

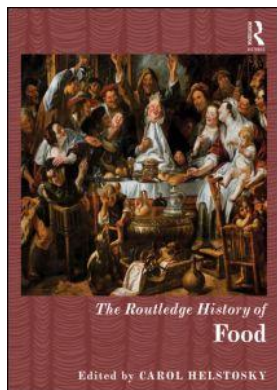
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Carol Helstosky

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Kathleen Collins

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COOKING CLASS

The rise of the “foodie” and the role of mass media

Kathleen Collins

Introduction

In the United States, there are two cable television networks dedicated wholly to food and cooking. In 2012, the Food Network had a nightly average of 1.1 million viewers.¹ Small kitchen appliance expenditures continue to increase,² and despite the demise of the venerable *Gourmet Magazine* in 2009, there are hundreds of print magazines and countless blogs to refer to when looking for recipes or food writing. These and many other indicators seem to incontrovertibly charge Americans with being a nation consumed, as it were, with food. But what does this evidence tell us? Is interest in food a modern-day phenomenon? Does all of this consumption around the subject mean that we are cooking more than ever before?

While there is a plethora of popular media on the topic of food, here we can observe the topic – especially the phenomenon of food television – from a more critical vantage point and ask some basic but perhaps ultimately complex questions in order to illuminate the role of “mediated” food in our modern lives.

The first question to ask has already been alluded to: Is it new? We will challenge the notion that “foodie-ism” is a new development, trend, interest or hobby. While it is certainly arguable that food enthusiasm has reached new heights and has gone mainstream in unprecedented ways, foodie-ism (definition of which to be tackled herein as well) has actually ebbed and flowed over the twentieth century and earlier. Food and cooking were claimed as forms of entertainment long before the television Food Network came into being in 1993, in print and broadcast formats. The advent of new technologies, however, has allowed interest in food to proliferate and to reach new and larger audiences.

The next question to address: Is it passive? In answering this, we will challenge outdated, simplistic theories of mass media effects. The concept of the passive or active in food-as-entertainment can be problematic. What is the impact of either active or passive consumption and the proliferation of food as entertainment? Closely related to this polemic is what we learn from food television. In addition to recipes and food knowledge, there are plenty of intangibles. Among these are what it means to be an “ideal” middle-class or upper-middle-class consumer and citizen in today’s world, at least according to certain constituents.

Along the same continuum lies a third question: Is it democratic? Is food television (and other popular forms of food-as-leisure) as democratic in nature or as universally accessible

as it seems on the surface or as it purports to be? In a connection to our first question, while many consumer-citizens perceive the present day to be the apogee of the “foodie” phenomenon, what may really be at play is a saturation and the mainstreaming of the culture of heightened awareness and attention paid to food and cooking. In contrast to the early twentieth century, when high society restaurants would be patently off limits to those who were not affluent and did not read French – what Andrew Haley describes as the “social Darwinism of aristocratic dining”³ – it would seem that we are presently witnessing a more democratized food culture. However, while class and social boundaries in many cultural sectors have become blurred over time, we may now be living in a food culture that still propagates a hierarchical system, albeit a more subtle iteration.

Food is still a divided, classist arena with a high dose of *aspiration* (versus *inspiration* as touted by television programmers and hosts) with political, economic and cultural causes and effects. In fact, as Joanne Finkelstein writes in her article titled “Foodainment,” food is often removed from its nutritional function “[and] this distance has been amplified in the late twentieth century as food has become both more subject to social imperatives of fashion and more deeply located within the entertainment industries.”⁴ In this chapter, we will address the above-mentioned questions by looking at the history of food media in the twentieth century in the United States from magazines and newspapers to radio, television and the Internet to determine how they made Americans a nation of “foodies.” In fact, we start with the debate about that word itself. Throughout, the concepts of knowledge and learning play key roles. Media distributes information, but humans must absorb and use that information to ultimately affect culture.

What is a foodie?

For cognizant citizens living in the United States and Western Europe in the late twentieth century, it might have felt as though the pinnacle of cultural interest in food was at hand. Almost everyone seemed to claim themselves to be a “foodie.” That zeal has not only been sustained into the twenty-first century but has also blossomed and branched out. But what is a foodie or foodie-ism? The term was likely first used in 1982 in the British magazine *Harpers & Queen* (a society-turned-fashion publication) and popularized in the 1984 (US) publication of *The Official Foodie Handbook: Be Modern – Worship Food*. The authors of the latter, Paul Levy and Ann Barr, describe a foodie as “a person who is very very interested in food. Foodies are the ones talking about food in any gathering – salivating over restaurants, recipes, radicchio.”⁵ While this definition is open to interpretation and co-optation, it is at least commonly understood that a foodie is a member of a group with a particular set of tastes, interests and body of knowledge that sets him or her apart from those without. These members have an interest in food beyond merely meeting biological needs; think of living to eat versus eating to live. But what are the other characteristics?

Some balk at the term foodie. Its meaning is misunderstood and controversial, and a vigorous debate has ensued. A more apt and widely agreed-upon term, however, is elusive. In the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the equivalent may have been “gourmet.” David Strauss defines a gourmet as “a connoisseur of food and wine, skilled in recognizing good flavors and textures,” implying a knowledge-based prerequisite.⁶ A 1970 episode of the American TV program *The French Chef*, however, illustrates the elitist overtones connoted by the word. In an episode featuring bouillabaisse, host Julia Child uses a mocking

tone to refer to the “gourmets” who “fancy up” the inherently populist fish stew implying that this group moves the stew into the inaccessible realm of the elite.⁷ Indeed, the word “gourmet” has lost much of its historical connotation, now that it is used indiscriminately to describe almost any food product in the supermarket or in the name of even the most modest convenience store. The Strauss-characterized gourmets themselves might see the term as watered down and too open to admittance, the idea being that people who are not sufficiently serious or knowledgeable about food should not claim membership of such a group. There have been a handful of food-personality terms to argue about over the last century or longer, none of which seem to be acceptable or useful alternatives to the sought-after meaning of “foodie”. Candidates include gourmand, gastronome, epicure, connoisseur and, in more recent years, more specific terms with varying activist or rebellious leanings such as chowhound or locavore.

What might appear to be a frivolous semantic debate is at the heart of the food class wars Western society has long fought and continues to wage. While obviously not as dire as other wars, even cultural ones, the topic of food brings to light a host of larger political, economic and social issues. In the first chapter of *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, authors Johnston and Baumann spend dozens of pages deconstructing the term “foodie,” its history, evolution and connotations, trying to arrive at a definition.⁸ The very fact of this is telling. Since its comparatively uncontested and light-hearted use in the early 1980s as a way to differentiate people who were interested in high quality, non-mainstream food (Johnston and Baumann), or who elevated food to the level of art (Levy and Barr), “foodie” and its connotations has evolved, or as Johnston and Baumann say, it has been “corrupted.”⁹ They pithily describe the term “foodie” as “[embodying] the tension between democracy and distinction.”¹⁰ What started out as an antidote to food snobbery has, on the one hand, become associated with elitism but, on the other hand, lost its social capital and might be considered by elites to now include misguided interlopers or, as Haley quotes from a 1921 *New York Times* article, “indifferent gullets.”¹¹

The ubiquity of food interest results in many people now claiming foodie membership who might not have been compelled or felt entitled to call themselves a gourmet in 1970. Today, people who are exuberant eaters (in essence, people who love food) consider themselves foodies, even if they are not adventurous or knowledgeable about the foods they eat. Others describe themselves as foodies because they are proud to be on the cutting edge of who’s who in the restaurant and chef scene (a related category of knowledge) and have the means to dine at such hot spots. Still others, perhaps descendants of the natural food-loving “hippies” of the 1960s and 1970s who were devotees of Francis Moore Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet*, count themselves as foodies for their specialized interest in vegan or macrobiotic diets. As we can see, the definition can be subjective, and the heated, healthy arguments about it involve all sorts of people.

