



The Cost of Convenience

Talk given at Ideawave Victoria (July 10, 2010)

This whole talk began with a commercial and an off-hand comment on Facebook.

The commercial: the latest from the McCain family line-up: Frozen potatoes that are peeled and chopped, because “*What’s standing between you and mashed potatoes?!?*” Cue the harried working mom, who is spending all day (in meetings, on the phone, driving home ... you get the picture) in a Sisyphean loop of potato preparation!

The off-hand comment, was my observation on Facebook that started with SRYSLY???. Peeling a couple of potatoes seemed like the least of my worries and certainly wasn’t the critical factor in sending me over the edge. After all, I thought, when did we become so busy that peeling a few potatoes was a complete waste of all our time.

Now before we launch into this topic further, I just want to clarify that among “convenience foods”, in fact, the frozen potatoes are some of the more benign things out there, containing only potatoes and sodium phosphate. What irked me more was the approach, once again, that someone (e.g. big food), knew better how I should be spending my time!

As it turned out, this appeared to ignite an interesting exchange of comments, with many having the same impression as I, but others pointing out that with busy families, they would prefer not to spend their time peeling potatoes thank-you-very-much.

Now in my previous life as an economist, life is all about the opportunity cost. One of the hazards of being a “recovering” economist is that this notion is pretty much hardwired into me ... so even now, I can’t help wondering what the costs are.

From a straight \$\$ point of view, there are costs, In fact, compare the cost of potatoes in the bag, at \$3.99 per 750 grams, which you can really only use for mashed potatoes, to the actual potatoes at about \$1.30 for the same amount – maybe not as big a difference as you might have figured, but remember two things:



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1. The large food processing company buys their potatoes at less than wholesale prices; and
2. When you buy potatoes in their original state, you have the option to change your mind! Don't feel like mashed potatoes? You can have baked instead! French fries! Scalloped potatoes! Croquettes! Think of all the options! There right off the bat is an opportunity cost!

Even factoring in your costs (say at the wage rate of \$12.25 per hour, which coincidentally is the AVERAGE hourly wage of those in the accommodation and food services sector – second lowest among all sector wage rates, only beaten out by those actually growing our food in the agriculture sector!), the time taken to peel and slice 750 grams worth of potatoes is at most 10 minutes, adding another \$2.00 to the bill.

So you only spend a bit more money when you add in the time! And you gain a valuable 10 minutes of your time, BUT, you still have to cook the darn things, but you are also stuck with a bag of single-purpose potatoes.

In addition to choice, you ALSO lose the other things you might have been doing while preparing those potatoes:

- The tactile feel of the potatoes:
- The realization that you are handling something grown from the earth
- The opportunity to talk with your kids about how potatoes grow
- Choice about where you want to get your potatoes! From the supermarket? From your back yard? From your local farmstand? Organic or not?
- That moment of contemplation you might have had while standing in the kitchen at the end of a busy day.

This is just the most recent example of convenience products aimed at making our lives easier! -- Rice that cooks in 2 minutes, Pot pies that crisp in the microwave while you



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talk to your coworkers in the lunch room, or my favourite, the microwaveable hamburger (bun and all!!!)

But I have to ask myself, do I really need to be able to cook rice in the time it takes to put my underwear on?

We (North Americans in general) are becoming such a nation of people who don't really cook, that shows with titles such as "Semi-Homemade" top the ratings charts (Visions of early tuna noodle casserole come full circle!!!), Swansons is spearheading the campaign for families to stay home and eat dinner together, and we now consider it normal when "making" spaghetti, to pour the sauce out of a jar!

In fact, things have become so dire that the latest US food guidelines (due out this fall), have come to the conclusion that "Nutritional education, cooking skills and food safety needs to be strengthened, especially among families. The idea is to get people to cook and eat at home more" (*as reported in the NY Times, June 15, 2010*). Pretty sad when your government has to tell you to stay home and eat!

In fact, those who cry the emperor has no clothes (as did Michael Ruhlman at this year's IACP conference, when stating "bullshit" to the notion that we're all such busy people that it's ok to eat like that!), face being called elitist and out-of-touch with reality. Ruhlman raised the titillating, but interesting notion that for 3 minutes of prep to get the roast chicken in the oven, one could have an hour of free time to have carnal relations with one's significant other, or failing that, help the kids with the homework or heaven forbid, talk about the day's events!

