Home Cooking, Nostalgia, and the Purchase of Tradition

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This article teases out meanings of “home” in everyday practices against a backdrop of anxiety in Western postmodern/postindustrial imaginaries at the beginning of a new century. Exploring reinventions of tradition, it draws on Australian women’s stories of establishing small businesses involved in the production of “homely” food and spaces. It concludes that cultural critics should go beyond simply questioning late capitalism’s flexible purchase of tradition to meet its own ends. In particular, more attention should be paid to the potential contribution of “microinventions” to the design of convivial cities and dwellings, without denying their political complexities.

Cooking is revelation and creation; and a woman can find special satisfaction in a successful cake or a flaky pastry, for not everyone can do it: one must have the gift.

— Simone de Beauvoir, 1949

Meals can be remembered only by analysing the coloured slick of oil that rings the bottom of each container: green — must be Thursday’s Thai curry; orange — Monday’s chicken vindaloo; livid red — sweet and sour something (when we succumb to a bit of takeaway nostalgia).

— Khym Lam, 1998

This article draws on the concerns, approaches and theoretical frameworks of cultural studies and cultural geography in ways of interest to those working in disciplines such as architecture, environmental design, and urban planning. Specifically, it traces the purchase of tradition — images and meanings attached to traditional spaces, experiences of duration, food practices, and presiding figures — through consuming “comfort” foods or through the nostalgic appropriations of “public” (nondomestic) space. At one level, for the urban/heritage planner, architect, or designer, the article offers implications for the project of producing comfortable dwellings and convivial cities, as well as some reflection on the interrelationships of “private” and “public” comfort. At another level, it makes a case for recognizing that the

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“lived-experience” approaches and theoretical frameworks of cultural studies and cultural geography might be useful for disciplines concerned with researching traditional environments, and vice-versa. Obviously, the intention is to encourage a fruitful intellectual exchange.

The analysis that follows stresses the need to understand the complex ways in which traditions are appropriated and reworked as commodities. However, this is not simply a story of capitalism triumphing over traditional values and practices, or one of consumer relationships formed solely by the nexus of cash-payment. While there are traces of these arguments in the analysis, there are also stories of women’s inventiveness as producers, creating products and spaces that meet people’s cultural as well as material needs. All in all, the narrative that emerges does not announce the end of tradition, but instead underlines tradition’s flexibility.

Of course, tradition can appear in unexpected places when studying cultural artifacts like food. Therefore, to begin this discussion of home cooking and its purchase, I return to the paper’s opening quotation which, paradoxically, leads me to Parisian café society in the 1940s.

HOME ON THE RANGE?

Simone de Beauvoir was not renowned for her cooking. Although she remembered catching a “glimpse of a housewife’s joys” on a December evening in 1941, as she sat writing in her Paris hotel room, surrounded by the silence of the curfew and the “delectable odour” of vegetable soup simmering on the gas ring, de Beauvoir is more likely to be figured as an icon of twentieth-century French intellectual life, holding court daily in the Café de Flore. While the café at this time (the early 1940s) did not serve food, for de Beauvoir it resonated homeliness: here was warmth, a space to work, the company of friends/dependents (“the Family”) at other tables . . . or the occasional pleasure of her being alone with Sartre, “with only the sound of a pen scratching across the paper and the smell of his pipe and her cigarette marking the other’s presence.”

“Personal possessions, a chair, a desk — a place to write. Not much has changed in over four hundred years,” wrote Witold Rybczynski more than forty years later, his recipe for late-twentieth-century domestic comfort based on unashamed nostalgia for Western bourgeois traditions of luxury, ease, clutter, privacy and intimacy. It is in this sense, then, that the Café de Flore was appropriated, for de Beauvoir and for Sartre, as an intimate space — as their home-from-home.

The romance of a writing life, particularly one that is trimmed of complicated domestic responsibilities, has always been an appealing one. Nevertheless, in the current climate of “time-space compression,” the turn to industrial cooking and the globalization of cuisine, there are contradictory cultural moments. These are ones that render embracing café society or “Monday’s chicken vindaloo” (as its working-class, takeaway equivalent) problematic. In recent years, in the Australian popular media there has been a minor moral panic in relation to discourses of urban design that predict “time-poor” futures in kitchenless houses and apartments. Arguments that traditional practices and rituals associated with home cooking and dining are, of necessity, in decline (and, with them, the material spaces of kitchens, dining and sitting rooms) appear to threaten mythical meanings of “home” as a site of place-making and identity formation in contemporary Western imaginaries.

Is home-cooked roasted chicken, for example, a “dying art”? Does this matter? According to Doreen Massey, the present time is one in which, for First World economies of affluence at least, “things are speeding up and spreading out.” As a result, the discomforts of fragmentation, disruption and “placelessness” have produced nostalgic longings for a secure world and for secure positionings within it. Certainly, food traditions appear to offer useful “tactics” for fixing “place,” with these practices dominant in migration narratives. Here, daily rituals of food growing, purchasing, cooking and eating become resonant sites for identity performance — for constant renegotiations and “re-settlements.” Of course, this argument implies that, essentially, we are all migrants, retracing, through food, our connections to time and place and maintaining the fragile balancing act of cultural positioning. For this project, the “dying art” of home cooking can be revisited (in memories, dreams or, indeed, in practice) as a comforting symbol of who we are, were, and want to be.

