

(CAMF6007)

DOCUMENTARY

Assessment 1 (Portfolio) - **1601398**

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A portfolio of work to comprise of individual research into the form of documentary chosen by the student for their film production.



CHEF'S TABLE:

THE REVOLUTIONARY FOOD DOC.

There is one subject matter of documentaries and TV-shows alike that's come in a very broad variety of styles and modes over the past 50 years. Everything from observational, participatory, performative and poetic – it is one that will likely never leave our TV screens, due to its vital importance in everyday life. People have obsessed over it, fought over it and searched around the world for it – all of this documented in many different ways. The subject matter that is at the heart of this essay, and many documentaries today, is food.

To really see just how far food documentaries have come, it would be wise to look back at where it all started. And like many other things, the origin of food on TV was, as Rousseau (2015) puts it, born out of opportunity and necessity. Rousseau (2015) continues to write about how World War 2 brought about rationing, and out of that, a need to teach the public how to cook nutritious meals with limited ingredients. What is interesting to note here is that, from our modern perspective, this sub-genre of food TV still exists today; *Eat Well For Less* (2015), *Jamie's 15 Minute Meals* (2012), to name a few. It is fair to note, however, that the reasoning of these more modern programmes stems more from domestic budgetary issues, as

oppose to nationwide rationing. Nevertheless, the surface purpose of programmes such as these, is to be educational.

When considering this educational side to cooking, it is not just limited to an audience whom watch out of a necessity to cook under budget. You have a more science-based look at cooking with Alton Brown's *Good Eats* (1999-2012), which explores different techniques of cooking and the history of food itself [fig.1]. There is the fast-paced, quality-food made-to-look-easy with Gordon Ramsay's *The F Word* (2005-2010), a hybrid of do-it-yourself cooking segments mixed with an insight into how Ramsay himself runs a kitchen [fig.2].

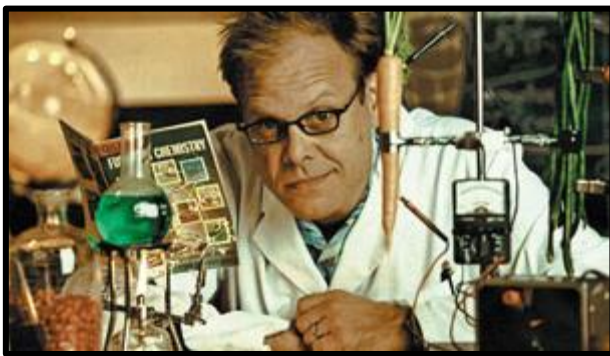


Figure 1. *Good Eats* (1999-2012)



Figure 2. *The F Word* (2005-2010)

Additionally, there are programmes that take on a more relaxed approach to cooking at home, especially those that appeal to an audience who want to impress friends at a party or improve their cooking skills in a more manageable manner. This form of cooking show is one of the oldest formats of food TV, beginning over 50 years ago with Julia Child's *The French Chef* (1963-1973) [fig.3]. Rousseau (2015) writes that, by the time *The French Chef* (1963-1973) aired on TV, war-time shortages were a thing of the past and shows such as that could indulge in a more foreign cuisine – bringing it home into the viewers kitchen. A more modern contemporary example of a show such as this would be *Martha Bakes* (2011-2016), an educational cooking show hosted by Martha Stewart [fig.4]. The studio-based kitchen and cleanly lit work-space is a recognisable aesthetic to this show and many others like it,

focusing purely on replicating a homely, although somewhat clinical-looking kitchen belonging to the viewers at home. Regardless, it was made to feel as though the techniques and recipes demonstrated throughout the episodes could easily be managed at home.



Figure 3. *The French Chef* (1963-1973)



Figure 4. *Martha Bakes* (2011-2016)

There is, however, one other programme, which could be said to sit alongside the previously mentioned shows, but is altogether, much more relevant to *Chef's Table* (2015-) and my own future project within this module. And that, is *The Fabulous Baker Brothers* (2012-2013). It is, in my opinion, leagues ahead of other shows within its category, from an aesthetic stand-point, to the rich, honest and welcoming personalities of its sibling hosts. Gone are the static wide-shots, uninteresting editing and the clinical-looking, studio-based kitchens – replaced with a rustic, naturally lit bakery that has this beautiful dusty haze to it. The hosts, Tom Herbert (Baker) and Henry Herbert (Chef) bring about a more realistic personality (Burnetts, 2013), one that becomes less like that of a teacher and more of a friend showing you the ropes. For me, this represents a step-forward, as the more organic flow of a show like this stands as a signal for the effect that modern times is having upon this sub-genre.

