Cooking: A Cognitive Activity

I have never been a great cook because I never cooked regularly, and cooking is a skill that may take years to mature. Though I used to cook occasionally, it was limited to one dish where I put all vegetables and rice in one vessel, put all spices and salt, and cooked it. Fortunately, my “vegetable fried rice” almost always tasted well.

Then I came to Stanford last September and started a life of a forced bachelor. It was then that I started cooking full time, and alone, without the able guidance of my wife. My wife had given me the recipes of a few dishes when I was leaving India and she had also dictated me a few more. Initially, I found myself calling up my wife in the middle of cooking a dish to find out what spices I need to use, in what quantity, and in what order, what vegetables go together, and again should I fry the vegetables first and put the spices or fry onions and spices and later put the vegetables. To this day, I have not understood why I need to fry the spices with the onions first and later put chicken, and why I need to fry the vegetables with onions first and later put spices. The mystery remains unresolved.

Initially, I used to keep the written recipe in the kitchen and followed it in letter and spirit. However, now, after four months, I’ve lost the recipes and cook using the recipe in my “mind”.

When I think about my cooking, I realize that there is a lot of thinking involved with it. If I want to make a dish to last two days, what would be the quantity of each of the vegetables such as onions and potatoes? What would be the quantities if I want the dish to last three days? And why don’t the onions and potatoes come in same sizes? Life is already so complicated and these vegetables make it more complicated. Why does the size of vegetables changes every week? Too bad.

When I start cooking, I analyze the size of onions, for example. Should I use three small ones or one large and one small, or two large ones? Then I select the onions based on the quantity of the dish I want to make and the kind of dish it is.

Then I start frying the onions, while simultaneously peeling and cutting potatoes, tomatoes, and green chilies. I put the cut vegetables in the frying pan and fry with the onions. Now it’s the time for putting the spices and salt.

In my written recipes, the quantities of several spices were written in terms of spoons and the quantity of the vegetables. Here I found that the quantities of the vegetables are different from what’s written in the recipe. And the size of the spoon I use here is different from what we had in India, and what my wife had referred to while writing the recipe.

After a number of trial and errors, I gave up using a spoon altogether. Now I use only my judgment to estimate the amount of each spice. I keep all spices together on the shelf so that I don’t have to remember the information. The knowledge in the world helps me in not requiring to remember each spice.
While writing this paper, I realize that there is a lot of thinking and decision making involved with cooking; however, over time, this thinking process has become routine and hence automatic.