PRESSURE COOKER

Why Home Cooking Won't Solve Our Problems and What We Can Do About It

Sarah Bowen
Joslyn Brenton
Sinikka Elliott

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1 INTRODUCTION

(BACK) TO THE KITCHEN?

It started with pancakes and eggs when she was five. By the time she was nine, Leanne Armstrong was making fried chicken for her family. At least that's how she tells it, her gold-flecked, green eyes flashing. A hand on her hip, she says, "Girl! I can *cook*."

Leanne's mother walked out on the family when Leanne was young. There were many years when she was absent. As the only daughter, Leanne felt called to replace her in the kitchen. "I had to cook for the whole family," she recalls. It was a big responsibility, one she's proud of handling on her own.

Still resentful about her mom leaving, Leanne nevertheless fondly remembers the slow but steady process of gaining mastery over the kitchen. Under her grandmother's tutelage, she even learned how to make her dad's beloved southern foods. "I can make chitlins, I can make pigs' feet. I'm telling you, I can throw down!" she says, grinning confidently.

Today, Leanne's favorite dishes are the ones that put a smile on her children's faces. "Sometimes I fry chicken wings. That's the boys' favorite, my chicken drumettes! I make roasts. They like hamburgers, or hotdogs and French fries, but that's easy. I mean, I can cook!"

She also likes to experiment with new dishes. "I've made baked potato casserole before. We cut up the potatoes and put it in a casserole dish with all our favorites on it. This past week I made Buffalo wings. I made a nice little taco casserole."

The daughter of a white mother and a black father, Leanne has curly, auburn hair and light brown skin, with a spray of freckles across her cheeks. She often dresses in blue scrubs and white sneakers, the required uniform at the technical college she attends. In the summer of 2013, Leanne was working part-time as a cashier at

McDonald's and taking classes. Her husband, Latrell, was unemployed. Like millions of others, their family was still struggling in the wake of the financial crisis that began in 2007. The largest economic upheaval in the United States since the 1930s, the Great Recession affected all American households, but it hit those on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder the hardest.[1]

Leanne's usually cheery disposition often bends under the weight of her daily struggles. She doesn't like her neighborhood, describing it as dangerous, noisy, and "drug infested." There is never enough money to go around, and Leanne is constantly forced to make hard choices. Buy groceries or pay the collection agency? Get new school clothes for the kids or hire an exterminator to get rid of the cockroaches?

Her marriage is another source of stress. Leanne and Latrell "bump heads," as Leanne puts it, especially when Latrell won't watch the kids or help around the house. There are moments when Leanne wonders if she made a mistake by marrying him.

But when the topic turns to food, Leanne is self-assured. She adores cooking, and the kitchen is one place where she feels a semblance of control in her life.

Like many Americans, Leanne spends a lot of time thinking about and preparing food. She doesn't subscribe to any parenting or cooking magazines, and she doesn't read the "mommy internet,"[2] but she's well aware of the dominant messages about what mothers should be doing in the kitchen. Good moms cook for their children. And not just any food, but food that is appealing, healthy, and made from scratch. Leanne has embraced many of these messages. She apologizes for using canned food, saying she'd prefer fresh or frozen, and dreams of having more money to make creative meals, like baked fish on a cedar plank. Leanne wouldn't call herself a foodie, but if you spend some time talking to her, you just might conclude that she is. Like self-professed foodies, she cares deeply about cooking and eating.[3] But these days, she doesn't have much money to spend on food. When the cupboards run low, as they often do, Leanne skips a meal so the kids and Latrell have enough to eat. There are days when all she has for lunch are two hard-boiled eggs. When her food stamps run out, Leanne calls someone for a ride across town to the food pantry. But help from the pantry comes at a cost. She waits around, her three children by her side, for her number to be called. She never knows what kind of food she will get, which makes it hard to plan meals or work around her family's preferences. Being poor chips away at Leanne's pride.

The kitchen restores her dignity and her confidence. But it doesn't solve her problems. And it creates new dilemmas, like when she can't reliably get the food she needs to make home-cooked meals, the kind of meals that good mothers are supposed to make for their children.

