

From cooking skills to delivery platforms: Competing futures of food in Brazil

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Abstract

Brazil's food system is undergoing structural transformation shaped by urban acceleration, digital platforms, and shifting domestic routines. Based on qualitative research conducted between 2023 and 2025 – including interviews, food diaries, and digital ethnography – this essay identifies three competing trajectories for the future of food in Brazil: the erosion of everyday cooking competence, the symbolic intensification of culinary practices, and the infrastructural dominance of digital food platforms. Rather than predicting a single outcome, the article argues that the future of Brazilian food will depend on how cooking competencies are redistributed across households, markets, and algorithms. The analysis highlights the strategic implications of competence externalization and the emerging politics of food autonomy in a platform-mediated society.

Key-words: Food consumption, Brazil, futures studies, futures of food, competence.

Brazil's food system is undergoing a silent but profound transformation. For decades, the national meal – rice, beans, a portion of protein and vegetables – functioned as a stable cultural and nutritional anchor (Barbosa, 2007). More than a dish, it represented a daily structure: cooking from scratch, assembling a balanced plate, and organizing domestic time around shared meals. This configuration was not only symbolic (Bitelli & Jurema, 2019) but also skill-dependent. It required culinary competencies transmitted intergenerationally and sustained through repetition.

However, urban acceleration, labor reconfiguration, digital mediation and platformization are reshaping these foundations. Food delivery apps have expanded dramatically across Brazilian cities and social media has become a primary source of culinary learning, through TikTok, Youtube and Instagram. Ultra-processed foods have gained space in everyday consumption (Louzada *et al.*, 2015) and kitchens are no longer necessarily sites of production but increasingly spaces of assembly.

These shifts do not merely reflect changes in preference: they signal deeper transformations in the competencies that sustain eating practices. When competencies erode, are outsourced, or are digitally reconstructed, the entire system of daily routines reorganize (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). Understanding the future of food in Brazil therefore requires looking beyond technology, demography or macroeconomics. We defend the need to examine how everyday practices are being reconfigured.

This research is grounded in the understanding that the future is not a linear projection of the present, but a cone of possibilities shaped by multiple interacting trajectories (Gall *et al.*, 2022). Rather than forecasting a single outcome, the analysis adopts a futures-oriented perspective that seeks to expand the field of plausible alternatives. Following Miller's (2007) conception of futures literacy, imagining the future requires a disciplined exercise of rigorous imagination – one that systematically explores alternative configurations of practices, infrastructures, and competencies. The three trajectories discussed in this essay should therefore be read not as predictions, but as structured possibilities emerging from observable transformations in Brazilian food practices.

The erosion and reconfiguration of cooking competence in Brazil

We conducted 30 in-depth interviews accompanied by in homes participant observation during 2023 and 2024. Our participants included Brazilians at three distinct life stages: adults with young children and teenagers, young single adults, or married individuals without children. This longitudinal and intergenerational investigation is grounded in the belief that daily constructions of the future are shaped by consumption patterns and practices that originate from childhood experiences, interactions with adolescent peers, and the dynamics of adult life (Hareven, 1995). We view these stages as interconnected processes throughout life, representing social, cultural, and biological dimensions. Therefore, we mapped the various structuring aspects of the experience of eating (material, social, symbolic, discursive) by tracing their pathways in consumer daily life.

Additionally we collected interviewees' food diaries, observational records of domestic routines, and digital ethnography of food-related content on social platforms. Rather than focusing on declared preferences or

stated trends, the research examined everyday food practices: how meals are planned, prepared, outsourced, and justified. Interviews were carried during home visits that enabled researchers to explore the household's space and tools.

Across households, one pattern consistently emerged: transformations in Brazilian food consumption are less about ingredients or culinary styles and more about shifts in competence – that is, the practical, embodied capacity to cook, plan, and manage food routines. Historically, cooking competence in Brazil has been sustained by repetition and intergenerational transmission. Everyday meals – particularly rice, beans, meat and fresh preparations – relied on tacit know-how embedded in domestic life (Barbosa, 2007). However, our fieldwork indicates that this infrastructure is under pressure. Data indicates three interconnected dynamics pushing routines gradual transformation.

Interviewees frequently described replacing weekday cooking with delivery platforms, ready-to-eat products, or semi-prepared foods. While often justified by time scarcity and urban mobility constraints, this outsourcing has structural implications. Several younger participants reported limited confidence in preparing “basic Brazilian meals” from scratch, despite expressing strong affective attachment to them. Outsourcing does not immediately eliminate cooking competence; rather, it reduces opportunities for its reproduction. The less cooking is practiced, the less efficient and more burdensome it feels – reinforcing dependence on external providers. In this trajectory, competence migrates from inside the households to external platforms and food service ecosystems.

