In 1964, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss published “The Raw and the Cooked” (“Le Cru et le Cuit”), in which he argued that turning raw food into cooked food traced a symbolic passage from nature to culture. Cooking, in other words, was a kind of *bildungsroman* for civilization itself. Lévi-Strauss’ essay theorized what Julia Child’s popular television series, *The French Chef*, had begun to demonstrate a year earlier with respect to American society; for we were evolving, under her tutelage, from the “raw” to the “cooked”— from meat loaf and mashed potatoes to *coq au vin* and *pommes de terres lyonnaises*. The recent film, *Julie & Julia*, is an index to how far we have come, not only in our culinary evolution but in our cinematic one.

It is hard to think of an American movie before the 1960s that concerned itself with food. There are, of course, plenty of scenes over dinner in classic Hollywood films and a few moments of food business (James Cagney’s shoving a grapefruit in Mae Clarke’s face in *The Public Enemy* comes to mind). But we rarely if ever see what characters are eating, and cooking as a process is mostly banished from view. I can think of only one film from the 1940s in which food has a thematic role: the delightful *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), in which Barbara Stanwyck plays a food writer, an assumed exemplar of domesticity, whose publisher decides she should make Christmas dinner for a newly returned war hero. The problem is that she can’t; her professional persona is a fraud, and she is really a single career girl who doesn’t know how to boil water. The film ends, predictably, with the promise that she will marry the hero and learn how to cook out of sight of public — and cinematic — view.

Not until the 1960s did food begin to be directly represented in movies. Julia Child’s televised approach to cooking seems to have augured the change. The sight of the ungainly Child clomping around the kitchen, mopping her brow with a dish towel, and missing the pan in flipping a pancake (a scene recreated in *Julie & Julia*) was a departure from the image of prescribed routine and feminine propriety associated with the fictional Betty Crocker and the airbrushed Donna Reed. Child was the forerunner of a more unfettered, even transgressive, representation of food that would appear in films of the 1960s and ’70s: the lascivious eating scene in *Tom Jones* (1963); the deconstruction of a sandwich by Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970); the grotesque gourmet meals, meant to mirror the grotesque crimes, in *Frenzy* (1972); the food fight in *Animal House* (1978). In *The Godfather* (1972), Clemenza makes spaghetti sauce between killing people, and delivers what must be one of the most cited lines in movie history (at least over dessert in Italian restaurants): “Leave the gun, take the cannoli.” (Two films during this period were also noteworthy in linking food to outrageous and macabre plot lines: the 1973 French-Italian social satire *La grande bouffe* and 1978’s farcical *Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?*)

Food and sex, food and social rebellion, food and violence — they were now being yoked together, providing new imagistic and thematic possibilities for cinematic expression. By the 1980s and ’90s, we see food threading its way through American films like *My Dinner with Andre*, *Heartburn*, *Moondruck*, *Mystic Pizza*, *When Harry Met Sally*, *The Freshman*, *Goodfellas*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *Soul Food*. In several of these films, cooking is more than a background motif; it is an activity that helps define character and anchor plot.

Julia Child’s introduction of French cooking to the American public also coincided — and arguably assisted — in the opening of America to foreign film. At the same time she was whipping up a *soule meunière* on *The French Chef*, American students were taking field trips to see the latest foreign import at Manhattan’s Paris Theater. It seems fitting, therefore, that a major turning point in the representation of food on film came from abroad, the 1987 Danish film *Babette’s Feast* (*Babettes gaestebud*). (The 1985 Japanese *Tampopo*, about the culinary education of a widowed noodle-maker, did not gain the same traction, possibly because Japanese food had not yet become widely popular in America.)

*Babette’s Feast* tells the story of a refugee from the Paris uprisings of 1871 who escapes to Denmark and is taken in by two pious, elderly sisters who hire her as their cook. One day, the Frenchwoman has an unexpected windfall: She wins the lottery and decides to use the money to prepare a “real French dinner” for her benefactors. The cooking of this meal becomes the focus of the second half of the film — both a
flamboyant spectacle and a delicate source of suspense as we await its effect on the sisters and their friends, who have lived a simple, stoic life up to this point. The film celebrates the artistry of fine cooking and the delight of fine dining, and connects both to a higher form of enlightenment. At the end, the food acts on its partakers like a spiritual opiate, making them more fully alive and more deeply appreciative of each other.

_Babette’s Feast_ became a cult favorite among an emerging population of “foodies” — the term itself newly coined as gourmet cooking clubs began to replace bridge groups in upper-middle-class circles. It was followed, three years later, by _Big Night_, an American effort along the same lines. This film generates additional suspense by linking the meal to the expectation of a celebrity guest (a plot point I attribute to America’s Puritanical unwillingness to let food do too much thematic work), but it functions like its predecessor in having the cooking of the meal (in this case an Italian one) structure the narrative and deliver much of the emotional effect. The dishes prepared are at once wondrously creative and profoundly material, and they offer the dual pleasures of sensual eating and social bonding.