The other side of the educational category of cooking shows, is a type more closely related to the travel show. This more casual and accessible side to this sub-genre, and one that would fit the category of participatory documentary, is represented by the likes of Guy Fieri's *Diners*,

Drive-Ins and Dives (2006-) [fig.5] and Adam Richman's *Man vs Food* (2008-). Both are similarly styled with quick editing and a more get-in and get-out attitude with the various locations they visit. But it's purely focused around the food that is presented to them, with Fieri examining the weird, wonderful and infamous combinations of food served at the places he visits (bringing his rock-star attitude to cuisine with him), and Richman's search for the biggest and best food-eating challenges around America.



Figure 5. *Diners, Drive Ins and Dives* (2006-)



Figure 6. Anthony Bourdain: *No Reservations* (2005-2012)

For a subtle, educational, and more in-depth food travel show, there is one man who many view as the undisputed go-to person for this category. One who has travelled the entire globe to research and present not just the cuisine itself, but its origins and meaning to the local population that surround it. That man, is the late Anthony Bourdain. His most popular show, *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* (2005-2012) [fig.6] is a much more explorative look into cuisine. His critique and observations of food are respected by world-renowned chefs far and wide, which happens to bring this type of documentary into a more performative mode – his emotion and unique view of the world is demonstrated by his actions and soothing voice-over. Another unique aspect to him is his down-to-earth, very human demeanour – this relatable attitude makes for absorbing viewing and gives purpose as to why he would want to explore further into the cuisine than most other food travel show hosts.

One final, and perhaps not entirely relevant (to *Chef's Table* [2015-] and my own final project) category is the competitive cooking show sub-genre. Irrelevant in the sense that it's fly-on-the-wall, observational mode and purely-for-entertainment structure is a far-cry from our previously talked about shows – which at least offer an educational aspect to their shows. Never-the-less, it's a sub-genre worth mentioning - if nothing but for the ethical discussions that may arise from it. One side to this sub-genre would be shows such as *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-) [fig.7] and *MasterChef UK* (2005-). Their humble and seemingly more honest approach in terms of aesthetics, editing and host behaviour, compared to our American cousins across the pond, is likely linked to the audience it airs to. That audience being the UK.



Figure 7. *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-)



Figure 8. *Hell's Kitchen U.S.* (2005-)

Meserve (2017), who originates from the US, writes about the differences between UK and US competitive cooking shows, stating that “British TV considers the act of baking/cooking an interesting enough topic to let the food speak for itself, rather than rack up the ratings by yelling obscenities.” This speaks for the attitudes of the hosts, who in US shows tend to take a more hostile approach towards the contestants, in order to incite drama throughout the episodes. The reason for highlighting this point is to demonstrate that the producers of shows such as *Hell's Kitchen* (2005-) [fig.8] and *MasterChef USA* (2010-) have a predetermined agenda before the cameras start rolling. An agenda that's all about the drama.

Many would view this as a very dishonest approach) to a competitive cooking show, especially for a format that is supposed to be the opposite of a scripted show. Realistically, reality shows like *Hell's Kitchen* (2005-) and *MasterChef USA* (2010-) are more scripted and pre-determined than your average audience member would think. For example, Hutchinson (2011) wrote an article about how *MasterChef USA* (2010-) faked a shot of a crowd of people [fig.9], stating that “at least three groups of people have been replicated and stuck in the background, to make the crowd look bigger.”



Figure 9. Fake shot in *MasterChef USA* (2010-)



Figure 10. *Kitchen Nightmares U.S.* (2007-2014)

This demonstrates just how much manipulation is achievable through the power of editing. But perhaps the editing side is something that should not be held completely accountable. Even *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-) uses editing in order to create excitement or suspense, by squeezing together the three-hour allotted baking time for each task into a 15-minute segment. As previously mentioned, in this type of show, there is a pre-determination from the producers about how they would like to steer the show), and how it will initially be viewed by an audience once it airs. There's evidence of this when comparing *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* (2004-2009) and *Kitchen Nightmares U.S.* (2007-2014) [fig.10], both presented by Gordon Ramsay in the UK and USA respectively. Ramsay's attitude toward the restaurants he is helping differs dramatically, as Colburn (2017) points out; “There (*Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*), Ramsay rarely raised his voice as he helped restaurateurs rethink

infrastructure and menu construction. Ramsay narrated the show himself, and sound cues were kept to a minimum.” This shows Ramsay’s awareness of the audience he’s broadcasting to, and it is a glimpse behind the curtain at just how manipulative reality TV shows can really be.