Now, perhaps more than ever, food is a matter of national concern and a political and cultural flashpoint.[4] One out of every eight people in the United States doesn't have enough to eat.[5] Food recalls, conflicting nutritional advice, and unpronounceable ingredients make people anxious about the food they're ingesting.[6] The impacts of large-scale food production also raise alarm bells. Consumers are afraid of pink slime in their hamburger meat,[7] chemicals in their strawberries,[8] and whether their food decisions are contributing to climate change. There is also panic about our growing waistlines. Since the 1980s, rates of obesity have doubled among adults and tripled among children, which many people attribute to the ubiquity of cheap, processed foods and the fast-food restaurants that stretch from coast to coast.[9]

Not everyone agrees about how to reform the food system and restore the nation's health, but one message often rises above the din: We need to get back in the kitchen. From celebrity chefs to home cooks, lots of people seem to have the feeling that our country has lost its way and that returning to the dinner table will get us back to healthy kids and strong families.

It's an alluring message.

Michael Pollan, arguably the most influential foodie in the United States, implores us to slow down and rediscover the joy of cooking and eating together. Cooking is a meaningful act, Pollan says, that can deepen our connection to nature and to ourselves. In his bestselling book *Cooked*—now also a documentary series on Netflix—Pollan takes readers into his own kitchen on a Sunday afternoon, evocatively demonstrating the pleasures cooking can bring.

As his teenage son, Isaac, works on his laptop at the kitchen island, Pollan stirs a *sugo* (the Italian word for "sauce"). They are planning to make fresh pasta later. "Sometimes Isaac wanders over to one pot on the stove with a tasting spoon," Pollan writes. "But mostly we work in parallel, both of us absorbed in our respective tasks, with occasional breaks for conversation." There is something about this kind of slow-paced work that alters the experience of time, he ruminates. "Our hours at the kitchen island have become some of the easiest, sweetest times we've had together."

Pollan's message is inspirational, seeking to convert readers by appealing to the healing power of cooking. Other food reformers aren't so gentle. They accuse people who fail to cook of being selfish, of neglecting their responsibilities as parents or citizens.

For example, farmer-author Joel Salatin points a finger at a general culture of laziness, which he and others believe is responsible for the high rates of obesity and diabetes among American children and adults. Salatin routinely blasts families for failing to capitalize on modern kitchen technology to cook good food at home. "With slow cookers, indoor plumbing, timed-bake [ovens], and refrigerators, today's techno-enabled kitchens allow busy people to cook from scratch and eat with integrity far easier than during Great Grandma's time," he chastises.

"She had to fetch water from the spring, split stove wood, start a fire and churn the butter and she still managed to feed a large family very well. If our generation can't do at least as well with our 40-hour work week and kitchen tech, then we deserve to eat adulterated pseudo food that sends us to an early grave." In a jab aimed directly at parents, Salatin concludes, "I don't know that anyone's children deserve this, however."[10]

Food reformers frame cooking from scratch not as a culinary choice or a hobby, but as an issue of morality.

The crux of the problem, food evangelists say, is the increasing number of people who have turned their backs on cooking. Jamie Oliver, Pollan's charismatic British contemporary, paces the stage, throws his hands in the air, and points dramatically at the audience during his TED Talk, viewed more than eight million times. There is a catastrophe in the United States, he tells them, with three generations of people who were never taught to cook. "We need to "start passing on cooking [skills] again," Oliver exhorts an enraptured audience.[11]

But what does it really take to achieve the foodie ideal of a home-cooked meal?

Home-cooked meals have acquired an almost mythical status. Yet it's worth thinking for a moment about what it takes to put a home-cooked, foodie-worthy meal on the table.

At a minimum, it takes a working stove and enough money to pay the electric bill to run the stove. Poor families like Leanne's are sometimes forced to make difficult choices: pay the electric bill or the rent? Buy groceries or pay a medical bill?

The foodie version of a home-cooked meal also takes the right ingredients. Foodies tell us to cook like our great-grandmothers did, using mostly fresh, unprocessed ingredients.[12] But who were these great-grandmothers? Certainly they weren't the vast numbers of immigrant women living in tenement slums in cities like Chicago and New York at the turn of the twentieth century. They weren't the African American and white sharecroppers barely eking out a living on land they didn't own. Far too many of our great-grandmothers had diets marked by scarcity and deprivation, not nutritious foods plucked straight from the garden.