_Big Night_ is also a restaurant film, which means that it adds the division of two spheres — kitchen and dining room — to the linear progression of moving from the raw to the cooked. The two brothers in the film, Primo and Secundo, represent the two kinds of skills — of culinary art and practical business — associated with these spheres and required in the running of a restaurant. The dramatic potential of this division is arguably another legacy of Julia Child who, in her tendency to sputter and sweat and drop things on the floor, showed that the kitchen, though it lies out of view of the dining room, can be a site of drama — as emotionally fraught in its way as the bedroom.

One of the best restaurant films in recent years to draw on the psychological symbolism of the restaurant’s divided space is the 2001 German film _Mostly Martha_ (Bella Marsha, remade in the U.S. in 2007 as _No Reservations_). The film opens with a mesmerizing credit sequence in which the chef Martha and her cooking staff prepare elaborate dishes in the kitchen, while the tables in the front of their small, well-appointed restaurant are carefully set, the patrons seated, and the finished dishes served. The sequence is compelling because it draws on the satisfaction we feel in seeing scattered and unprepossessing ingredients brought together and transformed into an elegant public presentation. In the film, Martha must make an analogous journey, moving from a neurotic loner to an emotionally fulfilled member of a social group. Despite her intense involvement in cooking, she is not shown to eat anything until she begins to form genuine personal relationships.

The 1994 Taiwanese _Eat Drink Man Woman_ (Yin shi nan nu), an early work by the director Ang Lee, also does a masterful job linking food to psychological and familial issues. As the film begins, we see the main character, the widowed father of three grown daughters, painstakingly prepare an intricate and copious Sunday meal. The feast he finally sets on the table both dazzles and oppresses — we can understand why the daughters, smothered by their father’s attempt to hold them within the family circle, look miserable when they sit down to eat. Both the father in this film and the heroine in _Mostly Martha_ are creative artists with food, but also, as is often the case for artists, distanced from the very humanity that their art is intended to support. Both use food as a surrogate for responsibility and a block against it. The plots of both films chart the characters’ journey from standing aloof from others to becoming involved with them — from cooking to eating: an existential passage from raw to cooked, kitchen to dining room, id to ego.

The influence of _Babette’s Feast_ on _Big Night_ and the adaptation of _Mostly Martha_ into _No Reservations_ reflect an American willingness over the past few decades to borrow from foreign film in much the same way that we have borrowed from foreign cuisine. Another example is the adaptation of _Eat Drink Man Woman_ into the 2001 American film, _Tortilla Soup_. In the adaptation, the Chinese characters are changed to Mexican-Americans, Chinese food to Mexican food. One of the adaptors, Vera Blasi, is Brazilian, and would go on to write the screenplay for _Woman on Top_ (2000), another food-centered American film, this one starring the Spanish actress Penelope Cruz and directed by the Venezuelan Fina Torres. We have arrived at an American “fusion cinema,” and it hardly seems surprising that a director like Ang Lee, who made _Eat Drink Man Woman_ in his native Taiwan 15 years ago, now makes big-budget Hollywood productions that focus occasionally, but by no means consistently, on Chinese subjects.

One of the delights of watching food-centric films is to see the main characters demonstrate their culinary skills. The breaking of an egg, the flipping of an omelet, the chopping of an onion (or a carrot or a piece of celery) become impressive feats when performed with dexterity and brio. The food writer Michael Pollan has noted that television cooking shows have come to resemble athletic events, showcasing the spectacular, often competitive talents of their chefs. In narrative film, however, the spectacle of cooking is always more than spectacle; it is also a dynamic means of representing character. Chopping, in particular, in being both precise and violent, is an exceptionally cinematic activity, capable of expressing repressed emotions of rage,
bitterness, and passion. It is no wonder that most every film in which food plays a role invariably has a chopping scene.

It is impossible to talk about films in which the preparation of food is central to the story without reference to the 2007 Disney film, *Ratatouille*. I am not generally a fan of animated films or of the anthropomorphized creatures that these films favor, but *Ratatouille* gave me new respect for the genre. The movie brilliantly exploits the suspicion of restaurant patrons that something unseemly may be happening out of sight. In this case, there’s a rat in the kitchen, and the rat is doing the cooking. *Ratatouille* is a tribute to the ability of animated film to renovate our sense not just of what is possible — we all know that cartoon characters can be run over by cars and get up unfazed — but also of what is palatable. After seeing the film, I became, at least theoretically, more tolerant of rodents (an antidote of sorts to damage done me by George Orwell’s account of rats in the kitchen in *Down and Out in Paris and London*). *Ratatouille* made me accept the conceit that a rat could be a gifted chef and also, perhaps just as unlikely, that a nasty food critic could be transformed into a happy and sociable man through a mouthful of ratatouille (a dish which transports him, in a nod to Proust’s madeleine experience, back to his childhood).

