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### Food TV

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# **FOOD TV**

## **Cooking Show History**

Food on television can include a host of formats, venues and functions, even within one medium, associated as it is with entertainment, education and advertising. Here it is defined as the genre traditionally referred to as cooking shows, although even that description is too narrow to encompass the wide range of programs types and content now available. In this essay, discussion covers the genre's history and evolution, culminating in a dedicated cable channel; the effect of food TV on cooking skills; the effectiveness of disseminating health, science and technology information; salient social messages delivered by food television; and the overall role of the genre in U.S. culture. Food TV, as characterized here, is emblematic of the concept of food issues itself, as it is relevant to consumer culture, economics, media and health policy.

Cooking instruction on television in the United States is as old as the medium itself. Beginning in the late 1940s, most urban television markets featured local home economist-hosted programs offering homemaking, cooking and nutrition advice and instruction. Geared toward housewives, these shows were inexpensive and easy for television stations to produce. They also provided the opportunity for convenient sponsorship by a variety of food product, appliance, and utility companies. The popularity of canned foods and boxed mixes in the 1940s and 1950s made it such that often a "recipe" might involve opening a can of peaches and adorning it with canned whipped topping. In the years after World War II, such programming was part of a cultural focus on the home and family and a return to a seemingly comfortable and stable standard of living.

Over the decades, cooking shows evolved, reflecting—and shaping—viewers’ interests and cultural trends. In 1963, the reception of the public television program *The French Chef* signaled a new widespread attitude toward cooking and cooking programs. The host, Julia Child, succeeded in popularizing and democratizing French cooking, which had previously been perceived as unduly complicated and difficult. Because French culture was at the time notably popular in the United States, viewers began to associate cooking and food choices with lifestyle rather than as a mere domestic chore. Therefore, cooking shows began to serve an aspirational as well as instructional purpose. In 1969, viewers of commercial television in the United States saw *The Galloping Gourmet*, hosted by Graham Kerr. Kerr was a professionally trained cook, but his producer insisted that humor be the aim of the show, even if at the expense of teaching.

This was perhaps a watershed moment where television producers and audiences understood that this type of programming could exist in the entertainment realm, not just the how-to or women’s service category. Although how-to type programs continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s—commonly on public television—cooking shows increasingly assumed more cultural cachet. Fine restaurants and inventive chefs exposed diners’ palates and minds to a wider array of foods, ethnic as well as American regional. As gourmet cooking worked its way into the mainstream, restaurant chefs as a professional class were developing a more prestigious reputation.

At the same time that gourmet food was growing in popularity, health trends were also reflected on food TV. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Americans began to show interest in eating in a way that took into account the health of the environment as well as personal well-being, and a handful of public television cooking programs, with titles such as *Cooking Naturally* and *Natural Foods*, offered information and instruction in cooking with whole grains and vegetarian

ingredients and making yogurt and baby food. In the 1980s, the aerobics and fat- and later carbohydrate-avoidant trends gave rise to a number of programs focused on light and “healthy” cooking. Examples include programs like *Calorie Commando*, *Meals Without Meat* and *Low Carb and Loving It*. Technology trends, such as food processors and microwave ovens, found their place on television food shows, too.

## **Launch of the Food Network**

Based on industry research exploring consumer interests, the cable channel Food Network was launched in 1993. With an unprecedented number of hours to fill on one subject, food TV quickly expanded to encompass news, travel, and game show elements. Within a few years, it became apparent to Food Network executives that a dynamic host garnered the biggest audience draw; thus, the 1990s ushered in the era of the TV celebrity chef. In an effort to increase its reach beyond food TV’s traditional female demographic, the network included shows with male hosts such as Bobby Flay and Mario Batali and formats that might appeal to men such as competition-style programs.

Some shows maintained an instructional focus, for the most part finding their time slot during the daytime hours, harkening back to the days of early network television food programming. This format was often referred to as “in the kitchen” or, sometimes more bluntly, as “dump and stir” programs. The evening hours were dedicated to more entertainment-oriented programs such as *Iron Chef America*, *Food 911*, and *Ace of Cakes* and a few years later *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* and *The Next Food Network Star*. As a commercial enterprise, executives were interested in attracting as many viewers as possible, thereby appeasing their advertisers. One of the biggest Food Network stars satisfied the gender and personality requirements—

Emeril Lagasse. As the host of *Emeril Live!*, he exemplified the enormous popularity and impact of a TV food celebrity.

## **Impact of Food TV on Cooking Skills**

In the 21st century, there has been considerable discussion over widespread health issues such as heart disease and obesity, and food TV has become part of the conversation and a matter of debate. Social science research has shown that Americans spend less time preparing food than in previous decades and simultaneously spend more money on purchasing prepared and processed foods. A number of studies have been carried out looking at the relationship between cooking shows and cooking activity and have drawn conclusions that indicate an inverse correlation.

