

DIFFERENT FOR GIRLS

DINING MAY HAVE CHANGED IN THE 21ST CENTURY, SAYS MIRANDA SAWYER, BUT THE GENDER DIVIDE IS AS STRONG AS EVER

Yak penis isn't to everyone's taste, but what if it's exquisitely prepared and cooked by a trained Oriental penile chef? Then, naturally, it becomes a delicacy worth chomping down on, and more – it becomes Macho Food, eaten by men, in order to make other men laugh. The penis becomes the perfect gag. In all senses.

Missy Food (as in you miss out a lot of it) is, in contrast, eaten by women in order to make other women jealous: usually of their self-restraint. Among female diners, a perfect meal is fish and salad, as fresh and sauce-free as you can get it. A delicious choice, if done well: but that's not the point. The purpose of such a meal is to demonstrate control, to show you're mistress of your body and its nasty appetites. Once everyone's clocked that, you can go as far as to follow your main course with a chocolate pudding – as long as you have one spoonful only, then sink back into your chair and declare yourself too full to take another bite.

Though it might seem too tragically stereotyped to actually exist, the gastro gender divide is very real, and growing. Men might not retire for cigars or order for the womenfolk anymore, but these customs have been replaced only by new ones. Consider the recent broadcasting success of BBC4's *Cooking in the Danger Zone*, which gave us the yak penis scene, as well as sizzling live scorpion kebabs and the correct way to cook testicles. It had a male presenter, Stefan Gates, who followed in the dashingly masculine footsteps of New York chef-turned-author Anthony Bourdain, whose *Extreme Eating* programme let the viewer delight in his gobbling up a still-twitching snake, and then drinking its blood.

Sushi versus St Johns. Seafood versus spare ribs. Like caipirinhas and Brazilians, like fake bakes and fake orgasms, lite bites are ladies' fare, while anything big, bloody and BBQ'd is just for the chaps. Which means that, though they still do most of



Missy Food



Macho Food

the cooking at home, you don't see many women – other than dear Delia – having the high profile, pan-media cookery career of Gordon Ramsay, or Jamie Oliver, or Anthony Bourdain, or Rick Stein, or Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. Watching a nice lady politely whip up a lemon-dressed salad just doesn't have the same televisual appeal as witnessing a full-blooded assault: on your kitchen workers; on uncooperative livestock; or still-twitching seafood.

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Male cooking – and male eating – is hearty and earthy. A man wears his chef scars with pride. They show he can take the pace and abuse of a working kitchen, he can work whilst high on adrenaline and no sleep, and he's so dedicated to his job that he never goes home. Men chomp through the biggest burger, or the hottest curry, or the weirdest dish on the menu, just to show they've got bottle. In short, fellas create fuss about food. If he's a chef, each elaborate, finicky, original meal has to be perfect, or there'll be knives and tantrums thrown willy-nilly. If he's an amateur, his once-in-a-month special means that no one else is allowed in the kitchen while it's being created and that someone else will be doing the clearing up. When men go to restaurants, they like their meat as raw-as-you-can-get it or burnt to a BBQ crisp. It's all XXXtreme and that's where the enjoyment lies. Females and food go the other way: if it's not everyday family fare, then women cook and eat by weighing and measuring – in calories or treats, in naughty or nice. In this prim, inhibited world, steamed vegetables and rice is a "good" meal; a roast dinner a "bad" one. It's interesting to consider the recent heroines of food – the Two Fat Ladies and Nigella. These cooks (not chefs) were the radicals of femi-foodies, simply

because they ignored the female rules and cooked with butter and cream, with chocolate and oil, with calories a go-go. They dipped their fingers in rich sauces, licked spoons covered in pudding. They enjoyed the visceral nature of food, revelled in its lusty pleasures. In short, they looked like women, but cooked like men.

Actually, that's not quite right: they looked like women, and they cooked like women would if they didn't have so many hang-ups about food. Men aren't that interested in sweet things, because they're neutral about them. They don't regard a dessert as a bomb set to explode on their hips. Nigella and the two Fat Ladies knew full well that publicly making, and eating, a chocolate soufflé or deep-fried Mars bar is as radical to women as the refusal to remove excess body hair. Women just don't do that kind of thing. They don't allow themselves to.

For too many women, food is either a chore to be undertaken, or a challenge to be beaten. So, by doing their own, sweet thing, Nigella Lawson, Clarissa Dickson-Wright and the late Jennifer Paterson were as radical as any blood-sucking, penis-sampling, staff-bullying chef de l'extreme. They showed women that food is to be enjoyed and relished; that it isn't as good as sex, or shoes – it's just different. That if you aren't frightened of it, food is one of life's most wonderful, delicious pleasures. And they did it all without skewering a single, still-living scorpion. Now that's extreme. **GFR**