A spate of movies in the past decade have attributed exceptional powers to the female cook, appropriating elements of magical realism in the service of social commentary. *Like Water for Chocolate*, a 1992 Mexican film, shows its heroine’s culinary gifts to be a form of natural magic, bestowed on her by a family servant to oppose the rigid adherence to custom that separates her from the man she loves. *Chocolat* (2000) connects the heroine’s talent for making irresistible chocolates with her marginality as a single mother in a small French town. And *Woman on Top* has the heroine’s cooking skills develop in compensation for a disability: a severe case of motion sickness. Cooking, in this last film, also fuels a picaresque journey in which the character gains control over her career and her marriage. *Woman on Top* is not a particularly good film — it has a foolish, slipshod feel about it — but it is interesting because it uses cooking to make formal as well as social points. It draws on a potpourri of international talent and features dance and musical sequences, surreal imagery, and fantasy. In one scene, the heroine, played by the incomparable Cruz, becomes a teacher at a cooking school and gives a languorous, sexy lesson on the chili pepper. In another, she and her transvestite best friend become stars of a cooking show, while her husband and a make-shift band play Brazilian music in the background. The movie seems by turns amateurish and avant garde, naïve and knowing. New trends in food — both new kinds of food awareness and new food types and fusions — seem to be influencing its disjointed and iconoclastic atmosphere and structure.

*Woman on Top* is a whimsical fantasy that has the scrappy, uneven feel of a low budget independent production. *Julie & Julia* is based ostensibly on real people and has the polish and swagger of the mainstream big-budget film it is. But different as the two movies are in their production values, thematic focus, and style, they resemble each other in that in both the joys of cooking seem ultimately a means of exploring the joys of representation. Both are, in this respect, decidedly postmodern films.

*Julie & Julia* stars Meryl Streep, who happens to have already played a cookbook author in the 1986 *Heartburn*, based on the roman a clef by Nora Ephron. Ephron is, of course, the director of *Julie & Julia*, Streep is known to be a great appropriator of foreign personas, and here she is playing a great appropriator of a foreign cuisine: Julia Child, the gawky American, who brought the art of French cooking to America, first in book form and then through television. Woven into this narrative is the contemporary story of Julie Powell, played by Amy Adams, who imitates Child not only by methodically cooking all the recipes in her cookbook in the course of a year but also by becoming an author, in this case of a blog, which is, in turn, translated into a visual medium, the movie *Julie & Julia*, To this representational maze, the film adds its share of self-reflexive allusions: At one point, the modern Julie and her husband watch a 1978 *Saturday Night Live* skit in which Dan Ackroyd imitates Julia Child — making us wonder if Streep got some of the tics of her portrayal from watching it herself. In another sequence, Adams as Powell learns through her agent that Julia Child disapproves of her blog — raising the question of what the “real” Child, now dead, would have thought of *Julie & Julia*. The ingredients of this film, in other words, have undergone so much recycling and reconstitution that it is hard to know where we are with respect to the real and the representation, the raw and the cooked. This conforms, I should note, with a general tendency in postmodern culture to reverse established categories on all fronts (hence, sushi is now a sophisticated food option, and locavore and raw food movements, “progressive” trends).

Nora Ephron is a talented filmmaker who has emerged in recent years as something of a contemporary Preston Sturges. Like Sturges, she is versatile (she writes, directs, and produces), has a gift for satire, and is supremely attuned to social trends. But Sturges was working in the great era of classical narrative film, and Ephron is working in a more diversified postmodern era, where cinema, like food, is expected to be increasingly surprising and allusive. As an accomplished cook and food writer, she is well placed not only to
make a film about food but also to understand the many and ingenious ways in which food can be used in representation.

Yet I have to say that for all its ingenuity, *Julie & Julia* left me unsatisfied. Watching it, I felt like those daughters in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, sitting down for a dinner that was vaguely oppressive in being so copious and elaborate. What is it that I wanted? For one thing, more scenes of Julia Child learning to cook. Yes, there’s the requisite chopping scene, but what about the peeling, mixing, and waiting by the oven that constitutes “mastering the art of French cooking”? I also wanted to see Child’s art re-enacted. What does it mean to cook those recipes today, and why, other than to write a blog that can be turned into a best-selling book and blockbuster movie, would one bother? Finally, I wanted more “(raw) stuff: not just more of the cooking process but of the psychology that informs it — the relationships to mothers and husbands, the sense of what cooking displaces and how it distills emotion.

A legacy of postmodernism may be the death of a narrative structure that moves in linear fashion from beginning to end — from the raw to the cooked, so to speak. Siobhan Phillips noted in *The Hudson Review* not long ago that “a nation with a lot of food books is a nation without much sense of food.” One could similarly say that a film with a lot of allusions to representation is a film without much sense of story-telling. Truth be told, I miss a good *coq au vin* and *pommes de terres lyonnaises*, even a good meat loaf and mashed potatoes. And I miss as well the simple pleasures of narrative film. • 22 January 2010

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