cooking today in modern kitchens is a high tech electric and electromagnetic affair.

Electricity, cooking gas and microwaves are common in modern homes and eateries. Food processing has developed to such levels of sophistication that we are in a processed food culture.

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Present day parents will only eat what they recognise and many are going to live on fast foods. Granted, food must be cooked sometimes to make it tasty, more easily digested and to



GOOD LIVING

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eliminate germs. Cooking sometimes disarms toxic substances in raw food and reduces the hardness of food, making it easy to chew. The kitchen can be considered a chemical laboratory that has fire as the important agent of transformation that acts on foods.

Inconveniences of cooking include loss of nutrients, especially vitamins and minerals in vegetables, denaturing of proteins and

carbonising of starches by the extremes of temperatures while fats oxidize to harmful substances like transformation to trans-fatty acids that are cholesterol forming. A loss of enzymes occurs in live foods.

Preparing foods at very high temperatures causes formation of toxic substances deleterious to the body and cooking very acidic foods in metal, copper and aluminium based utensils can cause chronic poisoning when these dissolve into the food.

For instance, the incidence of

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lung cancer is quite high among Chinese women, even those that don't smoke. The National Cancer Institute of America collaborated in an epidemiological study to unearth the causative factors of the tumours and found that the kitchen's smoke that the Chinese women inhaled contains carcinogens due to the grape-seed and soy oils used, which are very polyunsaturated and decompose easily at the high cooking temperatures of 280°C and above.

Hagerman G in 1991 showed that rats developed tumours when fed on fried foods and the Social Security Institute in Finland conducted a follow-up review of all cancer cases presented over a 24-year period in 1994 and showed that fried meat increased risk of breast cancer and endometrial and ovarian cancers in women.

For legumes, cooking is clearly beneficial as the protease inhibitors and hemagglutinins they contain which prevent them from being eaten raw are destroyed by soaking, cooking and even sprouting. A species of a pea that is very drought resist-

ant, *Lathyrus sativus*, which is used in times of drought causes paralysis of the nervous system, lathyrism. If it is properly cooked it loses its toxicity.

When cooking legumes with a pressure cooker, one needs to be careful as saponin in legumes creates dense foam that can obstruct the escape valve of the pressure cooker.

When cooking vegetables, one needs to use as little water as possible to minimise the loss of vitamins and minerals and it is preferable if one places vegetables in boiling water. Soaking and heating eliminates anti-nutritive ingredients in cereals such as phytates.

The advent of new cooking methods will mean that present day parents will have to adapt to new food processing methods whose danger can only be established with time. Science has a responsibility to make known these dangers as they are established. Since a well nourished child is likely to be a studious one, many schools should see food, not as a cost to be cut but an integral ingredient of good schooling and plan school meals well in advance. The village wisdom of roasting, boiling and mashing may not be sophisticated but served the test of marriageability and may need to be preserved to increase the value of processed food. And boys and girls can continue befriending one another after testing for HIV.

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