Coming out of the kitchen: texts, contexts and debates

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This essay revisits prevailing assumptions about the domestic kitchen. While the status of this space and even its existence as a discrete area within the home have become a matter for discussion, the work of cooking located in the kitchen remains a compelling subject within a range of popular cultural forms. We are accustomed to thinking of the kitchen as a scene of routine and ritual, but here I explore its appearances as an improvisatory and rebellious zone. Such possibilities are not necessarily the outcome of shifting practices associated with the postmodern home and its representation. On the contrary, the kitchen has long been a space, both intimate and socially significant, from which to generate arguments about gender, class and nation.

The redundant kitchen

The fluidity of the boundaries of the postmodern home has become a matter of routine comment. The domestic space seems, accordingly, to have become an increasingly complex text, both responsive to continuous interventions from ‘outside’ and shaped by agents whose identities are themselves in flux. But if the home, freighted with meaning, has become the focus of intense interest on all sides, the kitchen has claimed relatively little of that attention, at least in scholarly terms. The attention we have given to the arrangement and use of things, and to such social activities as eating and watching television, and indeed to the technologization of household work, has tended to drain the kitchen of significance. While the meaning of other spaces is continually having to be renegotiated, the kitchen retains its reputation as a space ideologically charged, unambiguous in meaning and impervious to change. In this essay I want to suggest that the kitchen is a space as various and unpredictable in meaning as any other, and to look at some of the debates addressed by representations of that space. I want also to suggest that while the context of postmodernism gives us an opening through which to explore the inventive and open-ended quality of contemporary kitchen texts, nevertheless such texts exist within traditions of depicting the kitchen as a space through which responses to a range of debates may be improvised.

From the late nineteenth century, an important strand within feminist theory and
activism favoured a kitchenless house; the kitchen was perceived to be the seat of women’s oppression.¹ The dynamism of that aspiration faded, but for some commentators a kitchenless society has, in any case, arrived, in the form of open-plan living spaces and the cooking technologies that allow individual family members (rather than exclusively women) to prepare their own food. It has, in addition, become a truism that we no longer cook, but fall upon fast food brought in from ‘outside’.² The advertisement for Pizza Hut currently showing on British television has an actress, familiar as the sensible, biddable policewoman in a popular police procedural, attired neatly in the traditional striped apron, at a table lightly dusted with flour and with a rolling pin in one hand. She is poised to instruct us on what to feed the family on Friday evening. But her answer to a necessity that viewers are assumed to recognize as a tedious duty turns out to be to slam down the rolling pin, tear off her apron and desert the kitchen in favour of a happy family visit to Pizza Hut. The kitchen would seem to have been stripped of even its lowly position as the workshop of the home.

Of course, insofar as the kitchen, whatever shape it takes, remains concerned with the preparation of food and the staging of cleaning, it would seem to be far from redundant. Bounded by walls or not, it remains the site of dirty work of transhistorical, transcultural symbolic meaning: the space where the raw, the unclean and the defiled are brought, and where the social rules attendant on civilized life are reiterated, where status is confirmed and exclusion practised. The kitchen has been very decisively argued to be marked out as a zone of feminine subjection, where women must manage a ceaseless routine of work to the satisfaction of people further up the domestic, social and political hierarchy.³ Meanwhile, Anglo-American postcolonial analysis pictures the kitchen as the arena for the domestication of the colonized or exploited female ‘other’. This is the space in which First and Third World inequalities are ‘brought home’, a recess repellent to middle-class woman and domestic worker alike.⁴

