

Homemade

The pleasure of making a meal for one

words *Jenny Rowe*
photo *Gaëlle Marcel*

Breakfast sat in front of the TV watching the news, fruit nibbled self-consciously at my desk, a snatch of lunch between conversations at work and a packet of crisps scoffed on the train home while I read.

Foods eaten but not enjoyed. When home beckons, empty rooms can feel daunting and my to-do list has a way of swelling like the sand in an hourglass. Not until it's too late will I remember to make myself something to eat. It's as if I have put myself on hold: I move on autopilot to the static of the dialling tone. Many times I've simply missed a mealtime when I'm alone, shoving it so far down the list it's fallen off the page entirely. Ready-made foods have sufficed.

But, when I do have a night in to cook for myself, it's a reminder that I exist in my own right, unattached to my partner, family and friends. I'm a whole person with independent desires and needs that deserve more than ad hoc nourishment. A homemade meal is a token of appreciation given to myself and my body, from myself. I say 'please' and 'thank you'. There is no doubt that gratitude will be forthcoming – it's a given.

Before I begin, I have many choices laid before me – a buffet of possibility. From what ingredients I use, to how I cook and eat: the pleasure is all mine. It's exciting and freeing to only have myself to please – simultaneously the queen and the pauper.

It turns out I'm an open-minded cook, forgiving ruler and an experimental one, too. One day, I might peel the carrots precisely,

rhythmically making my way around their uncanny forms, stripping away ribbon after ribbon of the dull, outer skin to reveal the slick, dewy sceptres underneath.

Another day, I down tools, preferring to run the potatoes under the warm tap, respecting their natural figure but rubbing at their muddied coats with my thumbs and forefingers. The water runs brown and the starchy sun-gold orb shines through.

Eyes smarting, I zip onions out of their papery coats, chopping, dicing or slicing, adapting the recipe to my mood. And my food, to me. I savour the process and watch the translucent fibrosity of the onions as they sputter and soften in hot oil. I note when things don't go to plan, knowing that it's too late to rectify any mistakes. In cooking, if not in life, I'm versatile and resourceful. I solve problems and patch things up my own way – wrong and right only exist when a judge is present, and I'm simply hungry.

I spend my day struggling to comprehend and quantify time, but when I cook at home, I have a glimpse of how it feels to be present in the moment and can actually see and taste the physical effects of time.

Ten seconds more and the bread will be toasted just how I like it, the pasta almost too-soft and sticky, just how I like it, the courgettes flecked with chilli flakes and slightly blackened – not how I like it, but close enough. The carousel of simultaneous tasks happily spin through my mind, which is entranced by the spectacle. Juices,

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seeds and spices sizzle away in the pan, in deference to the ticking kitchen clock and the rewards its hands will give to those who wait.

I can still remember the glee of being left ‘home alone’ with recipe instructions on how to make my own dinner as a teenager – the same flicker of delight licks my stomach as I take my first bite today.

From the speediest of snacks to the faggiest of feasts, cooking for myself is something to be proud of, yet it also humbles me. It’s both an affirmation of my fierce autonomy and strings that ground me, but also a reminder of how fallible humanity can be.

The delicious spaghetti carbonaras and ratatouilles aside, it’s this conviction that has me going back for more. ♦

Jenny’s oh moment is evening walks

“Marching through the fields at dusk while the starlings swoop through the trees and hedgerows, preparing for a cosy night’s sleep. So peaceful.”