Interest in food and cooking today has a social cachet that crosses demographic boundaries. While there is a common denominator of *appreciating* food, whatever that may entail for an individual, a foodie purist has a high degree of earnest interest in *learning* about and, as a result, a knowledge about food that includes, for instance, its historical origins, social history, flavor profiles and ideal wine pairing. In our current information age, the knowledge divide separates social classes as much as economic differences, and when it comes to food, *knowing* or *not knowing* – whether of something’s existence at all or of its significance – may even be the more divisive factor.

Is it new? The practical era

The life cycle of such a burdened term gives us some clue that food interest is not a late twentieth-century phenomenon, though perceiving it as a new cultural trend is a common misperception. What is relatively new, however, is the cross-demographic reach of the subject's popularity and the way information about food is transmitted. It is likewise arguable that interest in food – particularly its prominent categorization as a leisure time subject – has reached new heights and gone mainstream in unprecedented ways. While food and cooking have been used as forms of entertainment decades before the establishment of the US television Food Network in various media formats, previous iterations have generally been confined to specific groups, usually those with financial means.

In retrospect, it becomes clear that several critical events and tipping points in the twentieth century – at the time mere hints of the entertainment potential of food – contributed to a seeming zenith of food interest at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As we have seen in preceding accounts in this volume, the stage had been set in certain areas and among certain populations even earlier. The concept of conspicuous consumption¹² in the nineteenth century is evidence of a gourmet movement. In the early twentieth century, a few pockets of food writers or gastronomes – Wine and Food Society founder André Simon, journalist Julian Street, publisher Alfred Knopf and others – defied a mainstream modernist, scientific, nutritionist trend. The end of prohibition in 1933 paired nicely with a more gourmet philosophy. Food columns in newspapers increased, and food writers like M.F.K. Fisher and Clementine Paddleford helped create a new genre.

The rise of the upper middle class between and after the World Wars created a demographic that prized intelligence, sophistication and self-expression and that was willing to spend money on travel, cultural events and lifestyle accessories. During World War II, when many restaurants were exempt from rationing, a small dining-out boom resulted. Gourmet food gained traction as a presence in cosmopolitan and luxury lifestyle magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *House and Garden* and *Vogue*. Journalists who covered the gourmet movement early in the twentieth century were often society page reporters who wrote admiringly of activities of elite gourmets and emphasized exclusivity, a divide that was unfortunately easy to establish since many Americans suffered economically in the Depression.

In the American post-World War II era, as many women returned to domestic duties after having served in the wartime workforce, there was a push by certain invested parties to professionalize homemaking in order to imbue women's work with requisite prestige. There was little room or motivation to see food as a leisure activity in this climate, though there were inevitably those slices of the population for whom food was a leisure commodity. In 1941, the same year that the US government instituted the concept of recommended daily nutritional requirements, magazine publisher Earle MacAusland launched *Gourmet: The Magazine of Good Living*. *Gourmet* spoke directly to people with means for whom dining out or buying exotic ingredients was not just a possibility but considered a pleasurable activity, i.e. the foodies of the day. MacAusland could perhaps justify the awkwardly timed premiere by patriotically championing the bounty springing forth from American soil. A sixtieth anniversary issue of the magazine excerpted some exemplary quotes from the publication's first decade: "Gloria Vanderbilt sat opposite me; General Pershing's son to my left; Charles Boyer at my right. The famous star paid little attention to the curious females who ogled him, and much attention to his food"; "The only thing we want for Christmas this year is a boar's head. We want it prepared in the old English way – first

picked, then roasted, and served on a solid gold platter, its tusks gilded, a roast apple in its mouth, and the whole decked with sprigs of rosemary and bay”; “From poet to gourmet is such a small step”; and “The man who first put a grain of salt on a lettuce leaf and then dipped it in a mixture of wine vinegar and olive oil was one of the few true benefactors of mankind.”¹³

For most people, however, practical and economical information was more valuable. Both philosophies existed side by side, not necessarily in harmony, but serving the needs and desires of a good swath of the public. Where the upper class may have felt dubious about combining dining with entertainment – Haley recounts elites’ reaction to the profane presence of music in middle-class restaurants in the early twentieth century¹⁴ – home economists Marshall and Frazier reported that mid-century housewives craved anything to liven up the topic on homemaking TV programs.¹⁵ Eventually and inevitably, entertainment won out in all aspects.

Gourmet’s circulation increased dramatically in the decade and a half after World War II. At the risk of giving away the story, a telling parallel exists between the characteristics of *Gourmet* and its ilk and that of the television Food Network fifty years later. Strauss concludes that *Gourmet* and other magazines, restaurant reviews and gourmet cookbooks provided some familiarity with a superficial knowledge of French cuisine via the vocabulary, ingredients and preparation methods, but did not make people better or necessarily more adventurous cooks; presented paths to good living but also confirmed class and gender messages; was aspirational, presenting gourmet dining as a conduit to a higher social standing; fought against the tyranny of the revolution in convenience foods and new kitchen appliances; and made Americans more adventurous consumers of products mentioned and advertised in its pages as well as the sophisticated lifestyle presented.¹⁶ Each of these descriptors could be applied to the Food Network, but one major difference between the two time periods and media was the audience. *Gourmet* was generally for people who had no cooking skills because they relied on servants. The Food Network’s audience and its cooking skills will be addressed further on. This analogy serves as yet another piece of evidence – on the side of the naysayers – in the “is it new?” case.

Print media played a critical role in the evolution of food interest, but it was broadcast media that began to slowly smudge the lines of class distinctions. In the 1920s, the new medium of radio in the United States offered housekeeping-oriented programming directed at women, including cooking and nutrition information (e.g. Aunt Sammy’s *Housekeeper’s Chat*, Betty Crocker’s *Magazine of the Air*). Beginning in the late 1940s, TV was a convenient and especially suitable new medium for promoting home economics in a scientific light and for spreading the word about any number of topics. The rapidly adopted medium kept people at home and eating in after World War II, and yet it was TV that would, in a matter of a few decades, attempt to broaden food horizons on a grand scale. Even in the early 1950s, television helped to increase people’s acceptance of new foods, especially those endorsed by celebrities.