Nonetheless, even those contemporary texts that rehearse a minutely calibrated and highly conventionalized agenda for food preparation, relentlessly rehearsing answers to the essential question of what can and cannot properly be ingested, seem as much concerned with showing kitchen work that is disengaged from convention as with picturing conformity. For example, the American sitcom series Friends is full of representations of kitchen work. In an incident in ‘The one where Ross got high’, in which the character Rachel fails to cook a festive dessert for Thanksgiving (she makes the almost unimaginable mistake of combining recipes for English trifle and shepherd’s pie), the programme assumes our acceptance that the dish that Rachel has produced flies in the face of what is acceptable. The joke about Rachel’s mistake of mixing meat with custard and jam is followed by the vision of the other characters doggedly maintaining conventional patterns of social behaviour by actually consuming this dessert, or at least pretending to. Only Joey, the character who represents an essential, unquestioning masculinity, subsumes the rules of food combination that encode the structures of ‘civilization’ in his desire to eat food that he savours. Oblivious to the weight of the custom of millennia, he relishes the ‘beef custard thing’: ‘Custard? Good. Jam? Good. Meat? Good.’⁵

Scenes such as this may comfortably rehearse those rules of kitchen work about which
no one could disagree, wherever the programme is watched. At the same time, the old trope of the misfiring meal revisits conventions of gender behaviour; tales of important meals staged for outsiders and mismanaged by the housewife have certainly had a popular currency in Anglo-American culture since the mid-nineteenth century. However, even texts as apparently formulaic as Friends, for all that they address an arena – the kitchen – thick with significance as a space for modelling behaviour, and an activity – cooking – hemmed around with convention, may make more open-ended contributions to the debates in which they engage than we might expect. As the character Monica’s house-proud obsessions (not only with food but with cleanliness as well) and the gap between Rachel’s relentless consumption and her weak grasp on homemaking are reiterated episode by episode, what is apparently pictured is the neurotic distortion of the ideal on the one hand and the attractiveness of failure to achieve it on the other. Obsessive cleanliness and sloppy housewifery are well-rehearsed fictional positions but where, in earlier fictions of misfiring meals, the contrast between good and bad women’s virtues and shortcomings would be resolved in the humiliation of the ‘bad’ housewife, here the text provides no appropriate behaviour pattern. On the contrary, the present eighth series of Friends, still producing a set of characters strangely poised on the threshold of a settled domestic life, continues to accent the absence of appropriate behaviour through images of kitchen work, and especially through the increasingly eccentric kitchen behaviour of the highly domesticated Monica.

Sitcoms, since their emergence in postwar America, have always depicted the pains of the domestic, but the bizarre domesticity of Friends may also be seen in the context of a postmodern scene in which, as various commentators have pointed out, there has been a marked increase in representations of contemporary experience that reference the home and deal playfully with its meanings. My interest here, though, is not so much in tracing how the appearances of the kitchen may problematize the domestic space as in looking at how the kitchen as a discrete space with its own characteristic activities is used to join a range of debates circulating ‘outside’. The texts that I am using here illustrate both the unpredictability of kitchen appearances and some of the open-endedness of their textual tactics.

The improvisatory kitchen

Perhaps the most obvious appearance of the kitchen in Britain in the 1990s is within the television cookery programme. Such kitchens appear as ambiguous, half-defined spaces: sketchily reminiscent of the domestic kitchen and yet with the signs of disorder and use characteristic of the domestic space largely or wholly erased. Though they may make reference to the social relations of the family more or less explicitly (in a way that we would expect of a space devoted to producing food), the work of these kitchens is evidently set apart from the relationships of home or the routine responsibility for feeding people.