Universalized images of Great-Grandmother notwithstanding, the foodie ideal assumes that everyone has access to fresh food. Leanne's neighborhood no longer has a supermarket, although the wealthier neighborhoods a few miles away have plenty. Within walking distance, all Leanne has are a few corner stores. They sell soda and cigarettes and some processed staples, but they have little or no fresh produce. Leanne's not going to grow her own vegetables, because she has no land for a garden.

Leanne shops at the supermarket, because it's cheaper than the corner stores, but she can't go grocery shopping very often. Without a car, it's hard to get there. Sometimes she takes a taxi, but that eats up money she would rather spend on groceries. Leanne's mother, now back in her life, will give her a ride, but that comes with a cost too. She usually expects some money for gas and harangues Leanne for how she raises her children. The bus is an option, but it takes hours, and then she'd have to lug the grocery bags home from the bus stop, several blocks from her house.

Like many poor moms, Leanne shops once a month and, as noted earlier, sometimes goes to a food pantry to supplement whatever remains in her cupboards at the end of the month. She appreciates the help, but she has no control over the type of food she gets at the pantry. They dole out what they've received in donations. Sometimes the food is good, sometimes it's expired or stale, and often it's just not what Leanne would ordinarily choose. Most of it is canned or boxed food. Leanne would prefer fresh, but she also has a hard time storing it, given the cockroaches overrunning her kitchen.

Cooking according to the foodie ideal takes adequate space and functioning kitchen tools. Leanne has an older fridge, and it doesn't hold much. When she does her big monthly shop, she has a hard time wedging everything in. Her tiny crisper drawers don't keep the veggies very crisp or fresh. She has almost no counter space, making food prep challenging, but she manages, sometimes by sitting at the kitchen table to chop vegetables. She feels lucky to have a table; some of her neighbors don't have a dining table or even enough chairs for everyone in the family. But chopping veggies is like sawing logs with the dull knife she uses, the only one they have.

Making a foodie-worthy meal also takes time. Foodies assume that most people have enough time to cook from scratch and that everyone is home in time for dinner. Leanne's work schedule varies from day to day. She often

finds out only a few days in advance when she'll be working, making it difficult to plan ahead. Her classes at the technical college are typically held in the late afternoon or at night. Often Leanne doesn't get home in time for dinner. Many Americans share Leanne's predicament.

The foodie ideal is based on the notion that food is, or should be, at the top of everyone's priority list. Food matters to Leanne. It matters a lot. But so do other things. While she cooks, she's making lists of what she needs to do the next day. She's totaling up how she is going to get through the month with the money she has. Her kids clamor for her attention. One needs a signed permission slip and $15 for his school field trip. Another says she's supposed to listen to him read and then mark the checklist for his teacher, showing that he completed the assignment. Her one-year-old wants cuddles.

Finally, foodies often seem to assume that if we just take the time to prepare good food, our families will flock to the table and contentedly eat it. However, as many weary parents can attest, a lot can go wrong at dinner. "Though everyone likes to think of the family table as a place of harmony and solidarity," writes anthropologist Richard Wilk, "it is often the scene for the exercise of power and authority, a place where conflict prevails."[13] The work of sociologist Marjorie DeVault reminds us that the dinner table is a place where parents teach children manners and convey the particular eating habits and tastes of their social class group.[14]

Kids are often tired and cranky at the end of the day, just when parents are at their most frazzled. Sitting together for a meal, parents feel frustrated when kids subvert, and sometimes outright ignore, their efforts to get them to eat with a fork, use a napkin, talk quietly, and stay in their seat. In the old days, parents may have used a heavy hand—forcing kids to sit at the table until all the food was eaten, or even spanking them—to get children to conform. But modern parenting advice condemns such tactics, urging parents to reason with their children, give them choices, and explain the consequences of their behavior.[15] And even when children do stay in their seats and eat with their silverware, many parents struggle to get them to eat the food they've made.

Even with cooking skills and motivation, a lot of people find that achieving the foodie ideal of a home-cooked dinner is consummately out of reach. And yet many Americans feel the pressure to get it right.