Television cooking instruction was often initially embedded in general homemaking programs targeting housewives, just as it was on radio. With few exceptions, most of these programs were hosted by home economists or local TV personalities and consisted of nutrition information, homemaking tips and recipe instruction. They were generally sponsored by utility companies or by food or household product manufacturers. Inexpensive and simple to produce, they appeared almost simultaneously with the advent of commercially available television in the United States, airing locally in various cities.

Despite variations in host personality and theme, with a handful using humor and entertainment elements (e.g. Monty Margetts' *Cook's Corner*, *Chef Milani Cooks*, Ernie Kovacs' *Deadline for Dinner*), the teaching element on cooking segments or programs was fairly straightforward and pragmatic. A host – usually a woman – stood behind a kitchen counter and demonstrated the steps in recipe completion, verbally sharing tips on nutrition, cooking, shopping or saving money and time as she did so. “In order to appeal to the typical housewife,” writes Lynn Spigel, “the hostess would ideally speak on her level ... [T]he ideal hostess was decidedly not a glamour girl, but rather a pleasingly attractive, middle-aged woman – Hollywood’s answer to the home economics teacher ... [D]aytime hostesses were designed to provide a role model for ordinary housewives, educating them on the ‘good life,’ while still appearing down to earth.”¹⁷ In the early period of TV cooking instruction, this basic format existed in significant volume throughout the 1950s and in many markets into the 1960s and later. The professed purpose of such programs was teaching housewives to fulfill their roles, but the fundamental and commercial purpose revolved around a growing venue for sponsors to advertise their products.

There was, however, another layer of instruction, discernible perhaps only in retrospect. As early as the 1940s, an undercurrent of identity politics can be found in television cooking shows. Given that World War II had recently ended and the Cold War was mounting, Americans were setting their sights on home and nation. A central focus was feeding and ensuring the safety and contentment of one’s family. The rise of the suburbs and a campaign of cultural conformity affected all aspects of mainstream society and were naturally reflected on television, iconically represented in sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*. Food television followed suit as well. “Food TV’s audience (and arguably all TV audiences) are buying an identity,” writes Kimberly Joy Orlijan, “whether that be ‘American’ or ‘cook’ or both.”¹⁸ And as historian Mary McFeely argues, cookbooks (equally relevant to radio and TV cooking programs) teach ethnic groups and working-class Americans that “this is what you ought to aspire to.”¹⁹ Through cooking programs, viewers learned techniques as well as a form of cultural citizenship. And not just any kind of citizen was being fashioned, but rather one of a certain minimum class. “The good taste and aesthetic values modeled by TV chefs,” writes Tania Lewis, “can be seen as a strongly disciplinary mechanism, producing or aiming to produce a particular kind of well-mannered middle class consumer.”²⁰

Women, especially, gathered knowledge via recipes and household tips and simultaneously guidelines about what a husband (“a nice meal for a man to come home to, wouldn’t ya say?” as 1950s TV cook Josie McCarthy rhetorically asked) and children and even a group of peers expected. Program hosts gave dinner party ideas, often suggesting the trendy canned foods of the day and recipes that would make guests think their host had slaved for hours.²¹ The gathering of information that shaped viewers’ behavior occurred on an individual as well as a societal level, and it is apparent that even in the early days of food television, the message content was both explicit and implicit. “[T]hrough the communication of such culinary knowledge,” writes Isabelle de Solier, “cookery programmes transmit other encoded forms of knowledge about gender, class, ethnicity and national identity, which perform particular kinds of ideological work.”²² Likewise, Naccarato and LeBesco argue that TV cooking shows “offer consumers a means of earning culinary capital through credible performances of a range of gender and class ideologies.”²³

Many dishes on TV shows were chosen based on their liberal use of the sponsor’s product. Chef Milani composed a salad of Hunt’s canned vegetables and Minneapolis’ Bee

Baxter used Softasilk cake flour for baking on her show.²⁴ Program content ranged from everyday meals for the family – beef stew, casseroles, frankfurters and sauerkraut, Jell-O salads, vanilla crumb refrigerator cake – to dishes that would be eye-catching or exotic and impressive to guests, though not necessarily more labor-intensive or complex, e.g. ham studded with pineapple and maraschino cherries. François Pope was praised by a TV critic for demonstrating a complete meal prepared in under an hour consisting of shrimp de Jonghe (a Chicago specialty using garlic, sherry and breadcrumbs), a “Pope-invented cheese and mushroom concoction,” and a German pancake for dessert.²⁵ TV cooking show hosts around the country in the 1950s chose their favorite “something different” recipes to contribute to a published collection called *Cooking with the Experts*.²⁶ It is interesting to note that French is far from the only ethnic food considered worthy of preparing. Enlightening examples include: hot crab canapés, Tiki Toheroa soup, Pastitso, Portuguese roast pork, tripe Milanese, dolma, hot tamale pie and potato pancakes.

Not incidentally, yet another level of learning was taking place in the 1940s and 1950s. As one of the earliest television program types, cooking shows were instrumental in teaching viewers – again, especially women – how to consume not only products to buy for their home but how to consume television itself, making TV watching not only a daily habit but weaving appropriately targeted programming into the typical rhythms of a household’s day.²⁷ Magazines like *Gourmet*, too, were conditioning readers to purchase products and to aspire to a particular lifestyle.

Setting the scene and sowing the seeds

The practical period just described did include some notable exceptions. The esteemed cookbook author and “dean of American cooking” James Beard hosted the first nationally televised cooking program, *I Love to Eat*, on a US television network in 1946. The following year, on another US network, European-born and -raised, Cordon Bleu-trained Dione Lucas hosted *The Dione Lucas Show* where she initiated audiences to the charms and challenges of French cooking. The programs are largely forgotten in American collective memory since they were not emblematic of their era. These two epicurean hosts were ahead of their time with regard to transmitting the pleasures of eating as well as cooking via the lowbrow mass medium of television.

In the early part of the twentieth century then, there were segments of society where food was already a leisure pursuit as evidenced by adherents to high society dining and *Gourmet*. There were also anachronistic allusions to the potential of a more widespread culture of food interest as seen by the more populist attempts of Beard and Lucas. David Strauss’ book, even in its title, *Setting the Table for Julia Child*, suggests a scaffolding that was taking place during these years. Strauss describes a gradual movement away from the fear of sensual pleasure and Protestant ethics. Of course, even in the early twentieth century this interest was not new, and the progression was never linear. We could undoubtedly find instances of food-as-leisure in every decade, century and region of the world. Though not quite cyclical, the trend evolves and gains momentum each time it resurfaces given the new developments with which to build more virulent movements. Even in the twentieth century, is it not as if French food were the popular cuisine in the 1950s and 1960s to the exclusion of other types, as we witnessed in the TV hosts’ eclectic recipes? Soldiers who had been sent to Europe and a mid-century travel boom provided a mind- and palate-opening entrée to dishes beyond baked beans and broiled chicken. As chefs gained cultural

capital and television played a larger role in illuminating viewers, people embraced other ethnic foods as sophisticated and epicurean as well.

