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Because Ideas Matter...

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Recommended Readings

*Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*

by Richard Wrangham, Persus, 2009

Reviewed by Paula Saffire

Richard Wrangham makes mincemeat out of raw-food faddists. Okay, just kidding. But Wrangham does discuss the importance of meat and of mincing for the evolution of our big-brained selves. He makes a complex and solid case for cooking as the impetus for progress from australopithecines to homo sapiens, with a little help from mincing and marinating. It is a pleasure to find an argument so carefully made from so many different angles. We can thank cooking for the fact that we do not need to spend five hours a day chewing. (And think of all we accomplish with that saved time!)

Wrangham is a primatologist so devoted to his subject matter that has actually eaten many of the wild foods eaten by chimpanzees. He reports that some of the fruits, seeds, and leaves were so foul he could barely swallow them. He weaves together many interesting topics, from gut size and mouth capacity to the significance of having meal times. He discusses the extraordinary predominance of women as cooks (responsible for cooking in almost 98 per cent of cultures studied) and suggests that the invention of cooking "trapped women into a newly subservient role enforced by male-dominated culture." He ends with a discussion of our far too simple conventions of calorie counting.

- Paula Saffire is associate professor of classical studies at Butler University.