I am submitting this paper for consideration for the AMS Writing Prize
Introduction:
I recently interviewed my 80-year old Grandmother about her personal relationship with food and cooking. The goal of this interview was to learn about her feelings towards cooking to see if she viewed her experience as one of empowerment or one of oppression. My interview with my Grandma Nona suggests that cooking both empowers and liberates women while at the same oppressing them. In this paper I will use my Nona’s interview as my main example along with Warren Belasco’s Food: The Key Concepts, Lin T. Humphrey’s “Soup Night”, and Anne Allison’s “Japanese Mothers and Obentos” to demonstrate the complicated relationship between women and cooking and how cooking not only empowers women, but also enslaves them, leading to a reinforcement of specific gender roles.

Cooking, Control, and Women Inferiority:
In chapter three of Warren Belasco’s book, Food: The Key Concepts, the author looks at food and gender and argues that women can gain leverage through cooking. More specifically, Belasco argues how having control in the kitchen can lead to an overall control of “domestic consumption” (Belasco, Food, p.42). This means that women use power gained through cooking to extend their control to other areas of the household, like the management of money. The fact that cooking allows women to gain more power in areas outside of the kitchen shows how cooking serves to empower women.

This argument can further be supported by a quote from my Nona’s interview, “My husband believed he was in change, but when it came to food and the household’s bank account, I was the one who secretly wielded the power.” While this quote also provides support for the first part of my argument that cooking empowers women, it also hints at the presence of a latent form of oppression. This is seen in how my Nona’s uses the word
“secret”. The fact that my Nona lets my Grandpa believe he is in charge shows how cooking can also be oppressive by suggesting that women should be subordinate to their male counterparts. My grandmother shouldn’t have to hide her dominant status, yet she does and in the process accepts an inferior status without really realizing it. Belasco provides a similar example when he discusses the Kuo women of Kenya and how the men get all the credit for the feasts when the women do all the work (Belasco, Food, p. 44). This leads to a very bleak view of cooking in that while it does extend a woman's control to other areas of the household, leading to an increase in empowerment, it can also serve as a form of enslavement if the women's contribution isn't recognized because of how it reproduces the gender role of women being seen as inferior or subordinate to men.

*Cooking as Freeing and Women as the Main Food Producers:* Cooking can provide women with more than just control. Another type of empowerment that cooking provides women is freedom or a time where they can relax and feel liberated. This can be seen in Lin T. Humphrey’s “Soup Night” where the author, who is also the hostess, discusses the tradition of “Soup Night.” Soup night is an event held every Thursday and involves the festive gathering of a group of people who share and consume food (Lin, Course Reader, p.19). The main dish is soup, which is provided by the hostess, while participants bring bread, wine, and other additional items. While soup night is seen as a time of celebration of friends and community, it is the time prior to the event that Lin views as the most crucial. “Making soup requires one to stop rushing around...Thursday afternoons are sacred times for me, time set aside for making soup,” (Lin, Course Reader, p.20). This quote from Lin expresses how freeing the simple act of chopping and slicing can be. Lin values this time so much so that she makes it known how unwelcome guests are
who arrive early to help, which reinforces how important this time is for her to be able to become immersed in the cooking while the rest of her worries fall away.

My Nona conveyed a similar feeling in her interview when she mentioned that one of her favorite things about cooking was when she could relish in the quietness of the house and actually turn off her brain. For my Nona, there were no worries, just the soothing and freeing sounds and smells of the kitchen. Both of these women’s experiences really get at the heart of how empowering cooking can be because of the type of atmosphere they are able to immerse themselves in and how it provides them a sense of freedom and liberation.

Even though soup night is a very informal setting that takes most of the responsibility off the hostess, there is still some responsibility present that reinforces certain gender roles, like women being seen as the family’s main food provider. While Lin does view the time prior to the event as freeing, she also admits that she doesn’t always feel this way, “There are some Thursdays when I would prefer not to have to spend the afternoon making soup or when there is something else going on that I would like to do instead” (Lin, Course Reader, p.23). This quote shows that Lin doesn’t always want to cook, but knows she has to because of her commitment to the event and how important it is for those who attend. This connects back to my argument in that while cooking can be a form of empowerment, it can also be oppressive and lead to the reproduction of certain gender stereotypes, like women being viewed as the main domestic feeders. Why doesn’t her husband take on some of the responsibility and help prepare for the event when she isn't up to it? By continuing to make the soup, even when she doesn’t feel up to it, Lin is only reinforcing her role as the main food provider in society.
Cooking, Creativity, and Gender Performance Expectations:

As I have previously mentioned, cooking can be empowering for women by providing both control and freedom. Cooking can also be empowering by allowing for self-expression and creativity. In Anne Allison’s article, “Japanese Mothers and Obentos,” the author looks at the cultural meaning and serious responsibility of obento making. Obentos are boxed lunches that Japanese mothers are expected to labor over for their young school children. Additionally, Obento making is “a creative and fulfilling personal statement about themselves” (Allison, Lecture 4 Notes, p. 16). This quote shows that even though obento making is a very arduous task, it nonetheless empowers women by allowing them to express themselves within their creations.

The idea that cooking can be empowering by sparking creativity can also be seen in Lin’s “Soup Night” when she says, “Making soup is creative fun...” as well as in my Nona’s interview when she discusses how she was always looking for new ways to get different reactions from my Nono since he wasn’t a very emotional guy (Lin, Course Reader, p.23). These three examples all support and illustrate how cooking gives women more power by allowing them to become artists in the kitchen where they could create something new.

While the practice of obento making does allow for self-expression and empowerment, it is also infused with gendered meanings and performance that can oppress women. The idea that obento making is a training practice that creates the kinds of mothers that the Japanese school system wants is one example of how these women are being shaped by structure rather than agency and therefore being enslaved by the obento making process (Allison, Lecture 4 Notes, p.14). This is why Allison identifies obento making as “a double edged sword for women,” because of how it both helps and hinders women (Allison, Lecture 4 Note, p.16). This complicated relationship leads to a divided and
conflicted identity that both empowers and oppresses women. More specifically, it allows women to express themselves and acquire more power while at the same time reinforcing certain gender performances, which only leads to more enslavement for women who feel like they have to take part in the practice to avoid being labeled by society as a bad mother.

**Conclusion:**
Throughout this paper I have shown how the relationship between women and cooking is very complicated. It isn’t enough to say that cooking empowers women or that cooking oppresses women. The reality of the situation is that cooking cuts both ways. It provides ways for women to gain more authority while also leading to their subjugation. The specific examples I chose to support my argument were crucial in illustrating not just that cooking empowers and oppresses women, but how cooking does these things.

Cooking empowers women by allowing them to gain more control (Belasco), obtain more freedom (Lin), and be more expressive (Allison). The oppression can be seen in men and women’s automatic acceptance of certain gender roles, like women being inferior to men and women being delegated as the main food provider. If women stopped cooking, they would no longer be oppressed in the kitchen since they wouldn’t be in the kitchen. Although a loss would be that women would also have one less way to become empowered. One positive outcome would be that men would have to step up, assuming they wouldn’t want to starve themselves or their family. However, the quality of food produced could easily turn this gain into a loss. Another potential positive is that getting women out of the kitchen might allow them to get more involved in other aspects of their life like work. It would allow women to put more focus more on other things, which could lead to finding different ways in achieving empowerment. I know that it wouldn’t be possible to get all women out of the kitchen, but it sure would be fun to watch the men squirm.