In part this speaks to an assumption implicit within many such programmes: that the ‘real’ domestic kitchen is to be regarded as a space characteristically made over to mundane and unskilled work; hence the need arises for the help and instruction of the
professionals. The ubiquitous representation of high-profile television chefs often revisits the question of how far, if at all, these chefs are truly able to adapt their expertise – or indeed their characteristically expansive personalities – to the small and banal domestic setting experienced by their viewers. This is no less true of the appearances of cooks who perform in a kitchen that we are asked to imagine as their own than it is of those who demonstrate skills in a setting that is only sketchily domestic. Thus, while Jamie Oliver, the ‘naked chef,’ performs in what we are asked to imagine is his own kitchen and is depicted cooking informal meals for friends, the pretence that he is an ‘ordinary’ cook is continually ‘exposed’. Asked about cooking in ‘real life’, Oliver replies: ‘The best thing about cooking for your mates is that you don’t have to be flash. You’re not making clever soufflés or putting things in a mould or balancing one thing on top of another. What I like doing is just slamming three big bowls of something hot and steaming on the table and telling everyone to tuck in.’ Conversely, when asked how his ‘real’ friends respond to the challenge of returning his informal hospitality, he responds: ‘People panic.’ Plainly, his efforts on our behalf in his television appearances are not to be compared with the routines of domestic cookery.

However, if the kitchen of the television chef has, quite clearly, a tenuous relationship to the domestic kitchen, what we seem to see in such programmes is not a valorizing, by contrast, of a professionalized kitchen, a space well known, after all, for its exceptionally punishing labour and rigidly hierarchized relations. Rather we see the appearance of a kitchen uncoupled from any contextualizing relationships at all. It may be that the viewer is encouraged to fantasize about cutting a dash within the network of her or his social and familial networks, using knowledge newly acquired from the programme. But, most obviously, such programmes rewrite the kitchen as a space in which the cook performs independently and manages a series of tasks, simple as well as complex, without recourse to any responsibility or authority. Without such responsibilities, without the human interactions of the kitchen, without the mess and clutter, the activity of the kitchen text becomes a space to which of all kinds of other meanings may be attributed.

We already have ways of understanding the kitchen as an independent space that generates its own practices and meanings. Though scholarly work on the restaurant and the domestic kitchen do not address their common ground as spaces with distinctive codes and relationships to other space, there are strong echoes within these two discrete bodies of sociological work. For example, what Gary Alan Fine finds, in his study of restaurant kitchens, is a kitchen life characterized by creativity in the form of improvisatory practices. Fine actually argues, predictably, that there is a ‘giant step’ between domestic cooking (an activity he perceives to occupy a position somewhere between a ‘good’ chore and a hobby in the home) and the world of the restaurant kitchen, a step he describes as moving into the ‘real world of the food production industry’. Yet just as Fine describes the ‘micro-negotiations . . . organized by an obdurate enveloping reality’ of the restaurant kitchen, the tricks and short cuts prompted by the ‘desire to have the food look and taste right without excess concern about the process by which it becomes right’, the ambivalence about use of convenience foods; so similar negotiations, tricks and ‘cheats’ have been attributed to the domestic kitchen in

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sociologies of the home. Thus, in Luce Giard’s ‘Doing cooking’, in which the practice of everyday routine is minutely analysed, we find the transcription of a discussion with a Parisian woman and her family which draws our attention to the countless devices and strategies used by the domestic kitchen worker to avoid labour and save time, whilst fulfilling the perceived demands of family and friends:

At night we dine peacefully: of course I do the cooking rather quickly, because, in my heart of hearts, I’m a rather practical and speed-orientated woman. I don’t get weighed down with the details, I’m very expedient; whatever I do, I do it quickly... The other day you brought back some stingray, so, to make stingray in brown butter sauce, I first looked in a cookbook. You had to make a court bouillon and that would have taken a long time. Finally I found a recipe that was much faster... There are things that are just fine reheated; for instance, we had made – I had made – some beans, a cassoulet. Well, I heated them up the first time, and it was a little dry; the second time, I heated them up in a tomato sauce I’d made beforehand, and it was much better! Or when we have roast pork, the first time, we eat it just as a roast; the second time, we have it cold or heated up in a sauce; and finally I make a shepherd’s pie with what’s left or something like that with ground meat; I add onions and garlic, things like that... Mapie [Toulouse-Lautrec]’s recipes, for example, I cook with them, but I make them in a pressure cooker, and so I adapt the cooking times, things like that.9

