

Bill Schindler

Eat Like a Human: Nourishing Foods and Ancient Ways of Cooking to Revolutionize Your Health

New York: Little, Brown, 2021

On the back overleaf, Dr Bill Schindler is described as “an internationally known prehistoric and experimental archaeologist and primitive technologist”, which, with the book’s subtitle, brings the author’s window on technology largely into view. His is an “approach that incorporates archaeology (to learn about the past), primitive technology (hands-on work with ancient skills), and experimental archaeology (applying primitive technology skills using the scientific method to interpret the archaeological record)” (266). Combining all three, this book, with surprising practicality, delves into the oldest known food technologies. It is designed to provide individuals today with a “modern hunter-gatherer ethic” to address comestible ingredients in the best ways to make them safe, nutrient-dense, and bioavailable (245–6). This challenge, it is argued, was already presented to the ancestors of *homo sapiens*, 3.3 million years ago, due to their evolutionary physical limitations.

Over prehistory, hominids’ brains and bodies grew bigger, while other body parts were growing smaller, notably, teeth, guts, muscles, and even fingernails. Morphological reductions decreased the abilities of those in the humanising branch of the primate tree to break down food mechanically, to digest inputs efficiently, to sustain strength, and to claw and tear efficaciously. These changes, Schindler argues, have left human beings reliant on technologies to “process food outside of our bodies” before eating or drinking. Technology for Schindler is thus defined as “tools and processes that allow us to overcome our physical limitations to safely access food and its nutrients” (11). Among the earliest food-processing tools Schindler identifies the stone and bone blades and points of *Australopithecus*, noting that “the introduction of hunting, fishing, and trapping transformed us biologically and culturally” (16).

As part of the changing relationship of hominids to their food sources and technologies, Schindler notes the adoption of the use of fire for cooking, drying, fermentation/curing, geophagy [intentional consumption of dirt], and nixtamalisation. These “strategies to pre-digestion”, he argues, are the main means by which physical constraints in becoming *homo sapiens* came to be transcended. “Cooking begins the breakdown of proteins and starches, making the nutrients found in meat and root-based foods, like tubers and rhizomes[,] easier for the human body to absorb” (19). A rich combination of technologies—slicing, dehydrating, leaching, baking, and especially fermentation—“reduce or deactivate a range of [toxic] chemical compounds” (34). Of nixtamalization, he writes: “The physical and chemical changes that take place when maize is heated in an alkaline

solution [such as wood ash] are nothing short of magical. This process transforms maize from a bland, nutritionally inaccessible, boring grass seed into a nourishing, delicious, aromatic, and prehistoric and historic staple” (158).

Schindler believes that earliest food-processing technologies stemmed from humans “mimicking something that other animals do naturally” (17). Thus, launching projectiles replicates *covering long distances rapidly* in hunting. Cutting is done with stone tools instead of *separating pieces of animal flesh with large canine teeth*. Soaking and fermenting seeds in pots/jars or pits replaces *a bird’s internal crop*. Humans use stone to grind grains, as *a bird’s gizzard does*, not to mention to regurgitate, chew and spit. It is, however, the link to technology in the premise—evolution has left humans with the necessity of such mimicry—that warrants further attention here. Analysis can legitimately be done without wading too deeply into the primatologists’ and anthropologists’ debate about which food practices factored into the evolutionary shifts in hominids to bodies with shrinking guts and growing brains (although Schindler does take support from the turn-of-the-century work by Richard Wrangham *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*). Nonetheless, whether it was the presence of roasted tubers of Wrangham’s thesis or meat-eating (and hence increasingly the use of tools), as traditionalists argue, that brought about new morphological differences manifest in *Homo erectus*, Schindler’s contention that human ancestors had to turn to technology to render their food sources safe, nutritious, and bioavailable is not altered. This brings to mind Marshall McLuhan’s “Understanding Media”: “Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies” (55); in Schindler’s words: “we have built bodies and brains that require many of these foods that can only nourish us when we use technologies to make them as safe and nourishing as possible” (<https://eatlikeahuman.com/bill/>).