Some observers claim that food TV plays an important part in this shift away from cooking and wonder why the television-watching populace is spending a great deal of time watching food TV but less time in their kitchens. In addition, critics of today's panoply of cooking programs are concerned about the lack of both true instruction and emphasis on healthy food choices. The inference—faulty or unscientific though it may be—is that watching television food programs contributes to more detrimental eating habits and poorer health (as other studies have concluded about television watching in general). While cooking shows are ostensibly providing cooking instruction, in reality, their more powerful impact may be related to the elements that viewers find most entertaining such as the aesthetics of both host and his or her environment and the narratives and interpersonal drama presented on competition and reality formats.

By de-emphasizing actual skills, critics contend, the activity of cooking is further relegated to the arena of pure leisure. Commentators like journalist and food policy activist Michael Pollan argue that Americans are watching instead of cooking and that cooking has

become less of a real activity and more one of voyeurism. As television production values have evolved to meet the perceived desires of the viewing audience, these observers contend, programs pay more attention to lifestyle and aesthetic choices than cooking skills. Therefore, the programs are implicitly educating in these areas while maintaining an outward intended purpose of teaching cooking skills. Viewers may feel more justified in spending time watching a television show where they are potentially learning something as opposed to merely being entertained. It behooves producers and executives, then, to continue at least some purported intent of educating.

The concept of “takeaway” is popular among food TV executives, the idea being that even a small idea—a new way to prepare or serve food, trying a new ingredient—makes the experience of watching a show worthwhile. Producers argue that if viewers do not have time (or, it is implied, enough money) to replicate what is seen on a program, the takeaway information is at least feasible. Studies have indeed shown that consumers do absorb some food safety information from TV cooking shows—proper cooking, storage and cleaning, for instance—and presumably other potentially helpful messages can be gleaned as well. The takeaway can be delivered via an entertaining format, so viewers—and the shows’ creators—are fully satisfied.

## **Health Information**

Health and nutrition are rarely explicit agenda items in modern cooking programs. One reason could be that show creators assume basic health and nutrition knowledge among viewers. In the early days of cooking programs, when such content was direct and explicit, it seemed to serve a need for housewives. Today, content that is too earnest or unambiguously educational no longer seems to mesh with the goals of the genre—to attract and maintain as many viewers as possible.

Some programs, such as the 1990s British food program *The Two Fat Ladies* and a few Food Network shows hosted by Southern restaurateur Paula Deen from 2002 onward, flagrantly defy the idea of healthy ingredients and instead embrace hearty and caloric foods like butter, meat, and cream in their recipes. The emphasis is on pleasure, taste, and enjoyment. Deen has been criticized publicly for her touting of unhealthy foods, and many felt vindicated when she announced she was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. However, many food programs are measured in their presentation of a variety of foods, and hosts frequently offer tips on how to alter recipes to reduce calories or eliminate unwanted ingredients. In recent years, as trends have included an increasing interest in the environment and personal health (echoing patterns from the 1960s and 70s), some hosts also acknowledge or highlight the facts when foods are organic, local, healthy, vegan, or allergen-free.

One TV chef has made a concerted effort to affect health and social problems on a mass scale. British restaurateur and TV chef Jamie Oliver, whose popular cooking show *The Naked Chef* aired on the Food Network in the late 1990s, launched a campaign to improve the school lunches of British school children. Concerned about the lack of healthy alternatives and nutritional education in schools, he developed *Jamie's School Dinners* in the United Kingdom in 2005, which did help to some degree to raise public awareness about the issue. In 2009, he implemented a similar campaign in Huntington, West Virginia, which had been deemed to be one of the unhealthiest cities in the United States based on high obesity rates. His noble intentions with both *Jamie's School Dinners* and the U.S. iteration, *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, were met with great interpersonal and logistical resistance along the way, and though they ultimately met with varying measures of success, the experiences highlighted the deep entrenchment of the causes and associated problems with the nations' food systems.

While *Food Revolution* was not a cooking program in the traditional sense—though Oliver did provide a good deal of nutritional information and demonstrated cooking techniques to the participating families, children and school lunchroom staff—these types of program are commonly considered under the informal category of food TV. They illustrate the blurred lines between cooking programs and food TV that have resulted over the decades as well as the outgrowth of the genre and the place of food and cooking information in modern society.