This is all very well. However, do “home cooking” and processes of nostalgic “identity resettlement” have a life beyond remembered “pasts,” imagined pleasures, or mourning for that “world we have lost”? What does “home cooking” represent in supposed “placeless” postmodern/postindustrial societies where everyday we are invited simply to “heat and eat” . . . to “eat and run”? What does home cooking mean when food shopping involves our judicious grazing, as global citizens, on the products of a “multiculturalism of availability” (its diverse consumer pickings) rather than a “multiculturalism of inhabitation” (the richness of lived cultures, of everyday interactions)? How has “home” itself become a purchasable “style”? And whose meanings of “home” are on the market?

To explore the Western romance of home, as, indeed, a continually reinvented product of Western anxieties about “time-space compression,” I will draw in a microcosmic fashion on Australian women’s narratives of food and place, told from the Sydney inner-city beachside suburb of Clovelly. These narratives stem from two distinct sites — small businesses concerned with food preparation, with both of these substantially managed by women. However, first of all, I want to set the scene with some recent comment in both print and electronic media from kitchen professionals: architects, food writers, restaurateurs/providores. Does the “end” of kitchens (especially the iconic kitchen table) and of home cooking (the slow cooking of peasants, of rural life) suggest the need to forge new traditions to meet changing cultural conditions? Discourses of domestic spaces and skills under threat provide a compelling place to start this discussion.
“The dining room and kitchen are under threat,” announced Greg Perlman, a Brisbane architect, early in 2000, both in The Australian (the national daily newspaper) and on national radio. Certainly, debate about the socialization of housework through cooperatives and community kitchens, or about “outsourcing” domestic labor, is not new. All the same, current debate on this topic appears to be taking distinct form within the present climate of postindustrial capital, new information technologies, and changing work cultures. For example, Perlman and his associates, in conjunction with a Brisbane property-research consultancy, conducted targeted studies of the housing needs of “Generation X” (by their definition, young people born between 1965 and 1978). Such needs, the researchers found, constituted a definite “break” with the postwar, suburban “house-and-garden” dreams of their parents’ generation. In contrast to the “baby boomers,” everyday life experiences of the current generation of young people are shaped by contract and casual employment, real wage reductions, diverse household arrangements, renting rooms in share households rather than working toward homeownership, and an orientation toward networks of friends and “public” leisure, rather than the mythical “family unit” and the “home” as a “private” space.

In terms of the impact of this generationally specific “style” of living on domestic design, Perlman also noted: “You can strip kitchens back to one basic appliance such as a microwave, a bar-sized sink without a draining board, a mini-dishwasher . . . and a refrigerator. You still need to prepare breakfast, for which you obviously need a small amount of bench space, but not to prepare anything else. Breakfast is the most common meal prepared in the home by gen X. For them, home is a dormitory.”

Without the need for formal meals (either family ones, or the ritual dinner party of home entertaining), the dining room — indeed the dining table itself — becomes redundant. Instead, Perlman’s comments suggest the following portrait of Australia’s urban Generation X at home: seated on the sofa watching television, while “grazing” on a range of “quite sophisticated” takeaway foods spread out on the coffee table. This all takes place at odd hours between work shifts in the culture or hospitality industries, before setting out to meet their “tribe” at a café or the gym, or before retiring to study/bedrooms to surf the Net.

Perlman, it should be emphasized, is sympathetic to the changed work and leisure cultures of Generation X and to issues of income that declare fully fitted kitchens and separate dining rooms an unnecessary extravagance. Architecturally speaking, his position seems a sensible one (matching the designed space to everyday life exigencies, rather than to sentimental attachments based on normative family structures and practices). Nevertheless, other professionals argue that the kitchen as an endangered space needs to be protected, as do the skills and sensory pleasures associated with home cooking, at least in its mythical forms.

John Newton, Sydney author and food writer, commenting on the latest stage in fast food’s gentrification — the establishment of e-cuisine (or food prepared for order from the Web) by notable chefs and restaurateurs — found disturbing possibilities in “a more recent trend towards high-quality meals that don’t even need a frying pan, but simply require heating.” Not only are the spaces of the kitchen under threat (all you need is “a fridge full of plastic bags that you tip in a pot”), but so are the identity of the cook and the culture of cooking itself. Here, cooking means not simply the food on the plate — the final presentation of a “stylish” product, ordered from a Website. Instead, in de Beauvoir’s words, cooking describes almost magical processes — “alchemies” of “enchanted” matter whereby “matter becomes food.”