It is certainly not unusual to find kitchen texts that draw on this idea of creative and rebellious improvisation, in which the conventions of kitchen behaviour are rifled and new rules written. Bobby Baker’s well-received and much-analysed performance piece, Kitchen show (1991), for example, inflects the multiplicity and heroism of work in the kitchen with flights of imagination.10 Kitchen show works as a kind of parodic appropriation of such mythologies as the twelve labours of Hercules, literally as a ‘Baker’s’ dozen of thirteen tasks. Baker, inviting her audience into her own and others’ kitchens, cuts loose from the idea of the kitchen as private but altogether predictable space. She acts out a set of behaviours that give a surreal twist to the tasks and activities that are continually presented to us in popular culture, and to the familiar association between the mundanity of women’s domestic lives and flights of feminine fantasy. Thus, on the one hand we have Baker demonstrating how to stir sugar into coffee, and bandaging her hand in the stirring position to ensure the correct operation of the task; on the other, we have her listening to opera as she scatters spinach leaves. The piece comes to a climax with Baker balancing on one foot, like the dancer in a music box, j-cloths tucked wing-like into her shoes, a Mercury figure perched on the point of flight in time and space. As numerous critics have pointed out, this is a performance that breaks down what might seem to be an impermeable boundary between artist and housewife, between the spaces where ‘art’ is practised and the abject spaces of the home. Equally, this is a kitchen text that, as well as insisting on the richness of domestic experience, and specifically of the kitchen, as a source for creativity, also seeks to ridicule the pretensions of the art world.11

Baker’s kitchen plays to relatively small and specific audiences. But the high-profile television series, Nigella bites (2000) makes a comparable attempt to ignore the notion of the kitchen as a domestic workshop by linking it with sexual gratification. It is not only that Lawson is continually ‘hyphenating’ food and sex (to use Elspeth Probyn’s
term). She makes constant reference to sensuous contact with the body in her comments on cooking she performs for us in her kitchen: food is ‘swathed in sauce’, yolks are ‘cradled’, pasta is ‘voluptuous and creamy’, eating pasta makes ‘you feel like you’re eating liquid velvet’. Lawson has written of the advent of ‘gastroporn’ as the ‘last allowable excess’ in ‘our puritanical age’, and, in the first programme of *Nigella bites* she archly eroticizes the work of cooking when, having used rubber gloves to chop hot chillis, she ‘derobes and derubbers’ to move on to the next stage of preparation. Later, as Lawson is photographed in her garden eating an ice cream cone, she jokes that ‘I feel like I’m in one of these really awful bad English porn movies of the 1970s.’

Eating and sex are routinely elided in the language of everyday life, but Lawson’s kitchen – the programme is filmed in her home – takes on a particularly unpredictable cast, continually viewed as it is from or against other spaces. Watching continuous camera movement, movement around the kitchen, shifts to other rooms and the other spaces and places of Lawson’s life, we are never sure where we are. Of course, cookery programmes often show contextualizing footage of the ‘everyday life’ of the cook, and may show guests consuming the meals cooked as a closing sequence, but here different spatial contexts for the kitchen jostle for our attention. Only at the end do we briefly catch Lawson working within a discrete kitchen space much less open than we might hitherto have imagined.

At the same time, Lawson’s discourse and the intervening footage of her daily life refer continually to going out and coming back into the home, to rushing. The first programme, ‘Fast food’, is punctuated by scenes where Lawson performs an array of different tasks: cooking, filming, typing, driving, taking photographs of food, as well as picking up and dropping her children (‘a bit late’) and entertaining guests with half an hour to spare. This is not to be understood, Lawson suggests, as the life of a woman who is virtuously efficient. Indeed she begins her series with the following gloss:

> Fast food is an obvious necessity in all our lives, but it doesn’t have to be all briskness and efficiency. Which is just as well. These are not my strong points. The idea here, for me, is food that I love eating, that doesn’t give me a nervous breakdown to cook. . . . What I’m after is the *minimum* effort for the *maximum* pleasure in both the cooking and the eating.

