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AMERICA IS BECOMING A LAND OF FOOD FANATICS, TURNING INTO SOUS-CHEFS IN THE KITCHEN AND MAKING DINING IN, OR OUT, THE EQUIVALENT OF A CULTURAL EVENT.



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CHICAGO

The clumps of cauliflower clouds suddenly part and a wash of sunshine engulfs the expectant crowd in an outdoor amphitheater here. It's a setting that would be spectacular even without the solar arrival: a fruit and vegetable garden on an island in a small lake in the Chicago Botanic Garden, where beds of alfalfa and garlic grow in sculptured rows.

The crowd of at least 150 people eagerly awaits the day's entertainment. Three rows from the front, a woman in black with sunglasses the size of headlights arrives early and sits between two seats saved with terra-cotta pots. Nearby, a young man checks the settings on his impressive-looking camera. In the front row, a retired physician passes the time with a thick book of crossword puzzles, glancing up occasionally at the stage.

Finally, a host introduces the featured act, Roger Waysok, who strides forward and, after a burst of applause, begins his performance ... creating a barley, feta, and tomato salad with fresh mint.

"All the fresh ingredients in here, I am passionate about," says Mr. Waysok, the executive chef of Chicago's South Water Kitchen restaurant, his knife poised over a red onion.

The chef series that runs from May to October at the

botanical garden here draws hundreds of people each week. But it could be a demonstration held in almost any venue in America. In a land of fads and social movements, from fitness to feminism, now comes a new one – food.

America is, quite simply, fascinated by food in a way it never has been. We have become a nation of "foodies" who celebrate, debate, pursue, and show off knowledge of what we eat and how to make it. We're watching food shows endlessly on TV. We're enrolling in cooking classes in record numbers. We're loading our shelves with cookbooks and our e-mail with recipes for salt-crusted snapper. Our new celebrities aren't LeBron James or Julia Roberts. They're Bobby Flay and Southern food queen Paula Deen. In short, we have become something of a Sous-Chef Nation.

"We are witnessing the Italian Renaissance in food ... an intellectual elevation that is turned into something durable through media," says Krishnendu Ray, a food and nutrition expert at New York University. "The world of food today is exactly how the world of literature and painting evolved."

Really – nouvelle meatloaf as the Mona Lisa?

Not exactly. What he means is that painting started with artists producing images on canvas. Then people began buying paintings, critics began critiquing them, and soon an entire culture had sprung up around art. Today food is creating a similar buzz – people, young and old alike, are trying to become Botticellis of braised short ribs and then celebrating it with friends, reveling in the experience of mastering the art of cumin.

Cooking, in other words, is no longer just something your mother does to put dinner on the table. It's a vehicle to express creativity, forge social connections, articulate what we have learned from other cultures, and in some cases save the environment.

"Food has become an entire lifestyle," says author Christopher Powell, who helped launch the kitchen retailer icon Williams-Sonoma. "It's no longer just about preparation or consumption."

The transformation of food from kitchen to cultural phenomenon is evident everywhere. Farmers' markets and gourmet food trucks have proliferated across the country. Urban hipsters now preserve their own jams. Suburbanites are raising chickens so they can have fresh eggs. The most mundane fare – from hamburgers to cupcakes – has been turned into haute cuisine. Has anyone not had French fries made in duck fat yet? Cuisine is even popular on the big screen, from the dramatic (*"Julie & Julia"*) to the animated (*"Ratatouille"*).

Roger Hand, a retired doctor who attends the botanical chef series here every week, recounts how he recently attended a Shakespearean play and was surprised to find Elizabethan-Era recipes on sale in the lobby. "Going to see 'As You Like It,' I didn't think I'd come home with a

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