The implication here is that those who can’t cook (or won’t cook) suffer forms of cultural impoverishment. This argument, of course, tends to overlook the traditional labor relations of domestic cooking in Western societies, whereby most men could be positioned in a perpetual state of cultural deprivation! Interestingly, Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley, analyzing data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on gendered changes in the allocation of domestic labor within Sydney households in the mid-1990s, noted that although women now spend less time in the kitchen, this does not mean that men spend more. Instead, Bittman and Pixley argued the reduction of time that women spend cooking is more connected to increased use of microwave ovens, increased purchase of takeaway foods, and increased “eating out” in cafés and restaurants. In other words, at home, if women do not cook, their services are, more often than not, purchased in the market, rather than reallocated to other household members.

Furthermore, in these (Western) postindustrial times of service-based economies and feminized workforces, this “outsourcing” of women’s domestic labor probably has a nostalgic twist. In Britain, for example, Linda McDowell and Gill Court have noted that “increasingly these ‘new’ occupations rely on marketing attributes conventionally associated with the ‘natural’ attributes of femininity — sociability, caring, and, indeed, servicing — which are marketed as an integral part of the product for sale.” One may conclude therefore that “home” cooking is still available — for a price, of course — with “other” women’s labor required to sustain its romantic associations. In other words, through nostalgic commodifications (the products of “home,” of women’s nurturance), class meanings of femininity are also sustained, indeed strengthened.

Tied to anxieties about women not cooking (at home), and to threats of kitchens shrinking to motel-like alcoves with a bar ‘frig and tea-and coffee-making facilities, are concerns about young people not ever learning to cook. Once again, these concerns are not new ones, but they do take a specific shape in the contemporary “time-poor” moment of long working days (for those in employment), disposable income (for those with income to dispose), and accelerating changes in food production/knowledge management. In 1998, Lyndey Milan, as president of Sydney’s Wine Press Club, declared, “We are growing a generation of kids who can’t cook because their mums and dads can’t . . . we are
cyber literate, but food illiterate." The occasion was a recently released national survey which found that, between 1989 and 1994, Australians’ consumption of takeaway foods increased by 58 percent, with one in four meals purchased as a takeaway.9 In this argument, although the “time-poor” Generation X has become the technology-rich one (the development of the microwave chip enabling easy access to both food and entertainment), at the same time it is this generation that displays a definite “lack” in the everyday skills of food preparation.

Stephanie Alexander (chef, restaurateur, providore, cook-book author, food journalist, television celebrity, and doyenne of the Australian food scene) agreed: “Many young people no longer learn to cook at home. Some have little experience of the Australian food scene) agreed: “Many young people no longer learn to cook at home. Some have little experience of the family table.”26 In contrast, she remembered her own growing up (in the 1950s and 1960s in rural Victoria, south of Melbourne) as a process of learning to cook:

I learnt to cook at my mother’s side, and images of her that have stayed with me . . . include Mum bent in front of the Aga oven scooping baked potatoes into her apron, shaping bread rolls for dinner, forking rough troughs in the mashed potato on top of the shepherd’s pie, slipping a slice of butter under the crust of Grandma’s Bramble cake, or in full beekeeper’s outfit setting out to gather honey from the hive.27

Here is not only a catalogue of remembered foods and techniques associated with home cooking in a semi-rural context, but also a palimpsest of “home” itself — the slow cooking of cakes baking, meat stewing, loaves proving; the warmth and aromas of a kitchen with a wood stove as its centerpiece; the iconic figure of country woman, carrying out the rituals of the day or season. These are comforting images of “home” inherited from a long tradition of British and European ruralism, with women in the kitchen at its core.28 Is it perhaps the loss of this phantom figure and its nostalgic comforts that render discourses of the “death of the kitchen” problematic? After all, Gaston Bachelard has written of the significance of the first house of childhood as an emotional screen, filtering meanings of all later dwellings, place-attachments, and acts of remembering: “Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days.” As well, for Bachelard, this “first house” — the one we carry with us in memories and daydreams — is essentially the maternal one, built on metaphors of women’s nurturing. “Life begins well . . . all warm in the bosom of the house.”29

Leaving aside the question of place-attachments for those for whom life did not begin well (obviously, Bachelard is concerned as much with collective memory and myth as personal memories and experiences), the problem of how much danger really exists is worth addressing. Are the spaces of the kitchen, indeed, under threat? Will the maternal figure of the cook disappear? Thus, Akiko Busch, writing about contemporary kitchen design in America, suggested there is currently a revival in kitchens as convivial spaces for the ritual performances of everyday food preparation. At the same time, these kitchens of the postmodern age serve as display spaces for seemingly contradictory tendencies:

Yet as likely as we are to fill our kitchens with efficient production machinery, we also hold onto the vestiges of old-time kitchens, to cozy symbols of nostalgia. Spatterware plates set the table and antique egg-beaters decorate the walls. For every Sub-Zero refrigerator, there is an antique apothecary chest; for every restaurant-grade mixer, a Shaker box. We want the future in the kitchen, but not at the expense of the past.29

In the absence of “old-time” kitchens, their inhabitants, and the social relations of these domestic landscapes, the products acquired within economies of the “antique” provide comforting references. Needless to say, the position of pur-chaser of this “stylish” eclecticism is a thoroughly classed one.

