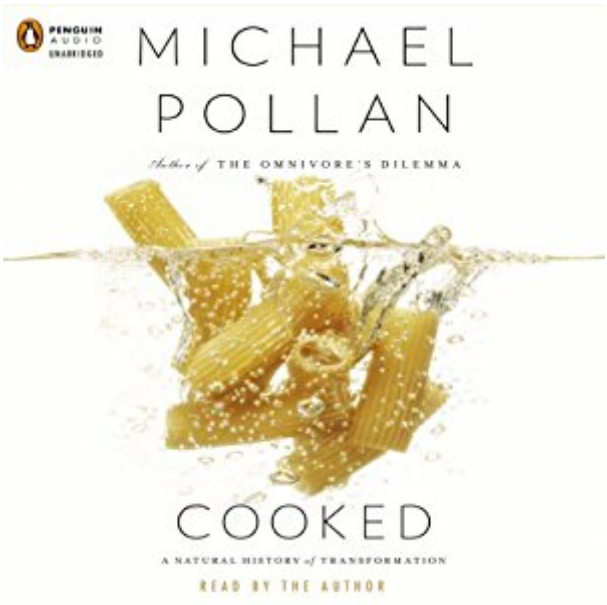
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Cooked: A Natural History Of Transformation



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Synopsis

Fire, water, air, earth - our most trusted food expert recounts the story of his culinary education In Cooked, Michael Pollan explores the previously uncharted territory of his own kitchen. Here, he discovers the enduring power of the four classical elements - fire, water, air, and earth - to transform the stuff of nature into delicious things to eat and drink. Apprenticing himself to a succession of culinary masters, Pollan learns how to grill with fire, cook with liquid, bake bread, and ferment everything from cheese to beer. In the course of his journey, he discovers that the cook occupies a special place in the world, standing squarely between nature and culture. Both realms are transformed by cooking, and so, in the process, is the cook. Each section of Cooked tracks Pollan’s effort to master a single classic recipe using one of the four elements. A North Carolina barbecue pit master tutors him in the primal magic of fire; a Chez Panisse-trained cook schools him in the art of braising; a celebrated baker teaches him how air transforms grain and water into a fragrant loaf of bread; and finally, several mad-genius "fermentos" (a tribe that includes brewers, cheese makers, and all kinds of picklers) reveal how fungi and bacteria can perform the most amazing alchemies of all. The listener learns alongside Pollan, but the lessons move beyond the practical to become an investigation of how cooking involves us in a web of social and ecological relationships: with plants and animals, the soil, farmers, our history and culture, and, of course, the people our cooking nourishes and delights. Cooking, above all, connects us. The effects of not cooking are similarly far reaching. Relying upon corporations to process our food means we consume huge quantities of fat, sugar, and salt; disrupt an essential link to the natural world; and weaken our relationships with family and friends. In fact, Cooked argues, taking back control of cooking may be the single most important step anyone can take to help make the American food system healthier and more sustainable. Reclaiming cooking as an act of enjoyment and self-reliance, learning to perform the magic of these everyday transformations, opens the door to a more nourishing life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

pollan has always taken a macro, bird’s eye view of the food on our table. in this book he writes with his same wit, compassion, and knowledge that he’s known for but focuses on the ways we get things to our table. this book is at the other end of the spectrum of a cookbook. it asks why we cook things over fire, in water, in an oven, through fermentation. it is as much an anthropological study is it is a culinary one. there are many reasons we cook things in water. pollan explains these reasons from many different angles: there is a biological imperative (kills bacteria); there is a culinary reason: makes inedible foods edible (and tasty); there are poetic observations (the french refer to a liquid just below a boil as "smiling").while it’s not a cookbook, "cooked" has increased my understanding of how food behaves inside the pot, over fire, etc. - which has made me better in the kitchen.

I was disappointed when I turned the last page that there were no more to turn. I will order another of his books as soon as I finish this review. The writing is scientific yet folksy. He entertains while informs and motivates. I already roast my own coffee, brew my own beer and cook from scratch because I want to. Now I know why I feel good about involving myself in the process of cooking. I will now attempt to make my own sauerkraut. Even if you never make more than coffee for yourself this book will make you think about and appreciate all that goes into putting a good meal on your plate. Recommended.

How do you say a cooking book is a page turner but this one is. Just fascinating. The historical background to developments in cooking told in an easy conversational way makes this a pleasure to read. Pollan’s adventures in BBQ, cheese making, bread baking,fermenting things from beers to vegetables makes one envy his life. Who wouldn’t want to track down experts in all these varied fields and learn from the best...spending months perfecting one thing at a time.....seriously, its all I can do to get a quick meal on the table. However, he has awakened a reverence for cooking that I took for granted and now I am cooking so many things from scratch much to my dogs, and families, delight. A fabulous book I’m recommending to everyone.

