

International relations and advances in technology in the twentieth century have had a huge influence on how food fits into our lives. Here is a brief look at our attitudes towards the food we eat, how we eat, and how technological advances have influenced the equipment we have in our kitchens and the cook books we have on our shelves.

What we cook

Fresh produce

Traditionally Britain has always had excellent supplies of fresh produce but poor refrigeration and transport links meant that in the early 1900s it was rarely fresh unless it was very locally sourced. Vegetables and herbs were grown in kitchen gardens and fruit, the preserve of the rich, was grown in glasshouses and orchards. Citrus fruit was imported. During the war years, food shortages and rationing meant that diets became plainer yet produce, particularly fruit & vegetables, was fresh albeit lacking variety.

After World War Two imported fruits and vegetables began to appear in the greengrocers. As a result consumers slowly lost their concept of seasonality.

Kitchen appliances

The role and design of the kitchen as a room in a home has changed a lot since the early 1900s. Much of this is to do with the equipment we find in the kitchens, driving and driven by the social changes there have been.

At the beginning of the 1900s many people were still cooking over a fire and taking food that they wanted to be baked to the local baker. Some houses did have ovens; these were fuelled by coal, gas or electricity but did not have regular heat settings as we know today. An experienced cook would be able to 'feel' the temperature of the oven but others would put paper or a little flour in the oven and assess the temperature depending on how long it took for the paper or flour to turn golden.

Great strides have been made in the aesthetics and efficiency of the oven. In the 1960s automatic electric cookers appeared which enabled the cook to put food in the oven, set the timer and the oven would automatically switch on and off at pre-set times.

During the two world wars the Ministry of Food gave women ideas of how to cook nutritious meals for their families on war time food shortages and rationing. One of the demonstrators was Marguerite Patten who, with Phillip Harben, became the first TV celebrity chef in 1947.

In the 1950s, Johnny and Fanny Cradock, Constance Spry and Elizabeth David sounded the beginnings of a gastronomic revolt with Elizabeth David, in particular, enthusing about the Mediterranean dishes she had discovered on her travels. The likes of Jane Grigson, Robert Carrier and Graham Kerr in 1960s and Delia Smith in 1970s continued to de-mystify the art of cooking.

The increase in restaurants serving foreign foods and the more we travelled in the 1980s meant that chefs such as Madhur Jaffrey and Ken Hom taught us how to cook dishes from abroad and Keith Floyd combined cookery with travel in his television series.

"Britain has an estimated 171 million cookery books."

Daily Telegraph,
13 February 2006

A potted history of British cooking

In the first half of the 1900s meat dishes needed longer, slower cooking to tenderise the meat because animals were older when slaughtered. Post-rationing excitement and the introduction of self-service shops in the 1960s changed this. Lamb, as opposed to mutton, became popular and young chickens known as broilers were produced. The self-service shops meant that produce such as meat was pre-weighed and packaged up as opposed to previously when larger pieces of meat were cut off on demand. Cuts of meat which cooked quicker became more popular.

Preserved food

In the days before refrigeration, food not consumed immediately would have to be preserved by salting, drying, smoking or covering in fat. Seasonal gluts were used to make sweet and savoury preserves and relishes. Preserved food was often packaged commercially in tins.

During World War One and Two, and the intervening years, these supplies were much in demand. The Advisers from the Ministry of Food supervised the preserving of any summer time surplus produce to be redistributed as part of rations during winter shortages.

In the 1960s people started having freezers in their homes and products were developed ideally suited to home-freezing. Frozen peas and fish fingers were instant hits!

Today, the vast range of processed, packaged, canned and bottled foods in our shops use these same preservation methods.

Microwave ovens became readily available in the 1970s. Now about three quarters of homes in Britain have one.

Refrigerators in the early 1900s were simple and more like 'ice-caves' than the units we know now. They could only be relied upon to keep things cold, not frozen, and so perishables would be picked or bought to satisfy that day's needs. The first examples of refrigerators appeared at The Ideal Home Exhibition in 1920 and by 1939 a quarter of homes had one. When home freezers became commonly available, cooks could prepare double quantities of one meal so some could be eaten fresh and the rest frozen and saved for another day.

This is known as 'batch-cooking'.

"There are few better places than the table to teach the young to be tolerant, to share, to be self reliant and easy mannered."

Nan Berger OBE FHCIMA,
school catering specialist

Quick boiling kettles and electric toasters were readily available in 1930 but housewives had to wait until the 1950s and 1960s for the majority of labour saving devices such as electric mixers and liquidisers as well as household equipment such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners and spin dryers. Now, bread-making machines and ice cream makers are becoming common place in many kitchens.

The advent of the celebrity chef

Many homes would have had a copy of Mrs. Isabella Beeton's *Book of Household Management* in 1900. This book was a comprehensive guide to managing a household in the 1800s – the index at the front of the book is itself over thirty pages long!

The 1990s saw cookery programmes being promoted as entertainment shows – the most obvious example of this being *Ready Steady Cook* – and, as a result, the number of cookery books in shops has exploded.

The success of programmes such as 'Jamie's School Dinners' and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *River Cottage* has brought cookery programmes and books into a new era. These programmes are encouraging us to look again at what we are eating, how our food is produced and who produces it for us.

Extracts from Marguerite Patten's book, *A Century of British Cooking*, Grub Street, 2001. For a comprehensive source of information on the history of British food read *British Food – An Extraordinary Thousand Years of History* by Colin Spencer, Grub Street, 2004.