Thus, perhaps the kitchen is not “dying” after all — only undergoing cultural and nostalgic renovation. Here, as with those niggling fears about time-space compression, one needs to question whose remembering is at stake when one is mourning the woman at the wood stove or purchasing her symbolic products. Who stands to benefit from nostalgic returns to traditional, gendered divisions of labor embedded in daily shopping, cooking and eating in the industrialized/postindustrialized West? To some extent I have discussed these questions elsewhere (crudely put: it’s often better to eat than to cook, to be served than to serve).9 But in this context, given perceived threats to tradition, the more interesting project is to unravel some of its creative reinventions. For the rest of this article, I will be drawing on interview narratives to pursue this task.

IN THE COMPANY OF NONNAS

Mary-Anne DeNavi, in partnership with her husband Michael, runs a small fruit and vegetable shop in the Sydney beachside suburb of Clovelly (named for the other Clovelly — a fishing village in Devon, Britain).30 The DeNavis’ business is sited among a cluster of small shops (mostly selling fresh or takeaway foods) at the top of a hill, on a main road leading down to the sea (figs. 1, 2). Standing on the footpath outside Mary-Anne and Michael’s shop, you can see the rooftops of Clovelly spreading out in the narrow valley below and lining the shores of its narrow inlet. Known locally as existing in a “time warp,” Clovelly is seen as a quiet, respectable suburb, unlike its much ritzier neighbors to the north — Bronte, with its café strip, and the iconic Bondi Beach.31 However, like most Sydney beachside suburbs, Clovelly shows signs of gentrification and a corresponding rise in house prices.32 Meanwhile, its population is predominantly an Anglo-Celtic one, with over half of Clovelly’s residents Australian-born.33 Mary-Anne herself is one of twelve children, Australian-born and of Anglo-Irish descent, while Michael is second-generation Australian with Italian grandparents.
Although the DeNavis’ shopfront window proclaims the sale of “Frutta e Verdura,” this is not simply a fruit and vegetable shop in which its owners follow the traditional occupation of working-class Italian families in urban Australia (fig. 3). Since buying the business six years ago, Mary-Anne and Michael have added a range of cooked meals to their stock. With a kitchen installed at the back of the shop and the employment of a full-time chef, these meals are now prepared on the premises. The development of this niche-market is described by Mary-Anne as a narrative of the foods on offer:

We started off making fresh pesto . . . and then went into pasta sauces. . . . We . . . do slow cooking . . . like the mammas use to do . . . and it slowly simmers away until you get that good type of flavor. And then we went into making . . . lasagna . . . Moroccan lamb and couscous and old fashioned barley and vegetable soup. . . . So there’s no preservatives, just how you would like to make it yourself at home — but you haven’t got the time. . . .

Jean: It’s a very luscious way of helping out. Like, I’m really interested, say, in your puddings, I noticed you have rhubarb crumble and . . . all the kinds of things I actually remember from my childhood and . . .

Mary-Anne: Well . . . it’s something that I am really passionate about . . . the nurturing nature of food and how it’s very important in . . . our day-to-day living and in our structure of our family life . . . bread and butter pudding . . . apple and rhubarb pie, ah, you know, I haven’t seen rhubarb

Figure 1. The view down Clovelly Road toward the sea. (Photograph by C. Moore Hardy, 2000.)

Figure 2. Small businesses lining the southern side of Clovelly Road. (Photograph by C. Moore Hardy, 2000.)

Figure 3. The DeNavi family outside the shopfront window that proclaims the sale of “Frutta e Verdura.” (Photograph by C. Moore Hardy, 2000.)
for ages, and it's . . . just like my grandmother used to make and . . . pear and apple crumble. You know, it's a healthy sweet that gives the people a bit of comfort food that they can put cream on. They don't feel . . . [it's] too fattening.

JEAN: Yeah. [laughter]

MARY-ANNE: That's what people are looking for, that little bit of . . . comfort that . . . mothers used to be able to give by being at home and having the dinner ready for people, which they don't have now.36

In the absence of the “mammamas” and grandmas (or “nonnas,” as Mary-Anne refers to these later), food can provide compensation. While Mary-Anne’s account underlines popular concerns about diet (“healthy” food with “no preservatives” and not “too fattening”), and about household practices (mothers that “haven’t got the time” and are no longer “at home”), her “meal solutions” are also inscriptions of the rural landscapes of collective Western imagination.37 These are landscapes of childhood and the “past,” images of fertile fields and storehouses of fresh, seasonal produce, and memories of farmhouse kitchens with their rhythms of “nurturing” activity.