On the contrary, as in *Kitchen show*, the challenge of associating the female subject with an ambiguous reading of the kitchen (and indeed the problematic relationship of ‘fast food’ with it), is linked with a narrative and a method stressing ceaseless, even random movement of the subject. It is perhaps this puzzling textual quality that has led Lawson’s viewers and critics not only to suspect that her recipes don’t ‘work’ but to recognize that they are watching the construction, in apparently disparate fragments, of a twenty-first-century self.

Both Baker and Lawson make plain their relish at transgressing conventional norms of kitchen behaviour. They are, nevertheless, engaging (in different ways and at different levels of intensity) with well-rehearsed debates about women’s work inside and outside the home. Bobby Baker parodies the instructional discourse directed at women in the home, for example in the smearing of soft margarine instead of cold cream on her face. Her hurling of ripe pears against the kitchen wall references the much-reiterated ideal
of the kitchen as a place of controlled, useful and, above all, germ-free space. Her self-positioning, in marking a triumph over conventions of silencing domestic women, recalls those conventions and their power to her audience’s minds.

Nigella Lawson’s programme about cooking, meanwhile, speaks to, and seems bent on picturing the resolution of, contemporary debates about the balance between work and home for middle-class women. We see Lawson sitting in casual clothes at home and yet asserting that she is ‘too busy’ to cook elaborate meals. We see her performing work, but this work turns out to be the recording of the programme which takes place in her own kitchen. The conventional gendered task of feeding others thus becomes her paid work, though here it is accorded considerable status as footage of her control of camera shots and authoritative presence in the operation of the programme confirm.

The rebellious class relations of the kitchen

If Baker’s and Lawson’s kitchen improvisations are evidently caught up within cultural debates about women’s lives, the domestic kitchen is not always and exclusively used as a locus for visiting gender debates. Kitchen texts routinely address questions of social relations. The chef Anthony Bourdain’s outrageous picaresque *Kitchen confidential* (2000) is organized around revelations of the divide between ‘inside’ the restaurant kitchen and ‘outside’. A scene of hard labour and poor conditions within the restaurant kitchen is shown in a troubling relation to the serene scene of ingestion ‘outside’. And while those ‘outside’ assume that they are cared for and regarded with respect, those inside are cunning and highly circumspect in their dealings with those who imagine themselves to be controlling the production of their food. Similarly, those who have researched the life of the domestic kitchen have noted the ways in which domestic relations are also characterized by a sense of alienation between those who prepare food and those who eat it, by secretive practices on the part of domestic cooks, by a separate culture ‘out’ in the kitchen. The literature of ‘proper meals’ is full of explicit accounts of humouring the domestic ‘customer’. Nickie Charles, writing about the work of women feeding their families, quotes her interviewees: ‘If Bob’s been away I’ve not bothered to cook proper meals – proper meals inasmuch as a cooked meal . . .’ or ‘I do a simpler meal if Dave’s not there. I’ll do something on toast for me and the kids . . . but if he’s here, then I would never give him anything like that for his tea.’

A variant on these inside/outside kitchen texts is the upstairs/downstairs text. This is a sub-genre of the domestic narrative that is concerned with examining the disposition of power within a home divided into two separate worlds. These are texts that map inequality and, as with the texts above, give an ambiguous status to the kitchen both as the heart of the house and as the space in which oppressive relations are pictured. If we look at a contemporary version of this kind of narrative, the film *Gosford Park* (2001), we find the usual opposition between peeved and exploitative upper-class parasites and the frantically hardworking and largely unfulfilled servants in their employ. ‘Cook’ is, as ever, indomitable and unbending, the kitchen the imaginary twinkling Victorian shrine to elaborate and expensive cooking. But we also see, as with the contemporary texts discussed earlier, these relationships uncoupled, from the start, from the usual discussion
of social inequality. What we are offered is a highly, even humorously, elaborated performance of class behaviour, as the players, distinguished English actors to a man and woman, arrive to play their part in a classic English narrative of adultery and murder on an English country-house weekend. While some of the stars of the English theatre are given walk-on parts as servants, as well as the ‘character’ parts that we expect, the entrance of the whole ‘troupe’ is preceded by the strains of an Ivor Novello song, ‘The land of might have been’.