It's about choice and how we value our time. Surely basic nourishment (Right at the foundation of Maslow's hierarchy!!! with water and breathing!!!) is worthy of choosing to spend some quality time with your food? To make a conscious choice about whether to cook or not? For all the decriers of Ruhlman's stance on this issue, what he raises is



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merely the concept of awareness and informed decision making about one of our most basic needs – that of eating. BUT, food is not only a basic need, but the ONLY one that weaves a thread through all aspects of our psyches – social, psychological, spiritual

We eat and prepare food to Socialize, Celebrate, Share, Grieve, Entertain and Create, not just to Nourish ourselves.

When we prepare food, we also: Socialize; Share information, skills and knowledge; Celebrate; Create; Decompress; Entertain; and, sometimes Nourish our souls!

If we outsource the preparation of that food, we lose intergenerational transmission of knowledge, skill and intuition regarding our food, and all those other dimensions! I don't know how many people I've had conversations with over the last 3 months who have commented that girlfriends/spouses don't cook nearly as well as their mothers, and definitely not as well as their grandmothers.

Interesting that food preparation is still viewed as a primarily female activity – activity that is typically omitted from GDP estimates (as studied and written about by New Zealand economist Marilyn Waring), but THAT is another talk for another day!

Couple that with the fact that the plethora of food shows, magazines and “foodie” blogs leave many folks inadequate if they're not preparing foie gras with sauted rapini they've hand-picked from their local organic farm, means many folks give up even before they've started!!!! People used to just cook! Without recipes! Tasty food! Dinner after dinner, night after night! And nary a garnish in sight. And that's perfectly ok!

In many respects, the steady introduction of convenience foods has left us wide open to the “wisdom” of big food, following the latest food fad because its “good for us”. This erodes our basic intuition about how and what to eat – not only are we outsourcing our food preparation, but we are also outsourcing how and what we learn about food.



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Cooking with grandma has been replaced by the evening cooking lessons at the Cordon Bleu for the busy working woman (or man) on the go, and the latest debrief from the nutritionists at Company X's test labs about the latest miracle substance found in exotic plants from across the sea.

The idea I came to talk about began with rant, BUT is really the idea of: How do we begin in-sourcing our food again!!!

I think this is a conversation worth continuing over the next few months! I feel privileged that I am in a position to work with food on a daily basis, but am becoming alarmed that for many people, it takes drastic illness before people consider cooking from scratch a worthwhile endeavour!

I've also been thinking about what options there are out there for people who want to in-source their food, but don't necessarily want to turn their lives upside down doing it. Would something like community or communal cooking opportunities be one solution? Cooking classes in schools? Cooking clubs or multilevel marketing approaches to sharing "how tos" about food?

I'm interested in doing more than just talking about this. What are some of your ideas?

Before leaving you, I would just like to leave you with a few facts that I found interesting, and caused me to pause and think:

- Convenience foods of one form or another have been around for generations. Think of pemmican, or couscous, or hasty pudding (hasty taking a full 30 minutes!)



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- Nutrition science dates to the mid 19th century and was originally focused on increasing food yields that would net a more robust workforce for the factories! And not unrelated, a more content workforce, less likely to start an insurgence!
- Interestingly enough, Prohibition was one of the biggest blows to fine dining in the United States. With people no longer able to enjoy food with their cocktails and fine wine, alcohol consumption became more about quantity than quality. On the legal side of things, it catapulted soft drink sales to the huge market share they enjoy today. On the illegal side of things, speakeasies only had to offer salty ham and pretzels with their cocktails to keep customers thirsty and coming back for more sub-par spirits!
- Campell's was marketing canned soup as a way of helping overburdened homemakers as early as 1914.
- In 1919, Fleishman's was marketing readymade bread as superior to home-baked
- Swanson TV dinners were introduced in 1954, and sold 10,000,000 in their first year!
- The home baking mix has been in decline since 1991 – consumers want products even faster than Duncan Hines Brownies!
- The early 1970s saw both the opening of Alice Waters' Chez Panisse AND the launch of the Egg McMuffin (talk about an interesting juxtaposition)

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