The increase in written and broadcast content both in the United States and United Kingdom over the course of the twentieth century illustrates both the seriousness and the popularity of food as a cultural interest. Food writers, cookbooks, restaurant reviews, TV food programs, and now websites and podcasts are legion, complete with a deep history. Which region is more fanatical about television cooking could be the basis of its own reality show, and both Anglophone regions share a similar chronological trajectory before they literally shared programs. In the UK, Fanny Craddock had a similar influence on the culture as Julia Child did in the United States, and Delia Smith, who began cooking instruction on TV in the 1970s, and Keith Floyd in the 1980s were two other iconic British hosts. Food as entertainment is in evidence in our modern era around the world in numerous ways. From a once exclusive leisure domain of the wealthy, food itself has moved into a privileged place in first world society as plaything or art object and cooking as a hobby or an enviable profession. The current popularity of cooking and food programs around the world indicates that foodism is a global phenomenon propagated by mass media.²⁸ While many of the programs shown in Europe, Asia and the Middle East are Western, English-language exports or adaptations (the import of Japan's *Iron Chef* to the United States is a notable and definitive exception), there exists now a mixture of home-grown and foreign programming in many countries, and several have dedicated food channels.

Expanding vistas

The gourmet movement gained considerable traction with the help of various media in the early twentieth century. There were an increasing number of books and essays, restaurant reviews, food columns and cookbooks along with the continued contributions of home economists and health advocates. Despite its patchy expression, food interest seemed to be a topic that was here to stay. In the latter half of the century, the most influential of the mass media on the continued evolution of food interest was television. Since foodie-ism has at its core a desire for knowledge, we will pay particular attention to what is taught and learned via mass media.

In 1960, when television was still in its adolescence, cultural studies scholar Richard Hoggart had this to say about it:

[Television] will be an important general educator, an educator of manners, a way of transmitting – by implication and suggestion – attitudes and assumptions different from those many in its audience have previously held ... it is bound constantly to be putting before people other ways of shaking hands, of sitting down, of wearing clothes, or reacting to strangers, of eating, of carrying on conversations.²⁹

While this comment could be applied to any number of program types, it lends itself well to food television, especially in light of the far-reaching impact the medium has had on the topic. A confluence of factors in early 1960s America created an environment for change in television content that reflected a time of social and cultural flux. Consequently, there was a historical shift in what was taught – or learned, not always the same thing – on food TV. The combination of the youthful, glamorous Kennedy White House with its Franco-phililia and French chef, Rene Verdon, a noticeable rise in international travel among the

middle class, higher incomes and a burgeoning generation keen on questioning tradition and authority opened the doors for food and cooking to take on new roles. No longer merely practical, information offered on television became fodder for other kinds of knowledge, a transformation that is observable to a great extent today.

Renowned cooking show host Julia Child happened along at just this time when she hosted *The French Chef*, which premiered on public television in the United States in 1963. Even fifty years on she is still considered the doyenne of television cooking (furthered by her resurgence in popular culture with the film *Julie and Julia* released in 2009, five years after her death). Child has long been hailed as a democratic and populist force for having brought increasingly popular French cuisine (widely considered complex and a matter for the elite) to the American populace in the 1960s. And indeed, as Alice Yaeger Kaplan writes, “Through food access to aristocracy has been democratized, because unlike the Grand Tour, food is both accessible and interpretable by varying social milieux.”³⁰ The fact of television – and Child’s charm and popularity – only intensified the message and mass impact.

Child, while not setting out to entertain, was extremely popular, and *The French Chef* and subsequent Child-hosted shows were public television staples throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Her public broadcasting contemporaries – including Jacques Pépin, Justin Wilson, Madeleine Kamman, Joyce Chen, Martin Yan and Nathalie Dupree – also imparted their serious cooking skills and assorted culinary themes, and, in the case of *Frugal Gourmet* Jeff Smith, impromptu lessons on the peoples of the countries from whence came his more far-flung dishes (Africa, Japan, etc.).

In 1969, British chef Graham Kerr appeared on commercial TV in the United States as the *Galloping Gourmet*. Though he was a trained culinary professional, his show was decidedly entertainment-centric and of a markedly different tone than his PBS predecessors and successors. He struggled with the entertainment–teaching divide and admittedly felt something was lost in “the methodology” introduced on his show. He sincerely wanted to teach, but forces were acting against him. His wife and producer, Treena, knew that it was necessary to make audiences laugh or they would be bored and wouldn’t watch. Graham knew she was right and that having an audience was the top priority. He was still able to teach on some level, but the content – in between gags – was rich with elements such as wine-pairing and fashionable gourmet combinations more than serious technique. Treena was a clever businesswoman and a visionary and her “methodology” fairly summarizes the model of food television today.³¹

Kerr was somewhat of an anomaly as the male host of a traditionally female-hosted genre, but his role was soon to become less anomalous. By late 1970s and early 1980s, as men were expected to contribute to housework and not just operate the backyard grill, they took part in cooking in the kitchen, and this helped bring cooking out of the women’s pages of newspapers and more into the journalistic mainstream. Celebrities, male and female, showcased an interest in and ability to cook, appearing on talk show cooking segments. As indicated previously, and as continues to prove true, celebrities are powerful models for viewers.

Through the 1980s, the US Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was the largely unchallenged television teacher, and to this day there is a divide between the kind of pedagogy on public versus commercial broadcasting and cable. Because of the economics of public television, PBS producers never had to concern themselves unduly with the entertainment–teaching dilemma. The merits of shows like *Lydia’s Italy*, *Great Chefs* and *America’s Test Kitchen*

rest on the hosts' skill or the strength of a particular theme (e.g. *Cooking Naturally*, *Jewish Cooking in America with Joan Nathan*, *Holiday Entertaining with Martha Stewart*), and public broadcasting cooking show audiences are likely to be considered "serious" about their cooking endeavors. Elite viewers, so conventional wisdom would say, turn to PBS for *real* cooking. "Hockey-fan foodies," as Sara Moulton calls the non-elite, or "the great unwashed," as Graham Kerr calls them, turn to commercial sites.³² There are pockets – the PBS "ghetto," and the daytime Food Network lineup deemed "in the kitchen" – where audiences can go if they are intent on learning.³³ Prime-time commercial TV and cable offerings (*Hell's Kitchen*, *Top Chef*, *Chopped*, *Cupcake Wars*) generally avoid the traditional "dump and stir" format. Accordingly, they are rife with competition, interpersonal drama, music, live audiences and dazzling personalities offering little in the way of technique instruction.