In "Cooked" Michael Pollan takes a look at the major processes that go into food preparation which he breaks into four categories - fire, water, air and earth. As with other books by Pollan there is a deep message in the writing and an underlying goal of the author to revitalize the reader's interest in our historic food culture and the approachability of it at the individual level in modern society. The book sets the stage in the introduction asking the question of why to cook. He notes that the amount of time spent in the kitchen by people has declined dramatically in the last 50 years and how the argument of division of labour and time optimization might hold partially true- being totally removed from preparing what we consume to survive is much much more complicated than such simple economic logic.The book sets the stage by discussing the BBQ. It is a perfect opening to reinforce the author's introductory criticims of modern food preparation as the social atmosphere defined by BBQs will always be an obvious reminder of the deeply social aspects of certain kinds of food preparation. The author researches heavily and takes the reader with him through his journey of finding the authentic BBQ. In reading the chapter i have a much larger where to eat next list... But the author combines food journalism of BBQ today with a historical account of the roast in our history and discusses some fairly deep concepts about what makes us human. The author introduces the idea that what makes us human is actually the ability to cook as by cooking we reduce the time and energy spent in digestion and allows for people to have evolved much larger brains that require economy of eating time. Not a central thesis of the book by any means, just an illustration that the philosophy of the author and examples all weave together to bring purpose to the writing.The author then goes into water and boiling food. This is less adventurous and seems slightly more introspective. Cooking food by boiling it is a more recent human invention as its dependent on a vessel to boil the water in after one has discovered fire. It is also a more domestic form of food preparation and as a result has more gender role connotations. The atmosphere of the campfire is different from the atmosphere of the person preparing a stew. Nonetheless the author discusses how all cultures boil food in various forms to both cook and improve flavour and at its core is a fairly common practice. The chemistry of what happens is discussed and the lessons learnt in terms of process. The author details how for himself the slow process of the food preparation filtered through to the family time enjoyed while talking and slowly eating the slow cooked meal.The author then moves into air and discusses baking. Baking is a form of food preparation that was subcontracted out of the kitchen hundreds of years ago (compared to roasting and boiling for example). The author gives himself the project of learning how to bake and starts in his home state of California. It is really interesting and it makes me feel like i am bread deprived. The science of

breadmaking is really interesting and the industrial process of making the flour has the effect of reducing the nutritional content. The process of recombining nutrients to the bland white breads in modern supermarkets is discussed and shown to be predominantly a failure in terms of achieving nutritional goals. The author starts with a successful baking of a white flour sourdough and eventually works with original wholeweat cultures. I read this chapter and want to try the bread as well as all the bakeries that went into shaping this chapter...The author finally moves into Earth which is really his description for allowing nature and microbiology to take its course on food. In particular fermentation is detailed in two forms. The first is through pickling and the author tries to make sauerkraut, kimchi, and various other pickled foods. This seems the most straightforward to attempt at home as its a very slow process but the nuances are discussed and as with all forms of food preparation the author discusses there is an art to it given the science has its limits given the multitude of processes that are occuring. The author then discusses the art of cheesemaking and discusses the health aspects of the cheesemaking process. The author ends with a discussion of alcohol production and he attempts making beer. Given the beer kits involved are slightly more ready made than kits for other forms of food preparation, the first try for beer seems to turn out quite successfully on a a relative basis. The role of alcohol in social settings, its health contents and issues as well as its historic role througout civilization and consumption in the animal world is all discussed in a lively manner.I have always like Pollan’s books. They are entertaining and have humor. Despite the lightheartedness of the writing the deeper message is one that should be considered. Cooking doesnt have to be a chore and the spillover effects of moving from processed food to home cooked are countless. For him with cooking - home atmosphere is better, nutrition is better, value for money is better and his experiences are better all the while his social fabric gets stronger. Obviously the message isnt for everyone to prepare all aspects of their food intake but to shift the balance away from always buying prepared and trying to minimize time cooking is a questionable goal. Despite not being active in the kitchen I feel more invigorated to try after reading this. I learnt quite a bit as well as enjoyed the read.

I more than loved this book, and I am a huge fan of the writing style and philosophy of Michael Pollan. It’s a hugely entertaining read and more importantly, and wonderfully eloquent and practical essay about how real people are reclaiming our food system from big agribusiness. This is not a preachy book, but the ideas here gave me so much hope and creative ideas about how to eat and cook in a more wholesome and environmentally sound way. If you find yourself drifting a little during the first part about BBQ, please push on, you won’t be dissappointed.

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