As the actors play their cameo roles to the hilt, the kitchen, by contrast, has the quality of a secret space, closed off from upstairs and downstairs alike – and indeed from the penetrations of the camera. It is also represented as a space containing and supporting a particular type of collaborative female power. In contrast to the austere and self-punishing regime practised by the housekeeper and the butler, the plump and sensual kitchenmaids embrace the pleasures of the flesh. Meanwhile, at the heart of a film in which few characters venture to reveal themselves, or possess the self-knowledge to do so, a scene occurs in the room where preserves are stored in which one of the guests, Anthony Meredith, the acme of indulged upper-class failure, steals down in search of simple childlike pleasures of tasting jam straight from the jar. Dorothy, a maid, comes to his assistance and encourages him in his regressive desires. As he attempts to drift into nostalgia for his childhood, he asks for reassurance that life has indeed been unfair to him. Dorothy’s response to his plea to be mothered is to advise him on the importance of passionate engagement with those around him. He returns upstairs and suddenly kisses his wife with fierce intensity, a gesture to which she fails to respond. In the social world of the film, in which upstairs and downstairs alike are either indifferent to or unable to engage with those around them, Dorothy’s words seem to emerge, literally, from another space, while Gosford Park, in playing the genre of the country house murder for all it is worth, plays also with our assumptions about the relative status of upstairs and downstairs, and invests the inner sanctum of the kitchen with a mysterious power absent anywhere else in the house.

Playful as it is, though, Gosford Park is in many ways less adventurous in its recasting of the class relations of the upstairs/downstairs genre than earlier texts. Indeed, I would argue that while our understanding of recent kitchen texts is usefully widened by our sense of a contemporary context in which domestic spaces have become ever more changeable and representations of them ever less predictable, this sensitivity to the improvizations of the present should not allow us to assume that earlier texts were not also willing to use the kitchen to imagine a different social order.

So, for example, in her autobiography, A fire in the kitchen (1938), the great writer of English cookery Florence White (1863–1940) understands the kitchen as a particular kind of powerhouse: ‘The longer I live the more convinced I become that the home and its work are the most important as well as the most interesting things in life, and the kitchen fire the hub of the universe, far more important than any mere parliamentary vote, which might well be left to men.’ It is not merely that the kitchen is the space, she argues, in which middle-class women may be inducted by their cooks into purposeful lives. For White (and others of the period) the art of traditional cooking is key to the achievement of a sense of identification with a nation in a state of turmoil. This work at the home’s
hearth is much more than traditionalism for nostalgia’s sake: it expresses a respect for the craftsman and craftswoman and their role in the formation of national culture, whilst also referencing the ‘powerhouse’ world of manufacturing.  

This imagination of the kitchen as literally firing the culture is rendered more engaging – and less evidently supportive of reactionary views of class and gender behaviour – by White’s emphasis on her own ambiguous and shifting class identity as a cook. Female cookery writers have often had a liminal class position, attracting an unwelcome identification as a woman too familiar with kitchens to have genteel origins.  

A fire in the kitchen strikes a very different note. White writes her tumble from an independent middle-class existence into a precarious working life as a fortunate fall: as her circumstances of economic vulnerability are drawn to our attention, so is her growing professionalism; though she often depicts herself exhausted by drudgery, yet she is relentlessly triumphant in her practicality. It is this slippery self-identification in class terms that makes the power she proposes for the kitchen something more than the usual conservative response to the well-publicized refusal of working-class unemployed women in the 1930s to go into domestic service; more than the nostalgia of the middle classes for the days of cheap servants. This is a kitchen text that resists the contemporary pressure for married women to keep the home fire burning. White’s kitchen is neither the passive downstairs space of the socially disadvantaged nor the inside space engaged in trying to manipulate the outside.