“The idea that the rural provides an ‘escape’ from an uncertain, multicultural and crime-ridden world into the timeless countryside, with its social quietude, peace and beauty, is commonly expressed by counterurbanizers,” comments Keith Halfacre, reflecting on the radical potential of nostalgia, reworked, to meet present needs.38 In fact, this rural romance of “natural” serenity depends for its very definition on the counter-romance of urban disorder and moral decay, reproducing, according to Elizabeth Wilson, a “corroborative anti-urbanism” that pervades the development of the modern city. “The result is that today in many cities we have the worst of all worlds: danger without pleasure, safety without stimulation, consumerism without choice, monumentality without diversity.”39

However, if one wants to escape the “corrupting” city, it may not actually be necessary to participate in rural life; possibilities for imaginative travel may lie closer to home.40 For the urban middle classes, of course, there is reason to rejoice in capitalism’s flexibility in acknowledging changing cultural practices in its commodity production: for now, it seems, they can have the cake and eat it too. In other words, they can taste, selectively, the cooking of the nonnas, or Thai curry, or chicken vindaloo through the marketplace’s “multiculturalism of availability,” in which different “pasts,” different places, different cooking “styles,” and different meanings of duration are transformed and packaged as heat-and-eat items of consumer choice. The costs of this choice, on the other hand, reside not only in questions of product affordability, but also in questions of whose fantasies are served by the cooking of phantom nonnas, and in the political complexities that underwrite its labor relations.

To follow the trail of these phantoms, it is not difficult to find accounts of women — wives, mothers, grandmothers, nonnas and grandmères — at work in country kitchens. Biographies and culinary histories abound in these (including the example quoted earlier from Stephanie Alexander’s *The Cook’s Companion*). In fact, the maternal figure at the kitchen table and the smells of slow-cooked food emanating from the hearth together become the *mise-en-scène* for much of our cultural remembrance associated with “home,” nurturing and food. Bachelard (born in 1884), for example, described his grandmother’s kitchen when he was a child:

From the notched teeth of the chimney pot there hung a black cauldron. The three-legged cooking pot projected over the hot embers. Puffing up her cheeks . . . my grandmother would rekindle the sleeping flames. Everything would be cooking at the same time: the potatoes for the pigs, the choice potatoes for the family. For me there would be a fresh egg cooking under the ashes.”

Luce Giard, growing up with a feminist consciousness that entailed a refusal of “women’s work,” when invited to learn to cook by her mother, realized as an adult that she had, in fact, developed a culinary consciousness as a child. “Yet my childhood gaze had seen and memorized certain gestures, and my sense memory had kept track of certain tastes, smells and colors. I already knew all the sounds: the gentle hiss of simmering water, the sputtering of melting meat drippings, and the dull thud of the kneading hand.”41 Meanwhile, Steve Manfredi, well-known Sydney restaurateur and food writer, recalled childhood in his grandmother’s kitchen in Gottolengo, Italy, in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a procession of seasonal and sensual delights: “If I close my eyes and think of my grandmother, the memory smells delicious. It was she who taught me to use my nose as other people use their eyes.”42 In a similar fashion, and extending beyond the boundaries of Western imaginations, Cheong Liew, one of Australia’s leading chefs who spent his early years (early 1950s until the mid-1960s) in a multigenerational family living above their shop in Kuala Lumpur, remembered “the many hours when I sat with my aunts in the kitchen preparing sour dough buns, cleaning shark fin, removing the shoots from the lotus seeds, cutting the wood, stoking the kitchen fire and cleaning the vegetables.” Like Steve Manfredi, Cheong attributed his early interest in food to his grandmother “who controlled the kitchen and the ways of the house.”43

One may be easily beguiled by the sensuality of these memories. The point to grasp, however, is that the position of the narrator is significant in such storytelling. Intricate details are presented from the vantage of the observing/helping child — a view at practically table-top level of the mysterious actions and sensory processes associated with — in Giard’s words — “doing-cooking.”44 This is a gaze that effects a return to the world of childhood and to the pleasures of exploring its minute textures — to its tasting, touching, smelling, hearing. However, it is also a return to the primary position of the one who eats, who is nurtured, who is fed.
Reflecting further on Mary-Anne’s account, and assuming a different perspective from that of the remembering child or the hurrying purchaser of “meal solutions,” one may realize that the answering gaze from the heart of the kitchen is missing. Indeed, a cook’s-eye-view might reverse the gaze from being positioned as object of others’ fantasies to one that acknowledges the costs of ensuring the comfort of others, whether at home or within market relations. As it is for many people employed in small businesses in Australia, the working day for Mary-Anne and Michael is a long one, and its personal costs are high. Not surprisingly, these costs include lack of time to spend at home with the family (Michael and Mary-Anne have four children, the youngest is now six); lack of personal leisure time and holidays (the business is open seven days a week, with Michael going to the markets at dawn each day, while holidays are brief and reasonably rare occurrences); and, of course, lack of money (according to Mary-Anne, “I’ve never been so poor in my life”). It seems ironic that a business dedicated to producing foods shaped by imagery of comfort for the “time-poor” and (presumably) the “resource-rich” (or, in Mary-Anne’s terms, “the middle-class . . . sort of corporate [class]”) requires its providers to forgo time, resources, and moments for “nurturing” in their own household’s daily rhythms.

