

CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ: STRATEGY FOR COOKS

Edited by Daniel Moran

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Editor's note: Following Prussia's defeat by France in 1806, Carl von Clausewitz, then a lieutenant, was interned as a prisoner of war. Until recently, little was known of his experiences. A new manuscript has lately come to light, however, which suggests that Clausewitz's early exposure to French cuisine may have had a greater impact on his strategic thinking than has previously been supposed. A translation follows.

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A watched pot never boils.

- Anonymous

All people eat, and it is from this universal fact, and the biological imperative that underlies it, that the practice of cooking food has arisen. Many foods, moreover, benefit especially from cooking in liquids, of which water is by far the most common. All societies use water to cook with, and we leave it to the philosophers and armchair idealists, who have never eaten a decent meal, still less seen the inside of a kitchen, to imagine a time when this practice may be dispensed with.

Cooking is thus an instrument of eating, the pursuit of digestion by other means. Among those means, cooking in water is among the most decisive, by virtue of the pronounced impact that water has on so much of what it touches, and the permanent changes of taste and texture that result. Water may be used for a host of cooking tasks, the identification of which lies outside the author's purpose; though it must be noted that those who wish to cook with water should take care to understand its essential attributes: its capacity to combine with some materials and not others, its purity or impurity, its relative cost, and so on. History and science can shed light on these matters; yet it is a fact that cooks vary in their talent as well as their purposes, and often act on the basis of instinct and experience—the best cooks above all. In the final analysis, the goal of culinary theory is not to prescribe procedures—those who slavishly follow the recipes in the cookbooks must inevitably be condemned to mediocrity—but to illuminate the actual experience of the kitchen, and thus cultivate the cook's capacity to act independently.

One of the most common cooking actions is the boiling of water, or, more precisely, the adjustment of water's temperature; for water may be cooled as well as heated, and may, at the extremes of these processes, take on different forms: ice on the one hand, and steam on the other. There is no logical limit to how hot or cold water may become; yet for practical purposes one is entitled to wonder whether a great block of ice, or a great blast of steam, would be accepted as "water" by sensible cooks or their hungry guests. At

these extremes the instrumental value of water in relation to the tasks of the cook changes; a topic to which we will return.¹

For now we confine ourselves to water in its liquid state,² in which, historically, it has best served the purposes of the cook. Liquid water may be used at a variety of temperatures, the choice of which varies with the dish at hand. When the meat is even a little tough, however, water must be quite hot before it can be used to cook with.

There are many tools by which water can be heated. Most typical, however, is the pot, which for our purposes can be said to exist solely to contain water and food. Pots vary in size, shape, and durability, and the choice of which one to use, or whether to use one at all, will be an important determinant of cooking success: before reaching into the cupboard, one should know the kind of meal one is cooking. Nevertheless, in broad terms the procedure for heating water is always the same: to place water in a pot, and then to place the pot upon a flame.

In theory, the heating of water is a mechanical process, whose outcome is determined by the objective qualities of pot, water, and flame. Yet, for those of us concerned with something other than cooking “on paper,” that is to say with real food meant to be eaten, the culinary purposes of the cook, and the emotions that cooking can arouse, must be taken into account if we are to know what it means to “boil water.” For even as the physical forces of combustion and oxidation, gravity and convection, evaporation and condensation, expansion and contraction, act upon water, pot, and flame, so too do the hopes and fears, needs and desires of the cook act in the spiritual realm: the need to prepare a meal for a certain time, and to coordinate one dish with another; to limit the anxious tedium that is so much a part of cooking; to see “how it tastes” — these and many other similar factors will make themselves felt whenever we move from the cool abstractions of the drawing room into the steamy reality of the kitchen; and they will be felt, moreover, with a force whose effects will grow as the number of guests waiting to be fed increases, and as the time to dinner grows short, to the point where the cook’s perception of time’s passage begins to slow in proportion to his impatience, to bend and stretch in defiance of what we know to be the laws of nature.

Thus it is said that “a watched pot never boils.”

Yet it would be a mistake to rest content with this commonplace observation, whose objective falsehood is in any case apparent: given time, *a watched pot will invariably boil*. No, the true student of cooking must go further, and take into account the actions that may arise from such improperly understood and imperfectly mastered perceptions — in particular from the tendency of inexperienced cooks, in despair at the spectacle of stalemate, and in defiance of all they have been taught, to turn up the heat as far as they can, at great risk to the pot, the meal, and even to themselves. Thus has many a fine pot been warped and blackened. For it is when the heat is turned up to “High” that boiling water bursts forth in all its elemental fury, no longer an instrument of cookery, but a force of nature in its own right, overflowing the pot, dousing the flame, staining the floor, ruining the meal, and drenching the very shoes of the cook.

¹ The author’s untimely death prevented him from completing this part of his work. [Ed.]

² Sometimes called “conventional water.” [Ed.]