It is precisely Schindler’s thesis of human dependence on technology to render food safely and fully digestible that commands thoughtful attention. He addresses—chapter by chapter, in ‘food groups’—plants, animals, grains, maize, dairy, bugs, and dirt, introducing the appropriate technologies and recipes for harvesting, detoxifying, and processing food stuffs to make their nutrients fully available. Schindler advocates the use of many tools: Mason jars, ceramic crocks, baskets, utensils (spoons, knives, spatulas), cutting boards, plates, baking sheets, towels, cheesecloth, a (reliable) kitchen scale, deep fryer, griddle, pots and pans, sieve, colander, thermometer, food processor/blender, Dutch oven, oven with broiler, vacuum sealer, smoker, meat grinder, stand mixer, stone metate/electric molino, and refrigerator, not to mention the unnamed arms of modern hunting. While these technologies are relatively basic, the list serves only as a preliminary clue to Schindler’s own relationship with technology. It seems to be driven more by the McLuhanian view— we have over time come to adopt, if not praise, virtually all

technological extensions of our bodies in the food-processing realm — than by clear guidelines as to what technologies are the best aids to our bodies' evolutionary "self-amputations".

Looming large over the extended microcosm of Schindler's Modern Stone Age Kitchen (influenced by traditional farm families in northern Italy and Ireland, Bolivia, Mexico, Iceland, the U.S.A., and the Boonchoo Weaver Ant Farm in Thailand, foragers in New York City, and the Samburu warriors of East Africa, among others) is clearly the technologized world of the Modern Agrobusiness Age Kitchen. Most of its approaches are quite expectedly eschewed by Schindler, as signs of "today's socially and economically driven norms" (6). It has easy access to only prime cuts of beef due to the impact of the Transcontinental Railroad and its refrigeration cars' eliminating offal from modern diets (64); it serves up "a quickly risen, yeast bread that artificially tastes like genuine sourdough" from "companies [that] take shortcuts and use lactic acid or something similar to produce it" (113); it proffers "maize-based foods [enriched] with niacin" from producers "continuing to seek innovations and genetic modifications of maize to solve the problem" of pellagra caused by niacin deficiencies (153). As for dairy products, the Modern Agrobusiness Age Kitchen uses enriched "Franken-milk", whose enzymes, lactase, bacteria, and vitamins have been almost totally destroyed by pasteurisation (173). It affords no cheese-making possibilities from "Franken-milk", hence "the only option for cheesemakers is to purchase rennet" from a hard-to-fathom system of Austrian processed powder, liquid or paste from the stomachs of veal calves industrially slaughtered in New Zealand (175).

This still leaves Schindler's reader with a serious question: which technologies are the ones which process food appropriately? Two guidelines seem to be missing explicitly: sustainability and scale. For example, Schindler touts seasonal foraging and our "becoming contemporary gatherers," and yet were the practices he advocates to become widespread, modern human beings could potentially have as significant detrimental impacts on the ecosystem as it is now asserted early humans did in the past, until they fully developed agriculture. Foraged plants indeed "are free, ... nutritious, and ... *everywhere*" (30), until perhaps they become discovered by or as marketable to the masses witness the over-exploitation of *free, nutritious, and abundant* fish in the sea! Data modelling of foraging activity among hunter-gatherer societies has shown that "crop cultivation was simply a new means of reducing the depletion rate and increasing the replenishment rate" (Gallagher, Shennan and Thomas, 2019). In the future, should humans turn to foraging in large numbers, will they see the consequences of their actions, as Schindler so optimistically asserts, before depleting the supply beyond the point of no replenishment, namely extinction? (31–32)

As for scale of production, whether in terms of distance from the source of the ingredients or from the processes themselves, the category of technologies that Schindler sees negatively seems to reflect any processes scaled up well beyond those of a single farm or local supply chain. It is rare that traditional techniques have accompanied growth in the global consumption of any food. Is it not scaling-up which brings in technologies that distance us from food, “grown, processed, and delivered by corporations and people we don’t know”? (20) Is it not scale which drives genetic modification of edible botanicals and monocropping “controlled by multinational food corporations”? (31) There is but one generic answer that Schindler provides to the question of which technologies might on any scale actually be appropriate, namely, “technologies which do not reduce our food’s nutritional value,” noting how few there are of these.

In conclusion, this is a book without scholarly footnotes and bibliography, yet the perspective is interesting and provocative, which makes it definitely worth a read!

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