For centuries, people have been telling Americans that we need to change the way we cook: cook more at home, cook more efficiently, cook more frugally, cook more American.[16] These messages are directed mostly to women, who continue to do the bulk of the work of feeding the family, including

planning, shopping for, and cooking meals.[17] And women take this work seriously. "Failing" at food—whether that means eating too much or not making home-cooked meals—means failing at motherhood.[18] Even when women, like Leanne Armstrong, enjoy cooking, they also internalize the judgments of others who condemn them for not cooking enough, not cooking the right food, or not assembling their families around the dinner table nightly.

Whereas nineteenth-century dietary reformers worried that we'd stopped baking our own bread, today's food evangelists worry that we've stopped cooking altogether. It's true that families eat out more than in the past. And women spend less time cooking than they did a few generations ago. But oversimplified comparisons of today's families with those of previous generations fail to acknowledge the fact that Americans have long depended on the labor of others to get dinner on the table. Poor white women and women of color prepared many people's meals a century ago, just as they do today. The difference is that these women previously worked inside the home, as domestic laborers, rather than in restaurants. At the peak, almost two million domestic workers were employed in American households.[19] Anthropologist Amy Trubek notes that idealized visions of home cooking persistently neglect "the many generations of paid cooks who first worked in homes and then in commercial settings to make these meals possible."[20]

Beyond *whether* we cook, debates about *what* we cook and eat have long simmered in the United States. What people eat and who gets to set the standards reflect larger economic and racial inequalities. The money in our pockets shapes the types of food we buy. On average, rich people in the United States have healthier diets than poor people, and the gap has widened in recent years, as the diets of middle-class and wealthy Americans have improved, but the diets of poor Americans have not. Researchers say this gap is largely due to the high cost of healthy foods.[21] It's more expensive to prepare a dinner with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables and lean proteins like fish or chicken than it is to make some ramen noodles or heat up a jar of pasta sauce and boil some spaghetti. There are other reasons, too. For example, it's more important to avoid wasting food if you don't have a lot of money, so poor people may be less likely to introduce something new to their families, because they might not like it.[22]

Class stereotypes about food also shape our ideas about people's food choices. In experimental studies, people automatically assume that more expensive foods are healthier than less expensive foods (even when the descriptions are identical).[23] Similarly, because people know that fast food is not very healthy, it is stereotyped as being the preferred fare of the poor. But

Americans across the income spectrum have a soft spot for McDonald's and Taco Bell. Still, this comes as a surprise to many. When a study revealed that the middle class eat more fast food than the poor, media headlines conveyed shock. "No, Poor People Don't Eat the Most Fast Food," proclaimed one.[24]

Ideas about food and what people eat are also shaped by legacies of racism. The foods traditionally associated with black culture, for example, are frequently denounced as unhealthy, simple, or backward, rather than as symbols of resilience, creativity, and sustenance. Psyche Williams-Forson, an American Studies scholar, argues that stereotypical black foods like fried chicken and watermelon have also been used to perpetuate racist images of blacks as primitive, predatory, or backward in their thinking.[25] Racist caricatures involving food have a long history[26] and persist today, such as when a white fraternity in New Orleans hosted a Martin Luther King Jr. Day party and served fried chicken, watermelon, and "forties" (40-ounce bottles of beer).[27] Unsurprisingly, given this racist context, many African Americans have a complex relationship with these foods.

Historically, food has carried symbolic weight for the many waves of immigrants who have made their way to the United States. Figuring out what to eat is one of the first challenges new immigrants face, and specific dishes and recipes from a person's country of origin can serve as a tangible source of memory and identity for immigrant communities. These foods have also long been used as symbols of immigrants' success or failure to assimilate. Starting in the late nineteenth century, nutrition reformers mounted campaigns to teach working-class immigrant populations from Eastern Europe and Italy how to "Americanize their diets in an economical fashion."[28] Italian food was described as "garlicky," "overstimulating," and "a real tax on digestion." "Still eating spaghetti, not yet assimilated," wrote one social worker after visiting an Italian household.[29]

Nowadays, dishes once derided as too "exotic" or "foreign" are widely embraced. American's favorite comfort food is pizza, introduced to the United States by Italian immigrants.[30] Mexican restaurants are now the second most common type of restaurant in the United States, edging out both pizzerias and hamburger joints.[31] Food scholars also argue that high-end cuisine is more "omnivorous" than ever before, with Indian, Mexican, and Thai restaurants available not just in New York or San Francisco, but in smaller cities like Raleigh or Des Moines.[32]

But the rising popularity of foods from around the world doesn't reflect a real movement toward equality or a genuine embrace of different cultures.