### Kitchen debates: the kitchen and national identity

In writing the kitchen, White was most concerned with the way in which that space might express Englishness, its threatened demise and recovery. And for all that the kitchen has regularly been discussed as an apparently marginal, abject zone, it is striking how frequently it has been possible to use it as a space from which to make pointed commentary on national issues. Perhaps our immediate assumption about praise for the traditional kitchen is that it encodes support for traditional roles and relations, and for a reactionary understanding of the national past as well. However, in turning to my final contemporary example, ‘A Sunday lunch revival and other meat dishes’, one of the programmes in the British TV series Delia’s winter collection (1995), I want to argue that, even where kitchen texts may ask us to imagine a collective past – and indeed literally reconstruct that past in our kitchens – these are texts that may also elbow their way into much more immediate national debates.

In ‘A Sunday lunch revival’, the British television cook Delia Smith, a national byword for reliability and predictability, goes about recalling a set of ‘traditional’ national practices. We are shown a copse where she may choose to walk before Sunday lunch, and the dining table set in anticipation, but it is in the kitchen, a workspace depicted, once again, as quite free from contact with family, that this revival of national tradition takes place. The central issue is the correct preparation of the beef which we see resting on kitchen surfaces in all its massive and glossy splendour. In close-up on the screen, accompanied only by the sound of Smith’s laudatory commentary, the image seems designed to encourage us to remember the centrality of meat as a sign of power, of vigorous strength, of the domination of ‘nature’.  

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What is interesting here is not only the way in which that power, strength and domination recall an imperial, patriarchal and consensual national past, but also the way in which that message must surely have been nuanced by the context of the programme. ‘A Sunday lunch revival’ went out at the height of the BSE crisis, and precisely at the moment in which the suspicion that eating beef might involve the infection of humans took hold in the popular media. Smith’s programme might be said both to assert the unchanging meaning of beef through focusing on its preparation in the kitchen and to insist, in the face of collapsing consumption, on the trustworthiness of government bodies in attending to the nation’s food. The focus on beef in the kitchen, free of association with the social activity of the meal or the nurture of personal relations in the family, seems to insist on its separation from gathering fears of rampant commercialism and incompetent government, and their implications for the national health. That such a programme could be aired without comment as the first news of vCJD in humans emerged in the mass media says much about the way in which the cook in the kitchen may intervene in national controversies without fear of censure.

Delia Smith’s ‘A Sunday lunch’ is a strident and unequivocal defence of a version of tradition. Smith seems to have drawn about herself the cloak of a conservative national institution, but it would be misleading to suggest that all writers of national food position the work of the kitchen in sustaining national tradition in the same way. Elizabeth David (1913–92) has become a powerful signifier in debates about national food, not only because she is claimed to have changed the nation’s perceptions of ‘real’ food but because she is seen as having, in a more general way, sounded the death knell to the drab days of 1950s Britain. Quite uninterested in the serving of food or in its social, much less family, function, and focusing on instructing her readers in the treatment of ingredients which they could not obtain at the time of publication or for many years subsequently, David’s authentic tradition lies always in the output of kitchens elsewhere. This authenticity, which is signified especially by the correct content of cooked dishes, has, she argues, been drained from Britain where, in the wake of the industrial revolution, cookery has ‘almost ceased to evolve’. It still, however, emanates from ‘peasant’ cultures of the Mediterranean and North Africa, where work of all kinds is centred on the home, and the kitchen illustrates the authenticity plainly inherent in the local:

A genuine cassoulet is not . . . a cheap dish . . . When you consider that in the rich agricultural country of the Languedoc every farmer’s wife has the ingredients of a dish within arm’s length, festoons of sausages and hams hanging in her kitchen, jars of goose and pork preserved in their own fat on her larder shelves, you understand how the cassoulet came into being; it was evolved to make the best use of local materials.