Today's commercial cooking show forms generally capture two types of viewers – those who want to learn but enjoy the entertainment aspects and those who don't care about learning and who are drawn in by the non-instructional, high production value elements. The latter group can also enjoy the fact, if it is important to them, that they are watching fare that has an element of how-to, fact-based content, where a few tips may be learned effortlessly by osmosis. Audiences began to learn by a different, perhaps more powerful, mechanism as TV cooking shows adopted more entertainment characteristics. "While written and printed words emphasize ideas," writes Joshua Meyrowitz, "most electronic media emphasize feeling, appearance, mood ... The major questions are no longer, 'Is it true?' 'Is it false?' Instead we more often ask, 'How does it look?' 'How does it feel?'"³⁴ These visual and hence more sensual and emotional factors offered by television lure and maintain audiences. As Marshall and Frazier reported on network programmers' opinions on homemaking shows, "you can't teach before you reach."³⁵

John Corner describes television as "a medium of entertainment and diversion, with its knowledge-providing role as a secondary function."³⁶ While cooking shows traditionally do offer formal information, the more competition-oriented and reality-show varieties stray a significant distance from that purpose in that they do not spend much, if any, time on explaining cooking processes. Nevertheless, they offer a different type of knowledge.

Because many of today's food-related programs could rightfully be cross-listed as reality shows – *Hell's Kitchen*, *Top Chef*, *Iron Chef*, *Next Food Network Star*, *Dinner: Impossible* – much of the scholarship about that robust sub-genre can be applied to cooking shows, and therein we can glean information about the role of entertainment in teaching and learning. "These reality programmes encourage audiences to learn about first aid, or decorating, whilst at the same time entertaining audiences with dramatic stories of rescue operations, or revelatory stories of DIY makeovers," writes Annette Hill. "We can call the informative elements in such reality programmes 'learning opportunities', as viewers have the opportunity to learn from the advice given in the programmes, but may choose not to take up or act on such advice."³⁷ Whereas the informative elements were at one time foregrounded, they have increasingly receded to comprise fewer slices of the content pie. This "takeaway" effect makes up much of what Food Network executives expect their viewers to gain from their programming, and they place a high value on those information fragments.³⁸

Is it passive?

The cooking shows from the 1940s through the 1960s indicated instruction as the apparent purpose, and therefore there was an assumption that viewers (mostly housewives) would

engage with them attentively and with an eye to gaining useful information. In other words, they were not generally consumed as a method of relaxation or form of leisure. In contrast, food and cooking shows of today have earned a reputation of passivity – people watch them purely for fun, often with no intention of learning or attempting recipes.

It is a common but questionable assumption that the consumer-viewer, especially given the ubiquitous notion of the “couch potato,” is passive. Around the time that television was first introduced to the general public in the United States and the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century, contemporary communication theories had a rather dim view of the effects of mass media. Humans were thought to be defenseless, impressionable receptacles, highly susceptible to manipulation. While some degree of these theories continue to prevail and carry a bit of weight, it is generally believed today that viewers and consumers have more agency than originally believed and that effects vary greatly between individuals depending on a number of factors. This is not to deny the powerful force of mass media.

In actuality, viewers have helped to shape the culture and television/media offerings and have a great deal of choice in the ways in which they use information. Just because someone might not be cooking while watching TV (it is all too common to hear people describing a spouse who watches the Food Network consistently but never cooks anything) nor dive into a recipe as soon as a program ends, it does not mean they are not actively learning something while watching. An analogy can be found in the 1980s US restaurant boom, when consumers took advantage of a healthy economy and began dining out more. While some might view allowing restaurants to provide dinner as lazy or passive, a more optimistic observer would see that diners broadened their horizons about foods, combinations and preparation methods available in the culinary universe. The 1980s was also the beginning of the primacy of the chef. Once a member of the working class, this figure – some to earn the descriptor “celebrity” – led consumers to care about not just what was cooking but who was cooking. When it comes to blogs and social media, it becomes even more difficult to argue that consumers are passive. Food has increasingly proven itself to be an arena where viewers and diners can express their interests, creativity, social status and desire for self-improvement.

Idea of learning

Learned collectively, knowledge of food and cooking has become mainstream in society. Some programs, therefore, may be reluctant to state the obvious, tacit information they assume everyone knows, and may feel obliged to move ahead with more advanced endeavors relating to cooking, food and entertaining. Annette Hill writes “This is why the majority of viewers of reality programming talk about the ‘idea of learning’ rather than learning itself.”³⁹ Akin to the impressionistic “idea of learning” is the *idea of ideas*. As mentioned above, the Food Network is a purveyor of takeaway information, perhaps more than traditionally consumed recipes. The *New York Times*’ food columnist Mark Bittman has published lists of ideas over the past few years that are, in effect, two- or three-sentence “recipes.” Some examples: “Soak couscous in boiling water to cover until tender; top with sardines, tomatoes, parsley, olive oil and black pepper”; “Chop prosciutto and crisp it in a skillet with olive oil; add chopped not-too-ripe figs. Serve over greens dressed with oil and vinegar; top all with crumbled blue cheese”; “Sear corn kernels in olive oil with minced jalapeños and chopped onions; toss with cilantro, black beans, chopped tomatoes, chopped bell pepper and lime.”⁴⁰

Similarly, in 2010, Canadian home cook Maureen Evans published *Eat Tweet: A Twitter Cookbook* offering 1,000 recipes, each relayed in fewer than 140 characters.

Just as we might want to adopt a gestalt rather than specific skills from TV shows, the extreme popularity of these published lists (they are among the most emailed articles from the digital version of the *New York Times*) and abbreviated recipes indicate that consumers may well simply need a nudge, rather than a menu plan or instructional recipe, to get them cooking. Whether this is for time's sake or because we are replete with culturally gleaned cooking knowledge is unclear. Another consequence of the rise of restaurants is that we are content to let others cook for us. Many people do not cook at all, but prefer to eat out or order in. In addition, media messages emphasizing the fact or myth that we don't have time to cook is a great boon to the prepared foods industry, further pushing consumers into a perceived passive box.

As a result of this cultural change, it is no longer expected that the cooking show host be a genuine expert (contrary to the Food Network's relentless claims of being so).⁴¹ He or she no longer needs to be an authority on the subject, but rather an arbiter, delivering tips and suggestions to a receptive lay audience of self-described foodies eager to trade up. "The TV chef, through his or her focus on aesthetics," writes Tania Lewis, "acts as a mediator and translator for a set of 'life skills' that is associated both with the elite world of the professional chef and with the realm of 'women's work'."⁴² Even those who *are* experts – classically trained chefs like Jacques Pépin or Bobby Flay – might be forced to downplay the amount of detail or rigor they teach on television.

Peter Lunt writes of the changing nature of expertise in popular television and how it has

changed from the provision of knowledge in the form of useful information to a format in which expertise and the adoption of advice is performed in programs and backed up by the accumulation of a repository of advice. The role of the expert has shifted from the authoritative provider of public information to that of therapist or coach offering advice to participants in the practical accomplishment of the transformation of the self.⁴³

Though this may be more dramatic and obvious in programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, we see it in cooking shows, too, as an example of lifestyle television. While a self-improvement agenda is not explicit, most cooking programs provide an underlying message that says, "If you cook well (or at all), you are a better person." In the early days of the sub-genre this was so because target viewers – women – were in a role of serving others. From the 1960s onward, cooking was an avenue for self-fulfillment, increasingly for men as well as women.