A second pattern observed in the research is the transformation of cooking from routine obligation into episodic project. Cooking is preserved, but often concentrated in weekends, social gatherings, or health-driven phases. In interviews, participants described weekday reliance on convenience and weekend experimentation with “proper cooking,” gourmet recipes, or healthier preparations. Here, competence does not disappear; it becomes selective and subordinate to hype. It is activated for pleasure, identity, or performance, rather than sustained daily necessity or cultural Family reproduction. This specialization produces a paradox: culinary sophistication may increase, while everyday autonomy weakens. Everyday ones choses a new dish to prepare.

A third dynamic emerging strongly from the digital ethnography concerns how cooking knowledge is now acquired. Younger participants of-

ten cited short-form videos, influencers, and algorithmically curated feeds as primary sources of instruction. Rather than intergenerational learning, competence is increasingly platform-mediated. However, this reconstruction differs from traditional transmission: it is fragmented, accelerated, and highly visual. Recipes are optimized for speed, simplicity, and reproducibility. This does not signal a simple decline of competence, but a re-configuration of where and how it is built.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Brazil is not experiencing a linear decline in cooking. Instead, cooking competence is being redistributed across households, markets, and platforms. The futures of food in Brazil will depend on which of these competence configurations stabilizes or expands. The next section translates these empirical dynamics into three competing trajectories for Brazilian food futures.

From present to competing food futures in Brazil

The trajectories outlined here are not speculative imaginaries detached from empirical observation. They extend transformations already underway in Brazil's food system. Recent national data suggest that Brazilian food practices are undergoing structural reconfiguration. According to IBGE's Household Budget Survey (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2017 – 2018), food consumed away from home already accounts for approximately 33 % of total household food expenditure, with significantly higher proportions in metropolitan regions. At the same time, time-use surveys indicate declining availability for domestic food preparation, particularly among dual-income households and urban populations. Parallel to this, Brazil has experienced rapid expansion of food delivery platforms: iFood alone reports more than 80 million registered users and millions of monthly orders, consolidating platform-based food access as everyday infrastructure rather than occasional convenience (Statista, 2023). These indicators do not simply reflect changing preferences; they signal a redistribution of food competence across institutions.

One possible trajectory is the progressive externalization of everyday cooking: The Market Future. If current patterns intensify, Brazil may consolidate a model in which weekday meals are structurally delegated to digital platforms, ready-meal industries, and hyperlocal delivery logistics. Cooking becomes episodic rather than routine. The household

shifts from production site to consumption node. In this configuration, platforms accumulate culinary coordination capacity – through logistics, personalization algorithms, and predictive consumption data. Autonomy migrates from embodied practice to infrastructural systems. While convenience expands access and flexibility, dependency deepens. In moments of economic volatility, fuel price shocks, or regulatory disruption, such externalization exposes systemic fragility. The erosion here is not merely nutritional; it concerns the concentration of operational knowledge outside domestic spaces.

A second trajectory suggests not disappearance but polarization. It is the gourmet circuit future. The fieldwork indicates that cooking is not uniformly declining; rather, it is becoming unevenly distributed across time and meaning. Weekday meals are increasingly simplified, standardized, or outsourced, while cooking survives in intensified forms during weekends or special occasions. In this configuration, culinary competence becomes symbolic. It is mobilized for leisure, identity construction, health optimization, and social performance. Consumers may cultivate sophisticated niche skills – artisanal baking, plant-based experimentation, fermentation – while simultaneously relying on convenience solutions for daily sustenance. The result is a bifurcated food system: routine nutrition governed by industrial efficiency, and affective or expressive cooking concentrated in curated moments. This trajectory preserves cultural capital but weakens routine food sovereignty. It also risks amplifying inequality, as time, resources, and stable domestic infrastructures become prerequisites for maintaining experiential culinary practices.

A third trajectory points not toward erosion but toward reconfiguration through digital mediation. It is the critical social media future. The research demonstrates that cooking competence is increasingly reconstructed via social media platforms, particularly through short-form video formats such as TikTok and Instagram Reels. Recipes circulate as modular, visually optimized units of knowledge, transforming culinary learning into an accelerated, replicable process. In this configuration, algorithms function as informal culinary schools, shaping not only what is cooked but how cooking is imagined.