For those on the receiving end of homely attention, either literally at home or in the market, it might be tempting to romanticize these relations of giving and receiving. However, for Mary-Anne, it is not a question of mystifying the labor of nurturance. Instead, there is need to acknowledge the material economies of running a business in conjunction with caring for an actual home and household — economies of money, time, human energy, and cultural positioning (and here I’m referring particularly to relations of class, gender and ethnicity), with all their profits and losses. Mary-Anne says, “it’s [been] a very steep learning curve, very steep,” and “it’s been a really, really hard road.”

LIKE YOUR FRONT ROOM

It is now time to walk down the hill from DeNavis’ to a second Clovelly site — another small business concerned with the production of homely meanings through nostalgic re-invention. Burnie St., originally a “village” street lined mostly with small shops selling fresh food, is now under renovation, its shops and shopfronts refitted for residential use or, alternatively, for use as “life-style” and media enterprises (Fig. 4). On the northern side of the street (near an art gallery, a computer-graphics business, and a sales office for a wholesaler of gourmet foods) Philippa White and her partner, Jinks Dulhunty, have opened a joint business: downstairs, a café which is Philippa’s domain; upstairs, a homeopathic practice established by Jinks (Fig. 5). Philippa describes the development of the café as a “homely” space:

I wanted a really, really nice little café, everyone would come in, all my friends, it would be like . . . um . . . your front room, you know, and you’d have everyone over and give them these delightful things to eat or drink and . . . give them the best coffee in town and, a nice sort of atmosphere . . . so, ah, that’s how it started really.

Friendship, hospitality and the illusion of endless time to wile away, daily rituals of food, drink, talk and relaxation . . . this business, in its practices, aims to re-create a caring,
sociable home or the traditional home-from-home — the convivial café or bar in the village marketplace. It seems that, for this particular reinvention, the “style,” pace, and seeming impersonality of the late-modern city is to be eschewed. Instead, there are references to both the “relaxed” spaces and rituals of an idealized domesticity and, presumably, to a nostalgic, imagined British/European “past” of “slower times” and village-centered life.

Philippa continues, elaborating on the home comforts the café has incorporated into its design and management “style”:

“You’re comfortable when you’re there, you know, you can pick up a magazine or you can chat for three hours on one cup of coffee . . .

JEAN: And do you find . . . that people do tend to come here and stay and do you have regulars . . . ?

PHILIPPA: [Laughter] I do have regulars, yeah . . . [We’ve] . . . made a beautiful banquette . . . [it’s] really comfortable. . . . [W]e had a group of girls down there last week and they just sat there for about three hours . . . I think they were in a meeting . . . but they just . . . sat on one cup of coffee and just chatted away for the rest of the afternoon, you know, while it was raining and [they were] . . . comfortable where they were.

It is possible to lounge on a banquette as on a sofa at home, ignoring the usual requirements of café etiquette that one sits properly (upright) at tables and keeps within the expected confines of one’s allotted personal space for “public” eating. Likewise, in a “homely” establishment, there are other rules of public eating and drinking to be broken, or at least challenged by the ambiance of domestic practices. Several times Philippa mentioned a customer’s “sitting” on one cup of coffee for hours to stress that this is an unusual privilege in commercial establishment. Here, some fluidity in the “rules” becomes a “gift” marked by “homeliness.” This is a gift of extended time and welcoming space for the consumer, and one for which the hospitable proprietor receives little financial remuneration. Furthermore, extrapolating from Sharon Zukin’s battle cry of “whose city? . . . and whose culture?” one could regard this gift as one made poignant by the increasing privatization of public space, together with its constraining force, on everyday life in the modern city.

Nevertheless, it is a gift one would expect to be freely exchanged among friends in the privacy of “your front room.” Friends, in this case, include different communities ranging from the “locals,” who Philippa says are “my bread and butter”; and “walkers,” who call in early in the morning for a coffee on their way to the cliff tops; to “a bit of a lesbian crowd,” who mostly come to the café at weekends. Furthermore, in these acts of hospitality, the café guarantees some rewards for the host — rewards that stretch beyond (or serve instead of) purely economic returns. For example, one’s own need for sociability can be met at the same time as meeting those of others: “[Y]ou can do the same old jobs, you know, but if you’re good at them, you can do them without thinking. You can still be chatting away. [laughter] Gossip, gossip, gossip [laughter].”

However, as with Mary-Anne’s story, it should be remembered that the conditions that render this gift of homeliness possible are not unproblematic ones. The following comment from Jinks and an exchange between Philippa and Jinks indicate different ways of reviewing progress, weighing the costs, and anticipating future benefits.

JINKS: [T]he very charm of Clovelly is that . . . it’s . . . relaxed, laid back, and it’s like a little . . . lost country town; that is the charm of Clovelly, and it’s terrible for business. [laughter] So anyone in their right mind, you know, really wouldn’t choose a site like this . . . . But Philippa thinks that . . . it’s a sleeper and it’s gonna come alive and it will get to the point where it won’t be so much effort for us, but basically, you know, we’re having to work much harder to earn our dollar.