If you eat well, so the logical implication goes, you are a better person. This notion can be interpreted in terms of health and self-care as well, an area also linked to class. What citizens require or demand (or spend money on) dictates the nature of program content. Food interest has broadened in ways that were hinted at in the 1960s and 1970s but now receive wider attention. And so it seems that what might be required in the current day, as evidenced by the alarming rise in obesity and diet-related illness in the United States as well as increased attention on environmental crises, is the development of programs to address these issues. Tania Lewis notes how lifestyle television of late "has been marked by a shift to a more overtly educational as well as arguably more realist approach to lifestyle change, one concerned with emphasizing responsible modes of consumption and

citizenship and with focusing on the pain and effort involved in transforming oneself into an ethical consumer.”⁴⁴ Despite this, the vast majority of televised food programming does not emphasize healthy eating. Some – Southern cook Paula Deen, greasy spoon hunter Guy Fieri and the British *Two Fat Ladies* as examples – showcase artery-clogging food, that very characteristic being the intentional hook and entertainment value of these shows. So while print media may answer the growing need and interest in health among some segments of the population, it is TV where we can all turn for a good dose of “junk viewing.”

One exception and deliberate antidote to just this sort of pervasive hedonistic or careless attitude toward food is British cooking show host Jamie Oliver. Known for his *Naked Chef* series in the 1990s and later *Jamie's School Dinners* where he hoped to transform the diets of students in England, Oliver is an apt example of what Lewis describes as “overtly educational.” With *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, on the American network ABC in 2010, he brought his pedagogical methods to a West Virginia town that was deemed by media outlets based on 2007 US government data as America's least healthy and fattest city.⁴⁵ Just as he had done in the UK, Oliver spent weeks teaching citizens of Huntington, West Virginia, how to eat better, cook simple meals and to feed school children more healthfully.

Oliver used cooking demonstrations, contests and games to engage the community. His presence was met with varying reactions from the town's citizens and viewers. One faction felt that he was interfering, uninvited and imposing middle-class values. Another saw him as a hero, one man waging a desperately needed battle in Western society. “In attempting to transform the overweight and behaviourally ‘aberrant’ people featured on these shows into ideal citizens, the emphasis on health, fitness and behavioural change is closely tied here to regulating people's modes of consumption,” writes Lewis. “In particular (and somewhat ironically, given that many of these shows are aired on commercial television), these issues are often framed in terms of curbing ‘excessive’ consumption from overeating to watching too much television.”⁴⁶ This type of more intentionally mallet-over-the-head citizen education in food television is ostensibly designed to improve the health and well-being of a society and therefore provide a public service. It is also a voyeuristic opportunity for those who perceive their own lifestyles as superior to those portrayed on a show like *Food Revolution*. As Lewis writes:

Much of lifestyle television is concerned, then, with teaching its audiences to adopt implicitly middle-class modes of “good” consumption and self-surveillance (from actively seeking out organic produce to purchasing the latest green appliances). Regulating one's consumption and embracing the necessary inconveniences of green modes of living are offered up as middle-class virtues to which we should all aspire. Linked to this aspirational focus, ethical modes of consumption are increasingly associated with social distinction, with expensive green products increasingly acquiring a degree of social cache amongst a growing urban class of “bourgeois bohemians.”⁴⁷

A bird's eye view of the evolution of teaching via food television might reveal this: We American citizen-viewers were first taught practical advice for homemaking; then we learned how to be creative and use cooking as a means of self-expression; then we learned to spend our money on food and accoutrements, to follow trends, to indulge and treat and find ourselves via food. After following all that advice, we are overweight and out of touch with real food and authentic cooking. Watching a program like Guy Fieri's *Diners, Drive-Ins*

and *Dives*, where overeating is sport, the time has come, other programs are telling us, to scale back.

We have posed the question “is it passive?” as it relates to food television and its viewers. The Jamie Oliver experiment would indicate that viewers are hopefully highly receptive to the messages. Naccarato and LeBesco write:

The upshot of food television’s popularity is the symbolic democratization of culinary capital – viewers are authorized to sit around feeling entitled and in-the-know, without really thinking about what is missing from their basis of knowledge. While we are not suggesting that viewers are inevitably passive dupes to the all-powerful media, we do recognize that sometimes the deck can be stacked in ways that constrain the possibilities for resistance ... food television, in particular, is adept at curtailing resistance by giving everyday citizens less room to talk back, to read against the grain, and so on.⁴⁸

In this application, resistance can be construed as challenging the power dynamic between upper and lower classes, the latter’s right to assert their own priorities instead of accepting perceived narrowly-defined, misplaced or irrelevant values. LeBesco and Naccarato, like Johnston and Baumann, also expound on the definition of a foodie specifically in comparison to a “chowhound,”⁴⁹ and therein the passivity issue rears up again. Chowhounds accuse foodies of “eating where they’re told” instead of blazing trails as chowhounds purport to do.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the impending syllogism does not compute, i.e. chowhounds are unlikely to be considered on equal footing – by chowhounds or members of the underclass – simply because they both refuse to eat what and where they are told. This is one of many examples that illustrate the complex hierarchies that have developed in recent years, and it also reminds us of the contentious nature of “foodie” defining.

Approaching food with an awareness of aesthetics or with a desire for knowledge acquisition is by definition not passive. As viewers, we have become savvier about media and its tricks. On the whole, we are aware we are being sold to, smirk at product placement, flip channels away from or fast forward through advertisements, and as consumers, we vote with our wallets. As consumer-viewers, our eyeballs are quite literally sought after. Because the development of program content depends on the intended audience and vice versa – *what* is driven by *whom* – different needs and desires emerge and are reflected on television. Changes in content from practical information to social mores to cultural capital to health and environmental information are not mutually exclusive, but as the form has advanced, various sub-sub-genres have emerged and highlight a variety of themes. Viewers’ and citizens’ need or desire to learn, as well as pedagogy, formats, content, methods, medium and ways of implementing knowledge ebb, flow and evolve.

Is it democratic?

The most salient characteristic of the present food movement is that it is ostensibly mainstream and open access; anyone can participate, even though some might be accused by others of practicing behaviors or espousing knowledge incorrectly, superficially or inauthentically. Social and cultural hierarchies are inevitable outgrowths of such an open marketplace of ideas. Previous mentions of this social accessibility such as Kaplan’s and the

efforts of Julia Child indicate an assumed democracy inherent in food and its open pathway to upward mobility, but it is not so simple.

While Child's intention was to demystify and popularize, what was ultimately being taught was more than simply the introduction of a type of international cooking. At the same time that Child was playing a small part in attempting to flatten a social class hierarchy, the awareness of trends and aesthetics as expressed via cultural trappings including gourmet *savoir-faire* began to create a culinary paradigm that has in many ways become more pronounced – at the same time that the currency of cultural capital has changed – in the intervening decades. “TV cooking shows not only teach pragmatic culinary knowledge in terms of cookery skills, but also play a vital role in the production and promotion of regimes of taste,” writes de Solier. “It informs viewers in matters of taste, and how to use their taste in food in projects of social distinction.”⁵¹

In the café society of the 1930s in the United States, “selectivity and publicity” were the main concerns of the anointed entertainers, writers, artists and the generally wealthy. Members enjoyed media attention and luxury consumption. Exclusivity was abated by the acceptance of some who might not meet the requirements of other elite social clubs such as Jews, Italians and women.⁵² In the early twentieth century, the gourmet movement's purported goal was to change American dining culture, not just to keep the knowledge and pleasure in exclusive groups but also to use their influence to spread the gospel of haute cuisine. The gap between the message and its application, however, was and is wide, for the middle and lower classes who cannot afford to partake. Today's “café society” is not explicit, but has many of the same unwritten entrance requirements. Remember Andrew Haley's “social Darwinism of aristocratic dining”? It has not gone far away.