As food studies scholar Krishnendu Ray argues, there is a "hierarchy of taste" in terms of "ethnic" cuisine; as immigrant groups move up the economic and cultural ladder in the United States, so do the prices consumers are willing to pay for their food, but not before.[33] Immigrants, many undocumented, also disproportionately work in jobs that feed others: as farmworkers, meat processors, or restaurant kitchen staff.[34] These job sectors are among the lowest-paying in the United States. Ironically, the people responsible for feeding the country are employed in jobs that often don't pay them enough to feed their own families.[35]

Reflective of the common belief that we live in a post-racial society, many people do not see how race and ethnicity still deeply affect the way people live their lives or what they eat. But these inequalities have always been, and continue to be, a central part of our food dilemma.

Conversations about food ought to include the voices of people who continue to be sidelined by foodie mantras. Today, many of the messages we get about food and family meals come from affluent white men. These foodies sometimes entertain, inform, and inspire us, but they miss important aspects of what is really going on in American kitchens today.

Even though women are still largely responsible for the work of feeding the family and seen as the gatekeepers of their children's health,[36] few researchers have spent time with mothers and their families in their kitchens. Fewer have investigated how being rich or poor, black or white, a recent immigrant or a fourth-generation American, matters in the world of food and eating.

This book represents a five-year journey that we and a team of researchers undertook to understand what it's like to put food on the table in the United States. We interviewed over 150 mothers and a handful of grandmothers who were primary caregivers of young children. Sitting on couches or at dining tables, a recorder between us, we asked women to tell us what they did on a typical day. What do your children eat? Who shops for food? Who cooks it? We asked about food rules, body image, and what they believed to be healthy meals. The majority of participants (138) were from poor or working-class families. Another thirty participants were from middle- and upper-middle-class families.[37] The families in our study lived in or near Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina, and in two adjacent rural counties.[38]

As we spent time talking about food, we began to appreciate the complexities of families' lives and making family meals. Yet that didn't leave us with a complete picture of what families actually did. So we asked if we could

watch them in action. We invited twelve lower-income families to participate in extended ethnographic observations.[39] All agreed to participate, and we spent hundreds of hours with them: going grocery shopping with them, tagging along on visits to doctors and social services offices, and hanging out in their homes as they made and ate meals.

We also embedded ourselves in these families' communities, forming partnerships with local churches, farmers, food pantries, and service organizations to better understand their food environments and help address food and health inequalities in their communities. We continued this work over a five-year period, conducting interviews and observations with families multiple times over the course of the project and collaborating with community groups on projects designed to improve access to food and spaces to be active.

As mothers ourselves, we are no strangers to feeding others. But, as we embarked on this study, we were aware that our understanding of this process was limited by our particular experiences as middle-class white female academics. As researchers, we understood the need to see beyond our particular ideas, practices, and contexts to observe the diverse and multifaceted dynamics at play in American homes.

This book takes place in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the region surrounding it. Raleigh is a place of stark contrasts. Home to the late, infamous US senator Jesse Helms, known for his overt racism,[40] Raleigh is also home to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the most influential organizations of the civil rights movement.[41] As one of the fastest-growing[42] and most-educated[43] urban areas in the United States, Raleigh is often hailed as a southern success story. But Raleigh's economic boom has not benefited everyone. In an analysis of economic mobility in the 100 largest counties in the United States, the Raleigh area ranked among the lowest.[44] The rural areas surrounding Raleigh have their own problems; poverty rates in Harnett and Lee counties, the two rural counties where this study took place, are over 16 percent, compared to just over 9 percent in Wake county, which includes Raleigh.[45]

We see these contradictions play out in food. Like many southern cities,[46] Raleigh's food scene has expanded and changed in recent years. For a long time, food in Raleigh was dominated by barbecue restaurants and cafeterias offering "meat and three" specials (essentially a choice of one meat and three vegetable sides).[47] From 1938 until it relocated in 2014, one of the city's best-known barbecue restaurants still had two entrances, relics of the Jim Crow era: one for black customers and one for white customers.[48] Today, craft breweries, hipster food trucks, and artisanal donut shops compete for an increasingly cosmopolitan clientele.