Among younger generations, this dynamic has produced an unexpected effect: cooking is relearned not primarily through intergenerational transmission, but through platform-mediated instruction. However, what is acquired is not limited to procedural know-how. Alongside step-by-s-

tep recipes, young users are exposed to discourses on sugar consumption, ultra-processed foods, plant-based diets, sustainability, gut health, and metabolic balance. The result is not merely technical competence, but the construction of a new form of critical food literacy.

Unlike traditional familial transmission – often centered on repetition and tacit knowledge – platform-based learning embeds cooking within broader debates about nutrition, health, and ethics. Young consumers do not simply learn how to cook; they learn how to question ingredients, industrial processes, and dietary norms. In this sense, digital mediation does not eliminate competence but transforms its epistemic structure. Culinary skill becomes intertwined with critical evaluation. Yet this re-configuration remains ambivalent. While it expands access to knowledge and democratizes experimentation, it is also selective and subordinate to hype. Visibility is algorithmically curated, privileging aesthetic performance and viral narratives over depth, contextualization, or scientific robustness. Competence is rebuilt – but under the logic of engagement metrics rather than sustained pedagogical transmission.

Across these three trajectories (Table I), a deeper structural tension becomes visible. The future of food in Brazil is less about specific ingredients, dietary trends, or gastronomic identities, and more about the locus of competence and control. Will everyday food autonomy remain embodied in households? Will it be absorbed by industrial and logistical infrastructures? Or will it be shaped by algorithmic curation and platform incentives?

Table 1 – Futures of Food in Brazil

The market future	The gourmet circuit future	The critical social media future
The practical consumer does not know how to cook and does not care, because apps and grocery stores make up for their lack of skill. If they want to enjoy preparing something, they turn to appliances and semi-prepared options that give them the feeling they took part in the process and added their own special touch. Their children eat at school, and on weekends, food delivery apps always come to the rescue.	The hedonist consumer has learned what is good from social media and from experiences in restaurants and on trips. They follow a bunch of interesting people on social media who post recipes. Why not have risotto on a Wednesday night? All this hedonism gradually shapes their relationship with food, reorganizing their menu and the way they cook.	The critical consumer has gone back to learning how to cook, thanks to social media that show step-by-step recipes and help them figure out what menu to plan. However, they are not just learning recipes. They are learning about food and nutrition, joining new groups, and suddenly turning into a critical consumer of sugar, carbs, ultra-processed foods, or meat. Relearning skills on TikTok has transformed their relationship with food.

The present moment suggests coexistence rather than convergence. Brazil appears to be navigating a transitional phase in which domestic knowledge, industrial provision, and digital mediation overlap and compete. The direction of consolidation will depend on broader structural forces: urban labor dynamics, regulation of delivery platforms, public food education policies, economic volatility, and evolving cultural narratives about care, health, and time scarcity.

The strategic implication is clear. The debate about food futures in Brazil should not be reduced to innovation versus tradition, or convenience versus authenticity. It must instead interrogate how competence is redistributed across households, markets, and digital infrastructures – and what forms of dependency or autonomy are being built in the process.

Conclusion: Food futures as a question of competence and control

Brazil's food future will not be defined by what people eat, but by who holds the competence to prepare, organize, and interpret food practices. The research presented here suggests that cooking is neither disappearing nor simply modernizing. Instead, it is being redistributed. Everyday competence is increasingly externalized to platforms and logistics systems. Culinary practice survives symbolically in leisure contexts. Digital media reconstructs knowledge in modular, accelerated forms. These shifts signal more than lifestyle change. They indicate a structural reallocation of food autonomy.

If competence continues to migrate toward platforms, Brazilian households may gain convenience but lose operational sovereignty. If digital mediation becomes the dominant pedagogical infrastructure, algorithms will increasingly shape not only consumption choices but also culinary imagination. The future of food in Brazil therefore hinges on a strategic question: how much everyday food competence should remain embodied within households?

This is not a nostalgic defense of tradition. It is a recognition that competence structures resilience. Food systems built exclusively on external infrastructures are efficient – but vulnerable. Systems that preserve distributed competence are slower – but adaptive. Brazil stands at a transitional moment. The trajectories identified in this essay are already visible in practice. Which one consolidates will depend on urban labor patterns, regulation of digital platforms, public food education policies, and broader cultural narratives about time, care, and autonomy. Food is not only nourishment. It is an operational system of skills, meanings, and infrastructures. The way competence is distributed today will determine the resilience of Brazil's food future tomorrow.

This research was financed by the Mondelez-ESPM Chair of Consumer Behavior.

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