

Richmond Review Article – The Manly Art of Food Security

By Stephen C. Mullins

Here's something that puzzles me. When barbecue season arrives in BC, why is it that many men who normally shy away from cooking will eagerly take to their backyard grills without the slightest hesitation? Being a master of the grill is a point of pride for many guys, something that is easily confirmed by watching shows like Grill It! on the Food Network, where the host and his male guests create barbecued masterpieces on grills that look as shiny and as complex as NASA's Mars rovers.

This isn't to say women don't enjoy barbecuing too, but in our society, it seems open flame cooking is one of the few areas of meal planning and preparation that most men embrace, even if they avoid other styles of cooking. Unfortunately for many men, cooking is considered women's work, a misguided attitude that persists in countries worldwide.

I've often wondered why this is still a thing, or was ever a thing. When the great explorers like Jacques Cartier or Simon Fraser went adventuring, they usually had an all-male crew, so the cooks were men. In places like BC, rugged logging and mining crews were fed hearty meals prepared, in the most part, by male cooks. Most of the time these men weren't barbecuing, but cooking stews, roasts, pies and other meals on iron stoves, and nobody thought it was unmanly. So how is it that if the same meals are cooked today in pastel coloured suburban kitchens on sleek metal stoves, cooking magically becomes women's work?

I wish I had the space in this article to delve into the psychology of this, but all I can do is point out the illogic behind this discrepancy and hope it will spur people to re-examine their attitudes about meal planning, food shopping and cooking, most of which is still done by women. Food security advocates have been urging men to get more involved in these activities for years now, and fortunately, there has been some progress.

A recent study by three University of North Carolina professors, published in the prestigious Nutrition Journal, found that:

“...the proportion of men who cooked increased from 29% in 1965–1966 to 42% in 2007–2008. For women, the proportion of women cooking declined from 92% in 1965–1966 to 68% in 2007–2008.”

Despite this welcome increased participation by men, the fact remains that the majority of men still don't cook at all. While it's true some men don't cook because they were never taught how, it remains that many men don't cook (other than barbecuing) because it's not a priority when their partners are doing the cooking for them, or they are discouraged by outdated taboos. This is a big problem because getting people to cook more often, regardless of their gender, greatly helps the cause of food security.

When people cook, they quickly learn how hard it is to get fresh, wholesome ingredients at a reasonable price, and they start asking why this is so. They start to learn what's grown locally and what's imported, or they begin to wonder if organic ingredients might be better for themselves and their family. And by choosing to cook their own meals, it also means they have largely turned away from relying solely on poor quality fast or pre-processed foods. There are many favourable consequences that flow from the decision to cook at home, so the more people that do it, the better.

So the outdated notion that cooking is unmanly has got to go. The myriad of useful food security benefits that cooking brings can't be maximized if half the population hasn't been trained in how to cook or has been erroneously taught that it's inappropriate for them to do so. What we're left with is a call to action.

Men, forget what you've been told about cooking. Be fearless like those early explorers and pioneers, because it's a man's world in the kitchen, always has been. Creating food masterpieces can be just as satisfying on the stove as on the barbecue, if you want it to be. Your choices about what to buy, cook and eat will not only boost your own health, but perhaps that of your community too. So don't be afraid to boldly take up the spatula and fry pan. Do it for yourself. Do it for your kids or your partner. Do it for your mom. But do it. Be a leader in the manly art of food security.

Steve Mullins is the communications manager for Richmond Food Security Society. We work to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out www.richmondfoodsecurity.org and find out how you can get involved.