But Raleigh's foodie transformation masks persistent inequalities. Food pantries struggle to keep up with the demand from hungry families.[49] The only large supermarket in Leanne's neighborhood closed in 2012, leading to news reports that a "food desert" had emerged in downtown Raleigh.[50] Raleigh thus exemplifies both the promise and the challenges of transforming the food system from the inside out.

Raleigh and North Carolina are places of rapid transformation and deep injustices, coupled with a long-standing history of resistance. John Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, writes that the South evokes strong feelings because the United States recognizes "the best and the worst of itself here."[51] The dynamics within the families and communities featured in this book—racism, unequal food access, gendered parenting practices, and everyday acts of defiance and endurance—are not specific to Raleigh or North Carolina. They play out all over the United States. The stories we tell are stories about what it takes to feed a family in the United States today.

The stories in this book are informed by all of the interviews and observations from our research. However, to shine a light on the diverse and complicated dynamics around cooking and feeding families, we focus on nine women and their families. They all live within an hour of Raleigh. They are all raising young children. They all undertake the difficult and, at times, fraught work of making sure their families have food to eat. Yet, despite these similarities, their lives look very different.

Leanne Armstrong can't catch a break, no matter where she turns. She whips up culinary miracles in her cramped, bug-infested kitchen as she plans for better times.

Patricia Washington hopes to get her daughter and two grandchildren out of the hotel room where they've been living for four months. She dreams of a real home, where they can share a meal around a table.

Rae Donahue has positive memories of the Sunday dinners of her childhood. But she is terrified of developing the health problems confronting many in her family and sees the foods she grew up eating as the primary culprits.

Marta Hernández-Boynton goes by the book when it comes to feeding her two sons, taking a different approach from the way her mother raised her in

Mexico. But nutrition advice is always changing, and she questions whether she is getting it right.

Melanie Richards loves food but hates the body she lives in. As she tries to hang on the lowest rung of the middle class, her children's growing waistlines are constant reminders of what she's up against.

Rosario García is determined to be a model immigrant. She grows her own food and makes Mexican dishes from scratch. But her children, born in the United States, prefer pizza and hot dogs.

Greely Janson goes to extreme lengths to shop locally and eat ethically. Food matters to her, but the time and energy she invests in cooking and shopping are wearing her down.

Ashley Taylor strives to raise her daughters to be independent and self-determined, just as her mom and generations of African American women before her did. She works to put food on the table, but food isn't a huge priority in her life.

Tara Foley's childhood was marked by hunger and loneliness. She will do whatever it takes to keep her kids from going through what she went through as a kid, even as circumstances conspire against her.

These nine women gave us extraordinary access into their lives. The book is an intimate journey through their homes and kitchens, as well as their worries and hopes.

We organize the book around seven foodie messages. Some are insightful. Some are misguided. And some are well intentioned but miss the point. We illustrate how these messages resonate and don't resonate in these nine women's lives. By showing the work it takes to feed a family, we demonstrate why it is not enough just to tell mothers they should try harder and care more.

Our research convinced us that the solutions to our collective cooking pressures won't be found in individual kitchens. Families care about what's for dinner. They are doing a lot, and they're trying very hard. It's not enough. Instead, we need to look outside the kitchen.

We hope you will be convinced after reading this book that we won't fix the food system by retreating into our kitchens—a solution that just makes inequality worse, because those with more resources have more options. We need collective solutions that help meet the needs of diverse American families. Some of these solutions involve food. Food should be a basic right, and we should make it easier for families to enjoy a healthy meal at the end of the day, whether they have cooked it themselves or not. Some require

broad changes, like policies that better support families and wages people can thrive on. Others require shifts in our collective imagination about what it takes to put food on the table, shifts that recognize the strength and dignity of all people and a commitment to right the injustices that undermine and divide us.