Paradoxically, of course, David’s works recall nothing so much as the behaviour and viewpoint of the upper-class traveller delineating, for those ‘back home,’ ‘other’ more colourful places, ‘other’ more contented and subservient working classes, ‘other’ cultures in more dynamic contact with their traditions – ‘other’ kitchens. In A book of Mediterranean food (1950), just a few pages before the description of the Languedoc housewife, she quotes her mentor Norman Douglas’s anecdote from South wind (1917) to evoke the way in which the kitchen may produce a rather more expansive experience.
for the privileged man of the world:

The ideal cuisine should display an individual character; it should offer a menu judiciously chosen from the kitchen-workshops of the most diverse lands and peoples – a menu reflecting the master’s alert and fastidious taste.

But while we generally understand travel writing to position, even fix, home identity, David’s ‘other’ kitchens mark the bereft quality of the ones used at home. At most, her readers can strive to imitate the ideal cuisine in their own colourless domestic spaces.22

Of course, the 1950s saw, in Elizabeth Wilson’s words, ‘chunks of the British Empire [break] off and [float] away down the tide of history’, and David’s commentary on British cooking is full of comments that reconfirm the contemporary sense of a loss of British power: ‘English cooking, even at its best, is manifestly not the best in the world’; it is ‘degenerate’; even British meat has been ‘equalled or surpassed’. Traces of authenticity remain only in the bohemian interiors of unconventional, makeshift kitchens of primus stoves and single hotplates.23

David resisted discussing what a (British) kitchen should be like, preferring to list and subsequently to sell, the traditional tools of Mediterranean kitchens in her own shop. Persuaded eventually to describe the ideal, she merely offered: ‘the perfect kitchen would really be more like a painter’s studio furnished with cooking equipment than anything conventionally accepted as a kitchen.’24 This perfect kitchen, in short, was a place of creativity, a space that could be identified with the vision of the exceptional individual, and not a space to which her readers could fruitfully aspire.

Conclusion

It seems perverse to regard the kitchen as a space without the capacity to trace and address cultural questions and problems that we attribute to other domestic spaces. Indeed, the sheer visibility of the kitchen in contemporary culture should suggest its usefulness in such terms. The kitchen we see is not ‘only’ or necessarily a domestic space. It often has a more ambiguous, indistinct quality, neither decisively contextualized nor constrained by the need to seem altogether real. We expect this in the context of postmodernity, at a moment when kitchens are both different and visualized in new ways. But kitchen texts, working within many generic traditions and using a range of strategies, have long depicted the kitchen as an arena for the weighty cultural work of reconfiguring gender behaviours, class relations and national identity.

Notes


2 See e.g. David Chaney’s discussion of the parameters of change in domestic food consumption in *Cultural change and everyday life* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002), pp. 70–2.

3 See, for a good example of such an understanding, Matrix, *Making space*. The assumption that
women must cook for their families in sociologies such as M. DeVault, *Feeding the family: the social organization of caring and gendered work* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991) and N. Charles and M. Kerr, *Women, food and families* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988) positions the kitchen as a space of servitude.


11 For a discussion of this point and quotations from Baker herself on this subject, see L. Baldwyn, ‘Blending in: the immaterial art of Bobby Baker’s culinary events’, *Drama review* 40 (winter 1996), pp. 38, 42–4.


17 This point is discussed in S. Freeman, *Mutton and oysters: the Victorians and their food* (London, Gollancz, 1989), pp. 156–64.

18 ‘A Sunday lunch revival and other meat dishes’, *Delia’s winter collection* (BBC, 1995).


20 A detailed chronology of the BSE scandal may be found in ‘Special report: the BSE crisis’, *www.guardian.co.uk.bse*

Ibid., p. 78.

