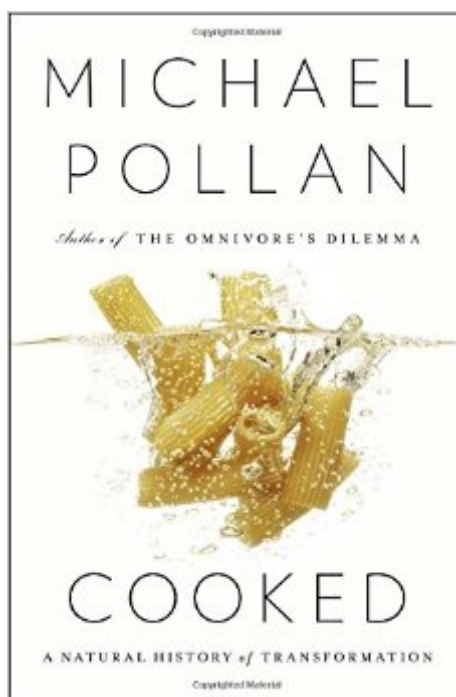


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# Cooked: A Natural History Of Transformation



## Synopsis

**\*\*Now a docu-series airing on Netflix on February 19, 2016, starring Pollan as he explores how cooking transforms food and shapes our world. Oscar-winning filmmaker Alex Gibney executive produces the four-part series based on Pollan's book, and each episode will focus on a different natural element: fire, water, air, and earth. \*\*** "An important, possibly life-altering, reading for every living, breathing human being." --Boston Globe

In *Cooked*, Michael Pollan explores the previously uncharted territory of his own kitchen. Here, he discovers the enduring power of the four classical elements—fire, water, air, and earth—to transform the stuff of nature into delicious things to eat and drink. Apprenticing himself to a succession of culinary masters, Pollan learns how to grill with fire, cook with liquid, bake bread, and ferment everything from cheese to beer. Each section of *Cooked* tracks Pollan's effort to master a single classic recipe using one of the four elements. A North Carolina barbecue pit master tutors him in the primal magic of fire; a Chez Panisse-trained cook schools him in the art of braising; a celebrated baker teaches him how air transforms grain and water into a fragrant loaf of bread; and finally, several mad-genius "fermentos" (a tribe that includes brewers, cheese makers, and all kinds of picklers) reveal how fungi and bacteria can perform the most amazing alchemies of all. The reader learns alongside Pollan, but the lessons move beyond the practical to become an investigation of how cooking involves us in a web of social and ecological relationships. Cooking, above all, connects us. The effects of not cooking are similarly far reaching. Relying upon corporations to process our food means we consume large quantities of fat, sugar, and salt; disrupt an essential link to the natural world; and weaken our relationships with family and friends. In fact, *Cooked* argues, taking back control of cooking may be the single most important step anyone can take to help make the American food system healthier and more sustainable. Reclaiming cooking as an act of enjoyment and self-reliance, learning to perform the magic of these everyday transformations, opens the door to a more nourishing life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I think I've read every one of Pollan's books. I loved some, especially *Omnivore's Dilemma*, while others were just good (*In Defense of Food*). With *Cooked*, there were parts I loved, while other parts I was ready to skim over. In the end, I enjoyed the book immensely, but not as much as some of his others. Like many of his other books, Pollan divides *Cooked* into thematic sections (Here: Fire [Grilling], Water [Cooking in water], Air [baking], and Earth [fermenting/pickling]) but they seemed a little forced, as Pollan himself seems to acknowledge. You need fire for three of the four, and yeast plays a pretty big role in both beer and bread. I get what he was trying to do, but it felt like it didn't quite work to enhance the themes of the book rather than merely provide breaking points. His introduction sets the stage for the entire book. He identifies a dilemma in modern culture: we spend less time cooking than ever but more time watching and idolizing others who cook. Pollan explains that contemplating this dilemma triggered something in him to write this book, and I think he makes an important overarching observation: although cooking may not be the most efficient use of time, it is an alchemic process that transforms both raw foods and people. Without cooking, humans would not be what we are today. The modern trend to remove cooking from everyday life, therefore, is likely to have huge consequences on who we are. As Pollan notes, our fascination with cooking reflects the deep-seated position it holds in our lives. The book contains long sections with meditations on what cooking is and what it means to culture, both ancient and modern, and for the most part I enjoyed them.

Michael Pollan has the amazing ability to take the mundane (corn, building a workshop, plant seeds) and make it fascinating. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* could take something many of us take for granted and turn it into an incredible journey. Pollan opens the book by explaining the day that realized that all of the questions that occupy his time seem to lead back to cooking. How to improve your health? Cooking. Good way to connect with the family? Cooking (and brewing). The most important thing we can do to help reform the American food complex? Cooking. Pollan admits he has always been mildly interested in the

act, but it wasn't until he realized how important it could be that he began wanting to learn how to do it in earnest. Pollan realized that though American's seem to be obsessed with cooking (Top Chef, The Taste, Anthony Bourdain, Hell's Kitchen) we seem to do very little of it. Pollan breaks down his education into four sections, much like he broke down *The Botany of Desire* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The first section, called Fire, starts out at a North Carolina BBQ. It's here that Pollan strives to solve the mystery of "pig-plus-wood-smoke-plus-time" and what makes it so darn good. He spends time with pit-masters, learning the fine art of the fire, which involves everything from Freudian theory, ancient gods and the Bible to chemistry and, of course, Big Meat. Before his fire education will be over, the reader will journey with Pollan to Manhattan, Berkeley, Spain and back again. From there we dive into Water, which starts out, inexplicably, with chopping onions.

To state the obvious, few people can write about food and food related issues like Michael Pollan. He has changed the way our culture--or at least well-read segments of our culture--thinks about our industrial food complex. In *Cooked*, Pollan takes his keen eye from large scale systems and focuses it on the kitchen and cooking (while naturally showing the connections to bigger issues). I suppose, I should write "my" kitchen, as Pollan is directing us to make this intimate and personal account. To build our relationship with food, we need to cook for ourselves, and from scratch (at least most of the time). While cooking has lost much of its esteem in our fast-paced, fast-food society, Pollan reevaluates the significance of cooking in everyday life: "Cooking, I found, gives us the opportunity, so rare in modern life, to work directly in our own support, and in the support of the people we feed. If this is not 'making a living,' I don't know what is" (pg23). In *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, Pollan pairs his sharp journalism skills with his acumen as a thoughtful analytic essayist to look more deeply at the way we transform plants and animals into food--and why a better understanding of how and why we do it matters. He observes: "The work, or process, [of cooking] retains an emotional or psychological power we can't quite shake, or don't want to. And in fact it was after a long bout of watching cooking programs on television that I began to wonder if this activity I had always taken for granted might be worth taking a little more seriously" (pg4). Not surprisingly to anyone familiar with Pollan's work, he uses cooking to help restore our connections to a healthier natural world.

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