JINKS: It’d be good, I mean it’d be good if you could get Philippa’s hours down to a normal person’s hours. She’s working over sixty hours a week . . . to make it happen.

PHILIPPA: Eventually it will happen . . .

JINKS: Yeah, if . . . [your] hours got down and you broke even. Basically we’re not . . . But at the moment . . . you couldn’t say you were doing it for the life-style, you’re really investing in the future . . . where . . . you hope you might have a lifestyle. [laughter]

PHILIPPA: But I enjoy what I’m doing, so it’s not as if I’m working for a life-style. I’m actually working my life-style into my job. It’s a lovely, lovely thing to have . . .
people come and see what you’re doing and see you . . . [M]eeting people’s a fantastic way to live your life.

jinks: Beats nursing. [laughter] Then they’re all dying. [laughter]

Although the personal costs of running the business are high, the acts of “giving” this requires — long hours, reduced incomes, and a repertoire of repetitive domestic tasks required to produce “yummy food” and maintain homely spaces — do not go unrewarded.  

Both women, as they reflect on their current projects, identify moments of potential for meeting their own needs directly, in contrast to the more mediated rewards of caring for others. For Mary-Anne, the work’s creative imperatives and personal satisfactions are together expressed as “passion” — a “passion” that includes others’ acknowledgment of her culinary expertise (“we’re very passionate about what we do, we love to talk about it with our customers”). Meanwhile, for Philippa, these satisfactions are thought of as “life-style” — the intrinsic pleasures and challenges of everyday work, rather than present investment of money, time, energy and skills in the hope of future gratification (“I wake up at 5 o’clock in the morning. I go, OK, now what am I going to do today? . . . and my head’s just spinning with ideas”).

In everyday acts of offering meanings of “home” in “public” spaces, there are spaces for both “passion” and “ideas.” According to de Certeau, these are, after all, the “ingenuous ways the weak make use of the strong.” In terms of the story this article traces, these are also clever ways of raiding tradition, generous expressions of giving and receiving pleasure, and sobering moments to acknowledge social power and its constraints.

TALES FOR A POSTINDUSTRIAL KITCHEN

It seems there is no need to mourn the “death” of the kitchen, cooking skills, and traditional country cooking as the loss of an “authentic” past, fixed in time and space and beyond retrieval in the West’s so-called postindustrial age. Tradition, it seems, is available — on a plate — for simply the cost of its purchase. However, celebrations of a postindustrial future of slow food transformed into “gourmet” fast food, or of perpetual “eating out” in the “tribal” village, are not entirely unproblematic cultural performances. There are obvious political questions of who can afford to eat, whose labor makes this possible, and whose cultures are being consumed (indeed, cannibalized). But there are also questions of whose histories and cultures are being privileged in these narratives of the “new.” In response to the current enthusiasm for purchasing “ethnic” (peasant) food and for café dining among the “classy and more often than not . . . Anglo-cosmopolitan eating subject[s],” one could easily turn to earlier times — to accounts of medieval cookshops, for example, and to other places — cultures of “eating out” for all classes in mainland China and Hong Kong. In other words, when reflecting on nostalgic performances of cultural mourning or of “style,” it is important to question the tendency to privilege our own memories and histories, and it is essential to unpack their Eurocentrism. Thus, instead of viewing tradition as either a fixed (perhaps “exotic”) past to be raided for the present, or an equally fixed romanticized future vested in “lack,” this article has sketched images of tradition’s flexibility and, through fragmentary tales of “lived experience,” images of the plurality of ways in which tradition is reinvented.

Luce Giard has presented this flexibility, this inventiveness, as a possible route between the dilemmas of “archaistic nostalgia” and “frenetic overmodernization.” Between these two extremes:

room remains for microinventions, for the practice of reasoned differences, to resist with a sweet obstinance the contagion of conformism, to reinforce the network of exchange and relations, to learn how to make one’s choice among the tools and commodities produced by the industrial era. Each of us has the power to seize power over one part of oneself.

While Giard adopted a more celebratory tone toward “doing-cooking” than perhaps this article allows, her stress on “microinventions” is a useful one. The stories told here do not present these women simply as slaves to their positioning in class and gender relations and in those of ethnicity (or simply as appropriators of tradition on behalf of middle-class palates and identities). Likewise, the stories are not intended as definitive or representative ones. Instead, stories are both complicated and speculative, their details allowing reflection on broader questions of tradition, memory, and the everyday ways of negotiating power — of testing its limits. These are accounts subtly nuanced with women’s cleverness at referencing the past in new ways, with their awareness of traditional knowledge and skills while demonstrating flexibility of application, and with their capacity to seek pleasure while acknowledging its constraints. “Passion” and “ideas” become leitmotifs of this inventiveness, along with a recognition of tradition’s mobility. After all, according to Giard, “a culture that stops moving decrees its own death.”