### **Science and Technology**

Technology has historically been addressed by food TV via hosts who implicitly or explicitly encourage the use of various appliances or prepared food products to aid in the cooking process or to enhance a recipe. Science is occasionally brought to the fore more deliberately in recent years, notably in programs such as the Food Network's *Good Food* hosted by Alton Brown, and public television's *America's Test Kitchen* hosted by the editors of *Cook's Illustrated* magazine. In these programs, hosts directly educate viewers on the mechanical or chemical processes that take place in various food preparation or cooking activities such as the purpose of browning meat and the differences between baking powder and baking soda. Viewers of *America's Test Kitchen* benefit from watching the demonstration of recipes that have been tested often, as many as 50 times, to ensure that they work for home cooks.

These and other programs' educational agendas stop short of acknowledging the controversies surrounding science and technology topics such as genetically modified foods and the environmental and health impact of certain industrial and agricultural practices. Such issues are addressed in substantial number by documentary filmmakers, but the economic structure of food TV has not been a welcome venue for such controversy.

Food TV executives and advertisers are intent upon creating a positive frame of reference and experience for viewers, and food programs have traditionally represented comfort and the “good life.” Any challenges presented on food TV are those that move the “plot” of a program along, such as tackling a cooking conundrum or winning the race in a cooking competition like *Iron Chef*, *Top Chef* or *Hell’s Kitchen*. It would be problematic for food and cooking programs to present explicit information on the controversial topics mentioned here because the goal of the commercial networks is to attract viewers. Even public television stations, where there are more references to foods origins and farming practices, rely on viewer contributions and corporate underwriters and are therefore likely to shy away from controversial topics. To provide thorough information about what is commonly referred to as the “industrial food complex” even for the sake of information and the social good would be at odds with producers’ and advertisers’ primary messages. TV production values—i.e. entertainment values—tend to take precedence.

### **Underlying Social Messages on Food TV**

In addition to topics of potential political debate, food TV presents information that can be observed from a social perspective. Although by no means overt, subtle messages are often detectable, wherein the ideal or assumed audience of a program is implicit. As evidenced by their marketing information as well as the many high-end advertisers and expensively outfitted kitchens on the sets of many of its programs, the Food Network’s target audience is higher income consumers. Without flaunting but also without apology, the programs in total celebrate and promote consumption. The combination of travel with cooking and restaurant dining further cultivates the notions of leisure, pleasure, and spending. Democratic, encouraging, welcoming messages about the feasibility and fun of cooking are abundant on food TV, but some of the

activities or products displayed would be difficult for viewers of lower incomes to replicate. The high-end appliances, ingredients, and cookware used and advertised and the well-appointed kitchens and homes featured on most food TV programs embrace notions of conspicuous consumption and excess, which may not necessarily reflect the reality of many American homes.

Related to notions of social class, one British study observed that when respondents were asked to rank their personal sources of cooking instruction, television cooking programs were rated low in comparison to sources such as cookbooks and family members. Cooking programs did, however, have more impact on higher social classes than on lower classes. The researchers conjectured that this group made more use of media whereas lower social classes relied more on learning from family members. On food TV, cooking is generally presented as a leisure activity or hobby rather than the traditional domestic task that it was in the early days of cooking programs and as it is for many families—especially challenging for working class families.

## **The Role of Food TV**

These issues raise a fundamental question about the role of food TV and whether it is intended to educate or entertain. As we have seen, network executives would likely say that they can do both, though their actions tend to betray their entertainment bias. Because television is a powerful and pervasive medium—most homes have one or more sets—and because the Food Network reaches 100 million U.S. homes, there is a theoretical potential to impact viewer behavior. This power accounts for the great popularity of the genre as well as the challenges faced by both creators and viewers.

Some argue that food TV is a potential source for good—to wit, Jamie Oliver's advocacy. Others would say it is part of larger social ills—think of the reaction to Paula Deen's style of

cooking and rampant health concerns. Both approaches are admired or criticized for their extremes. Jamie Oliver and his ilk would hope for behavior and policy transformation as a result of programming. The great majority of most food TV, however, simply exists to entertain and ideally impart some useful tidbits along the way.

For viewers, the role of food TV is subjective and depends on what each one hopes to achieve—for example, to learn new skills and recipes or to watch an entertaining program. Ratings show that the entertainment approach attracts more “eyeballs,” as the jargon of the TV industry would describe it, and thus the proliferation of shows with this focus. In many cases, the impact of these programs is on changing or expanding tastes if not behaviors. Inevitably, whatever the purpose or perception of food TV, it is evident that the genre has brought a wider swath of the population information of some sort about food and cooking.

*Kathleen Collins*

*See also* Advertising and Marketing of Food; Television Advertising; Cooking as Leisure Activity; Celebrity Chefs; Nutrition Education

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