The reason behind the brief look-back at how Food TV has developed and branched off into different areas, is to contrast with where it is today. And where it is today, on a streaming service such as Netflix, has been hailed by some as a ‘renaissance’ – one whose beginnings could be attributed to Netflix’s very own *Chef’s Table* (2015-) [fig.11]. Creator David Gelb is a filmmaker familiar with the subject matter of cuisine, and a great deal of *Chef’s Table* (2015-) can be seen in his previous work *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011) [fig.12] – a romanticised and poetic look into the life of a Three-Michelin-Star sushi chef.



Figure 11. *Chef’s Table* (2015-)



Figure 12. *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011)

The focus here is not so much on the food, rather emphasis is placed on the dreams, passions and determination of the chef creating the food we see. It is a deeper insight, one that seems inspired by Bourdain’s travel shows, albeit in a much more sophisticated, elegant manner. Never-the-less, *Chef’s Table* (2015-) shares this human aspect, and as Travers (2016) puts it; “Everyone should identify with these people, even if they don’t identify with the food”. Gelb’s six-part series focuses on a different world-renowned chef for each episode, each

bringing a different style, identity and reasoning for why they have a passion for cuisine. This intriguing, sometimes emotional journey into the chef's past is something that is not often explored, and you would have a hard time finding a programme that does so with this much panache. Which brings me to *Chef's Table's* (2015-) other strong point – its visuals.

Perhaps purely mentioning visuals is negating other factors that make it work, such as the way in which the score works with the visuals through precise editing. In an interview with Smith (2016), *Chef's Table* cinematographers Adam Bricker and Will Basanta [fig.13] spoke about the challenge of filming this show, stating that; “Sight, smell, feel, sound and, of course, taste — are intertwined. So capturing that with the very limiting tool of sight (and a little sound) alone is tough.” This way of thinking is perhaps what separates *Chef's Table's* cinematography from many other food shows. They have time to perfect the visuals of the food, in comparison to a fast-paced competitive cooking show or a run-and-gun food travel show.



Figure 13. A. Bricker and W. Basanta Cinematography: *Chef's Table* (2015-)



Figure 14. *Salt Fat Acid Heat* (2018)

Aforementioned, there is somewhat of a renaissance in Food TV, especially streaming channels such as Netflix. Parham (2018) writes about how new show *Salt Fat Acid Heat* (2018-) [fig.14] is the latest addition to a “new movement of food shows on Netflix and elsewhere that spurn the pallid and passé images of shows past, turning away from white domesticity to a broader vision of food acceptance.”

When it comes to my final project for this module, a short documentary of an award-winning restaurant, it is clear that a lot of my inspiration and the vision I hold in my head for what it will look like, is clearly inspired by that of *Chef's Table (2015-)*. Equally important, however, is recognising the limitations I face in terms of equipment and budget. There is a quote, directly from *Chef's Table (2015-)* cinematographers Adam Bricker and Will Basanta, that's become a guideline for my approach to taking my final project; "Because the audience can't taste what's on screen, it was important to place it in the correct environment to feel the food. I also think the narrative aspect of seeing a dish come to fruition, from concept, to sourcing, to cooking and finally to the plate, really helps the audience connect with the dishes." Smith (2016)

Chef's Table (2015-) features a selection of the greatest restaurants in the world, ran by world-famous chef's creating award-winning dishes, and the cinematography of the show works in direct tandem with the elegance of what they are presenting. Therefore, based on the previous quote, my style for this documentary should match the warm, rustic and welcoming atmosphere of the restaurant I've based my documentary on. The 'narrative aspects' of a dish is something else I would like to explore – a journey of a fish from the ocean to a carefully crafted plate of food. It would make sense to include this kind of narrative structure in my documentary, whereas *Chef's Table's (2015-)* backbone would be that of the chef, I would have such a strong personality to rest the meat of my documentary onto.

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Jamie's 15 Minute Meals (2012-)

Jiro Dreams of Sushi (2011)

Man vs Food (2008-)

Martha Bakes (2011-2016)

MasterChef UK (2005-)

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