Mass media perpetuates the hierarchical dynamic. Niki Strange argues that cooking shows are not necessarily what meets the eye, that is, simply the delivery of cooking techniques and recipes. She provides terms for media cookery program types: cookery-educative (instruction via demonstration), personality (focusing on host/presenter/instructor), tour-educative (travelogue) and raw-educative (food's transformation from raw state to finished dish often incorporating broader topics such as production-consumption processes).⁵³ We could add to this paradigm a fifth category. While not as easily defined, it would carry the most weight and have the most profound effect on our collective psyche: culture-educative. Worth consideration are the mechanisms by which food television teaches according to its explicit agenda – recipe and technique instruction – as well as by its implicit messages, which are inextricably tied to social class and consumerism.

Television made high culinary culture available to members of formerly uninvited guests who could now gain access to information about different places and practices in the world (“cultural tourism,” describes Finkelstein⁵⁴) and theoretically gain access to upmarket ingredients and kitchen tools. “When the viewer of a cooking program learns what it means to ‘chiffonade’ and to ‘canel,’ to ‘deglaze’ and to ‘degorge,’” writes Orlijan, “the viewer is acquiring another language – that of the kitchen, a language that creates an imagined community ... Attaining the language of cooking and purchasing an identity via acquiring products spawn communities that necessarily, by their very existence as communities, create and exclude others.”⁵⁵ Compared to the early twentieth century, when standardization of products and techniques was *de rigueur*, the end of the century and early twenty-first century – due in large part to cable television – can boast a great diversity in cuisines represented. It seems clear that this bevy of options, the apparent welcoming of “everyone,” has been a strong force in creating a climate where “everyone” feels at

ease considering themselves foodies. There is something for everyone and niches galore. But does variety or quantity or greater choice necessarily translate to a level playing field?

The cultural capital of food knowledge allows people to take on the temporary or illusory identity of a member of a higher social class. Some argue that such capital is the central medium of exchange. “The use value of ... a recipe displayed on television without accompanying text is variable at best,” writes David Goldstein.

The exchange value is all, an invitation to a voyeurism in which one sees the inside of one’s own kitchen as a potentially utopian space, perennially new and full of elegant devices; one sees oneself as a consummate performer with time on one’s hands ... What [Martha Stewart] teaches in these laboratories of domestic decorousness is how to watch her teach.⁵⁶

The Food Network, in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, does aim to be populist. Rachael Ray, for instance, uses products that can be found at any supermarket, and *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* profiles food establishments that sell the most American and accessible of dishes. The Internet is an open forum for anyone to blog or post videos about cooking, eating and restaurant reviews, thereby creating a seemingly infinite stable of amateur guides. But even that once flat playing field has become competitive with the prestigious James Beard Foundation now awarding honors not just for professional food writing and cookbooks, but for blogs and webcasts.

Lifestyle for sale

While the existence of food magazines grew over the decades, starting with the 1941 arrival of *Gourmet*, *Bon Appetit* in 1956, followed later by *Food & Wine*, *Saveur*, *Cook’s Illustrated* and many others, it was the launch of the Food Network in the United States in 1993 that radically altered the landscape of the cooking genre and its social position. It was not, however, an immediately noticeable change. The circumstances of the network’s origin say much about its role and the effect it continues to wage almost two decades later. Food and cooking, popular consumer topics as evidenced by the number of print publications in its services in the early 1990s, were deemed by a group of media executives to be an untapped, viable TV topic. The early days of the network included the airing of old TV cooking shows – including Julia Child and Dione Lucas – and soon thereafter new shows were developed, some of which were tangential to cooking instruction, i.e. news, travel and game shows. This strategy successfully combined recipe instruction and cooking skills with cultural trappings. Finkelstein efficiently and richly sums up the modern age:

Cooking programmes on television, new gourmet magazines on the news-stand, and the proliferation of chic products such as bottled water, designer olive oils and balsamic vinegars signal that food is a consumer item and a form of mass entertainment. The fashions in tastes for, say, fondue, crème caramel, wine sauces, tiramisu, tagines, demiglaces, coulis, squid-ink linguine and ciabatta can be mapped on to the social cachet of the ethnic or specialized bistro, the celebrity chef, the popularity of particular cult films, and the best-selling works of accomplished travel writers such as Peter Mayle and Jan Morris ... Ambience and the

aestheticization of food have made eating-out into a fashionable performance, and, as such, part of the expanding, insinuating entertainment industries.⁵⁷

The market-driven nature of today's food television affects food interest in a profound way. It creates *want* – to possess knowledge as well as material goods – and it explicitly and aggressively teaches viewers to consume. When viewers shop for products displayed on cooking shows, whether those advertised or simply an ingredient or accoutrement used by the host, they are likely subconsciously acquiring an element of the lifestyle presented. Buying the same spatula that longtime TV host and cookbook author Sara Moulton uses, a viewer might wager, will make me a better cook. But even more implicit, buying Nigella Lawson's robin's egg blue dishware or mezzaluna can foster the belief that emulating a host by purchasing specific products can lead to the creation of a more desirable lifestyle. The dynamic is hardly different from how we operated as adolescents when we emulated the popular girls' style of dress with the hope that it would bring us the same social success. It is an illusory endeavor since we intellectually know that merely copying a lifestyle is not the key to entry. "Many a social novice would try and fail to imitate the lifestyle of the well-to-do," writes Andrew Haley of dogged middle-class attempts in the early twentieth century, "only to learn that a modicum of economic success did not necessarily entitle one to the respect and social recognition that set the American aristocrat apart from the rest of society."⁵⁸ Their failures led to the middle class striking out to forge their own class identity (we might see an echo of this with the foodie–chowhound dynamic).

John Hartley's concept of "democrataintment" is relevant here. "During the second half of the twentieth century," he writes, "television has reached and sustained a position as the foremost medium for cross-demographic communication."⁵⁹ While the Food Network claims a populist philosophy, democracy is not necessarily its true aim. By design, exclusivity reigns in the realm of food-as-lifestyle. The continued success of enterprises like the Food Network depends on a persistent yet dynamic cultural divide. Fortunately for producers and advertisers, there will always be something new – whether an ingredient, restaurant, kitchen tool or health claim – which ensures a new surge of consumerist desire. In terms of knowledge dissemination, perhaps food television is an alleged democratizer – information is still free in many cases. But in terms of obtaining the physical trappings, many aspects are out of reach for people with insufficient incomes. (To further complicate the infrastructure of cultural gaps, many foodie purists would not even deign to watch or accept information from something as plebeian as the Food Network.)