For the kitchen professionals — architects, designers, urban planners — the analysis suggests the need to unravel meanings of diversity and their implications. Here I am referring to diversity not simply in the context of a wide range of food products or eating practices, but as an engagement with different meanings of “home” and spaces for “homely” interactions. “Home,” as this argument has shown, has elements of portability, whether the “homely” space is the view of the television from the couch, the comforts of a banquetue at the “village” café, or the food talk over the purchase of apple crumble from the local provider of “meal solutions.”
designing public and private spaces (houses, kitchens, cafés, restaurants, streets, plazas, parks), it seems important to take these diverse and flexible meanings of “home” into account, together with the closely connected ones of comfort, with all its inflections of remembering, dreaming and imagining.

The crucial question, however, is how to design convivial cities and comfortable homes, homes that encourage the sociability and intellectual challenge of a rich “public” life and cities that allow the intimacy and nurturance of a “good” home. Susan Parham, reflecting on the need for a variety of spaces for dining — public, private; indoors, outdoors — has written: “It is clear that cities need to change. We need human-scale streets for pedestrians, a higher density of people and houses, public outdoor rooms and private indoor rooms that are good to eat and drink and converse in. Communal eating is absolutely basic to human life.”56 Taking up Parham’s challenge, one might add the need to recognize tradition as a powerful, spatializing practice that does not necessarily demand conformity and fixity but, alternatively, might offer space for mobility and “microinventions.” At the same time, however, the purchases of its nostalgic products are not without their contradictory moments.

REFERENCE NOTES

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15. The Matsuik Snapshot No 22 (June, 1999); and Perlman quoted in Ripe, “Fast Track Snacks,” p.12. Note that Perlman and his associates from their Brisbane architectural practice engaged a marketing-research company, Matsuik Property Insights, to investigate four generations of Brisbane residents’ housing needs for the next five to ten years.


17. Ibid.


24. For examples of nineteenth-century public comment on the poor quality of Australian cooking and the inadequate skills of both commercial and domestic cooks, see B. Santich, Looking for Flavour (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 1996), pp.103–5.


26. S. Alexander, The Cook’s Companion (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1996), p.1. For examples of other cookbooks that target young people as inexperienced cooks, see K. Lam’s Eating In, dedicated to the “take-away dependent,” which presents a seductive argument for cooking at home (pp.1–4); and J. Oliver, The Naked Chef (London: Michael Joseph, 1999), pp.37,197, in which the appeal is to simplicity, time efficiency, and Generation X’s capacity to “graze.”


31. I have developed this argument in J. Duruz, “Food as Nostalgia: Eating the Fifties and Sixties,” Australian Historical Studies, Vol.30 No.113 (October 1999), pp.31–50.

32. Informally structured interviews were carried out from April 1998 to July 1999 with each of a small group of women who either live in Clovelly, New South Wales, Australia, or who are working there in small food-related businesses. The group is a diverse one, with women differing from each other in any number of ways — e.g., in terms of age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, number of children, ages of children, nature of paid work, and years lived in Clovelly.

33. Interview with Elizabeth McDonald, June 12, 1998, transcript, p.4.


35. This statement is based on data from the following: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Basic Community Profile Catalogue No.2020.0 (2031-POA) (Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra, 1997), Table B01.


37. A sign in DeNavi’s window announces that “meal solutions” are available. A similar term used in the industry is that of “home meal replacements.” These “solutions” and “replacements” are not, as Ripe has pointed out, simply “frozen TV dinners, but instead emulate the sort of dishes you might cook if you were making a meal for yourself.” C. Ripe, “Chill out in the Kitchen,” The Australian, March 24, 1998, p.16. See also C. Ripe, “Gourmet Dining without the Drudgery,” The Australian, March 25, 1999, p.12.


40. For a discussion of ways to reference the rural in contemporary urban living (through food, cottage architecture, clothing, four-wheel-drive vehicles, etc.), see H. Mackay, Reinventing Australia: The Mind and Mood of Australia in the 90s (Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1993), pp.21–14.


44. C. Liew with E. Ho, My Food (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1995), pp.2.3.


46. See J. Collins, K. Gibson, C. Akorso, S. Castles, and D. Tait, A Shop Full of Dreams: Ethnic Small Businesses in Australia (Leichhardt, NSW: Pluto, 1995), pp.138,210,170–71. After conducting a survey of small businesses in Sydney, these writers argued that the dynamics of ethnicity and gender shape the experience of running a small business in distinctive ways. Nevertheless, their data showed that long working days and reliance on family labor are characteristic of all Sydney small businesses, although ethnically based businesses, especially those run by women, tend to be open even longer hours than nonimmigrant businesses.

47. DeNavi, transcript, pp.16,20,75.

48. On food, especially home cooking, as a form of gift-giving, see D. Lupton, Food, the Body and the Self (London: Sage, 1996).
52. White, typescript, pp.4–5.
54. White, transcript, pp.6,14.
56. Dulhunty, transcript, pp.25–27.
58. DeNavi, transcript, p.38; and White, transcript, p.13.
64. Ibid.