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NEW FASHIONS IN FOOD

Three years ago, I wrote a column deploring the dreary sameness of the diet of so many Americans, especially of those in the fast-food generation. The column expressed bewilderment that, although our supermarkets offer a daily dazzling display of beautiful fresh foods for home preparation, so many Americans seem satisfied with the same packaged fare day after day.

It was, therefore, a special pleasure to read a recent cover story called "America's Great New Food Craze" in one of the leading newsmagazines. The news story tells how supermarket managers say that they have never experienced as much demand for food variety as they do today.

Supermarkets are responding to this demand by stocking a wide range of fresh produce (that until recently could be found only in specialty shops), seafoods, ethnic products, and natural foods. Even restaurants feel the demand for greater variety, nutrition, new taste experiences, and better quality.

Those who care about our nation's nutrition are delighted with the big changes in America's eating habits. People are eating less foods that are high in cholesterol, sugar and salt, and eating more fresh produce, poultry, fish, juices, yogurt, and skim milk (rather than whole milk).

My column of three years ago bemoaned the fact that home cooking had gone out of style, and that restaurants no longer advertised "Mom's apple pie," "Grandma's pancakes," or "Dinners that taste like home cooking." Three years ago, the fast-food generation looked for foods advertised to "taste like take-out" and "have that restaurant-hamburger taste at home." Surveys then showed that 40 percent of Americans under age 30 believed that food eaten away from home is at least as good as food cooked at home.

The most exciting part about the shift in American eating habits of the last three years is the revival of the lost art of home cooking. Consumers now look upon food and its preparation as an enjoyable pastime, and they are devoting more energy to it.

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There seems to be no end to the constant and increasing demand for cookbooks. Newspapers have expanded their food sections. Cooking classes are bulging with eager learners. Perhaps Mom has discovered that her liberation from the kitchen by the fast-food chains actually reduced her family's quality of life.

Fast-food fills a real need in our busy lives and I'm not knocking it (except for the so-called "shakes" that pretend to be milk shakes but never came near a cow). I just think that home cooking has so much more to offer in terms of taste, variety, nutrition, and eye appeal.

I hope that the fast-food generation will learn the delights of overnight yeast-rising breads and rolls, and of old-fashioned buckwheat cakes for Sunday breakfast. I hope they will someday appreciate the difference between real homemade ice cream, the kind that literally melts in your mouth, and commercial ice cream glued together with preservatives that refuse to melt.

Turkeys are now cheaper than in many years. They take more time to cook than a hamburger, but when a turkey is home-roasted, kept moist and frequently-basted, it is the choicest of all entrees and well worth the trouble.

I hope that most of our youngsters will some day enjoy the taste treat of strawberry shortcake made with genuine shortcake and real whipped cream instead of cake poured out of a package and "cream" squirted out of a can.

I hope the new cooks will discover the endless succession of delectable dishes that can be made from the many kinds of squashes on the market. And how could anyone be content with an instant potato when a real potato is so easy to bake and so delicious?

The return to the lost art of home cooking might even inspire eager cooks to try that most delicious of dishes, the souffle, which requires hand-beaten egg whites to give that special lightness without artificial support. The favorite flavors in our household are chocolate, cheese, spinach, lemon, and eggplant.

The tremendous variety of beautiful fresh foods available for home preparation is the crowning achievement of the American private enterprise system. The best news of the New Year is that it is fashionable again for Mom to be in the kitchen (at least some of the time).

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