Again, this has echoes in modern history: *Gourmet's* restaurant reviews were an effective conduit for familiarizing readers with gourmet restaurants in New York City and other regions, mostly larger cities in the United States and abroad, though of course this favored people who lived near them and people who could afford them. In point of fact, food television is less a public service than a highly effective marketing campaign. The presented content, values and aesthetics speak to a population who already has achieved a certain level of comfort. For those who do not quite see themselves reflected on the screen, it is aspirational. Food television relentlessly sends the message, "This is what you *should* want," which persists as a form of teaching cultural citizenship. Sometimes that message is delivered directly, as in the case of Jamie Oliver, other times more obliquely, as in the seemingly casual showcasing of hosts' desirable homes or kitchen gear, or, in the case of reality-style programming that can reveal the uglier side of human behavior, the message comes in the guise of a cautionary tale on how *not* to live.

As the format, tone and aesthetics of cooking shows have evolved over past decades, viewers are learning less from a televised version of a cookbook than from a celebrity host-centric catalogue. Compared with the earlier, pre-modern, pre-Food Network cooking shows, viewers are more likely to want to live like their TV hosts rather than merely cook like them. Viewers project themselves onto the tableaux presented, and on-screen activity is performed to appear eminently do-able. We are given explicit instructions after all, in how to do something in a space that is recognizably similar to a space in our own home. Repeating the actions in our own kitchens does not seem far-fetched, the way adopting the activities of the nobility on *Downton Abbey* might. The seeming do-ability and have-ability is central to the success of television cooking programs. As Signe Rousseau writes,

unlike Crocker, or Ronald McDonald, or any other figure who has had an impact on how and what we eat, celebrity chefs are real people, and their personal involvement in our welfare also tells us something of the shifting boundaries between public and private in a globalized world where it has become fairly normal to add other people's lives to the range of products we consume on a regular basis and to allow them to influence more and more of our own choices.⁶⁰

This brings us back to the notion of viewer passivity or docility. In the face of pleasing images, attractive faces and surroundings, and authoritative, enviable celebrities or chefs, it is difficult to argue that the viewer is not being seduced. However, it may be that seduction that succeeds in leading a viewer to attempt a recipe, especially to try out one's new mezzaluna. Dangling high-end, just out of reach products – both in ads and in program content – that promise an entrée to the auras portrayed on screen (those of Nigella Lawson, Martha Stewart, Ina Garten, Giada De Laurentiis or “Pioneer Woman” Ree Drummond, for example) is a large part of the allure of the programs. Presenting a privileged world attainable to some but far from a vast majority of the Food Network's viewers⁶¹ is, in effect, fuel for capitalism. “Knowing and using the language of cuisine, including exercising one's educated palate, separates those with cultural capital from ordinary eaters,” writes Pauline Adema. “As more people become familiar with gourmet foods, flavors, and preparation techniques the value of gourmet food and cooking as cultural capital decreases.”⁶² Producers and advertisers are aided by “hip elite” viewers and consumers who want to remain on the cutting edge and to leave the culturally ignorant behind.⁶³ “By blurring ‘who knows what about whom’ and ‘who knows what compared to whom,’” writes Meyrowitz, “television has fostered the blurring of social identities, socialization stages, and ranks of hierarchy ... What people share is not identical behaviour, but a common set of options.”⁶⁴ The options, for many, are purely theoretical. And while one-upmanship in terms of food knowledge and gourmet savoir-faire is not new (there was a plethora of gourmet dining clubs in the 1970s, for instance), it has become heightened with the aid of food and cooking information in a variety of media.

The big picture

In the United States, cooking instruction has been a fixture of American broadcast media since the first days of radio in the 1920s. The genre has proven its virility over time by adapting to media innovation – television, video, Internet, podcasting – as well as changing cultural desires. Traditionally seen as a basic service program type (before the emergence

of “lifestyle” television), this how-to sub-genre has evolved over the last six decades to rely on and often be associated with entertainment – and more recently and specifically, reality – programming.

The relatively recent emergence of socially health-oriented programming is reminiscent of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration when citizen nutrition was a primary concern. In other ways, too, our current food media harkens back to previous pedagogies. The countless home cooks now sharing cooking tips via blogs and home video (web-only cooking video is largely the province of amateurs) are analogous to the days of radio where geographically disparate housewives shared recipes and homemaking tips across the airwaves. The housewives are now joined by working parents, frat boys and rock stars, all seeking as well as offering instruction. The Food Network’s marketing strategies, the entertainment veneer and the popularity of food among the general public have helped to widen the audience of cooking shows.

Cooking shows, despite their wide variability and divergent evolutionary characteristics, still claim common ancestors. It is useful to imagine the plethora of programs on a continuum with relatively pure entertainment at one end and pure instruction at the other. The form has shifted but the mission remains steadfast. Since their inception, cooking shows have been closely connected to issues of class and distinction, usually implicit in any given program. The program type is especially powerful in its teaching about cultural citizenship as it appeals to, and is relevant and theoretically accessible to, a wide swath of the population. Viewers learn recipes or cooking tips as well as ways of consuming (material goods, television itself and ideas) and ways of fashioning a lifestyle – all of which contribute to both personal and societal identity formation or transformation.

For many, food has evolved from a means of nourishment to a form of entertainment as well. Where once food media’s purpose was instruction, it gradually took on the characteristics of a leisure pursuit. “Foodie” may be a late twentieth-century term, but food interest had been embedded in the human psyche for a long while. The table had been set piece by piece over decades with a powerful hand from electronic media. Our original three questions can be applied to the concept of foodism or food interest, no matter how it was propagated. The first question, “Is it new?” can be answered forthrightly: no, foodism is not the novelty that it might seem in our present day. The remaining two questions, “Is it passive?” and “Is it democratic?” each earn the reply, “That depends.” Consumer, viewer and citizen power depends on their varying reserves of social and economic capital. We are “buying an identity,” as Orlijan writes, but with caveats.

Notes

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- 4 Joanne Finkelstein, “Foodtainment,” *Performance Research*, 4, 130.
- 5 Ann Barr and Paul Levy, *The Official Foodie Handbook: Be Modern – Worship Food*, New York: Timbre Books, 1984, p. 6.
- 6 David Strauss, *Setting the Table for Julia Child: Gourmet Dining in America, 1934–1961*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, p. 132.
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- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 11 Haley, *Tuning the Tables*, p. 222, original citation: C. Rosebault, "Lost Tribe of New York Epicures," *New York Times*, February 13, 1921, p. 5 book review.
- 12 American sociologist Thorstein Veblen introduced the concept to describe a person's immodest display of wealth in his 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*.
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- 15 J. Marshall and L. Frazier, "The Homemakers' View of Television" and "The Networks' View of Homemaker Show," *Practical Home Economics*, October 1952, 14–16, 46.
- 16 Strauss, *Setting the Table for Julia Child*, p. 189.
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