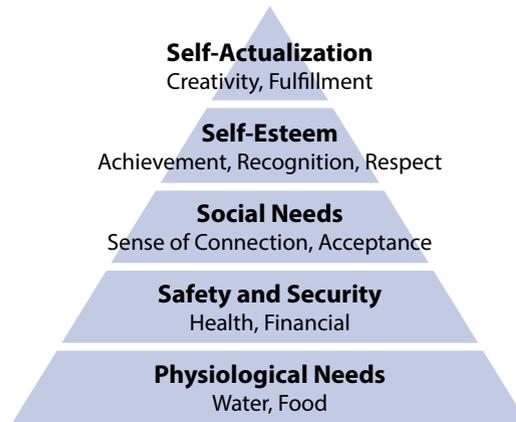


Fear in the Kitchen

The only real stumbling block is fear of failure. In cooking you've got to have a what-the-hell attitude.

—Julia Child



Maslow's hierarchy of needs with areas related to food and cooking.

This is my pep talk for readers who are afraid of the kitchen. For some, the idea of stepping into the kitchen sets off panic attacks as the primitive parts of the brain take over. (If it helps, you can blame your brain's *locus coeruleus*. It's not your fault; take a few deep breaths to relax it.)

Fear in the kitchen can come from many sources but invariably boils down to fear of rejection and fear of failure. Why someone fears something depends on what needs are at stake. Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, was looking at what motivates human behavior in 1943 when he created his *hierarchy of needs*, putting what he considered the more basic human needs at the bottom of a pyramid. While his ranking of the needs hasn't held up to scrutiny, the needs themselves give a good framework for looking at kitchen fears. The most common fears I've seen about cooking involve social needs and self-esteem.

First up, social needs. Cooking for others is a powerful way of building friendships and community, and bringing people together over a good meal is immensely rewarding. But there is also trepidation: what happens if you utterly ruin the food that you're cooking? To overcome this fear, start by redefining what happens when food is ruined. So what if you ruin the dinner? Sure, there are physiological needs (one solution: order delivery) and a financial impact. But if your fears are based on social needs, the food doesn't actually matter. As long as you're bringing people together and treating them well, you'll be meeting your needs—and theirs. (Humor goes a long ways to getting over

fear—“Remember that time we served cereal for dinner and laughed about it?”) People are far more likely to remember how you made them feel than the food you served. What’s important is who’s at the table, not what’s on the plates.

Then there’s self-esteem. Low self-esteem comes from comparing ourselves to others and caring too much about what others think. We’re bombarded with magazine covers promoting the perfect holiday meal (“so easy, so elegant!”) and online posts showing amazing culinary creations. Then when we go to try that “easy” recipe with the beautiful photograph, we expect the same outcome. These comparisons aren’t valid. Aspirational magazines—and, sadly, many scientific papers—publish their best results instead of their more obtainable average results. Can you picture a glossy cooking magazine with all the photographs of perfect meals replaced with ones capturing a home cook’s version?! For self-esteem challenges, instead of making impossible comparisons, accept yourself for who you are and accept whatever it is you’ve made. (Unless, of course, it’s utterly burned, in which case see the previous paragraph.)

Julia Child’s appeal lay in her almost-average abilities and her “nothing special” humble aura (plus buckets of tenacity). Like her, try things with a what-the-hell attitude. Expect to drop the chicken on the floor once in a while. Play around with various ingredients and techniques. Come up with projects you want to try. (*Mmm, bacon and egg breakfast pizza.*) So what if you drop the chicken or burn the dinner?! If you’re enjoying yourself, does it matter? As the famed psychologist Albert Ellis quipped: “Only you can make you feel guilty!”

How much better off would we be if we talked about “success in learning” instead of “failure in the kitchen”? There’s not much to learn when things work. When things fail, you have a chance to understand where the boundary conditions are and an opportunity to learn how to do something better next time. Philosopher Alain de Botton gave a fantastic speech on this definition of success at the 2009 TED Conference. See <http://cookingforgeeks.com/book/botton/> to watch his talk, “A kinder, gentler philosophy of success.”

Give learning time. You might have days when you feel like you’ve learned nothing, but the cumulative result will lead to insights. If a recipe doesn’t work as well as you’d have liked, try to figure out why. The recipe might simply be too advanced or poorly written. If you’re not happy with the results, try a different source of recipes.

The way to get over the fear in cooking is to understand what needs you’re trying to meet and not allow anxieties around those needs to bubble over elsewhere. Treat cooking as an experiment and bring that smart geek curiosity to the kitchen. Approach it as a fun puzzle to solve, where you get to pick the pieces.

If you’re nervous about cooking for others—a romantic date?—practice cooking the meal you’ve chosen the day before for just yourself and a confidant. This will make the routine of cooking the meal more familiar, reducing fear. It’s entirely okay to screw up and toss it in the trash; it’s no different than a science experiment that didn’t pan out (pardon the bad pun).
