

Vicarious Consumption: Food, Television and the Ambiguity of Modernity

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"In case you just landed from another planet, I'm Emeril Lagasse." So begin many episodes of Food Network's number one show, "Emeril Live." The vivacious, boisterous chef yells and waves his arms, talks back to his studio audience, and engages at-home viewers with his humorous and sarcastic remarks. How did this Massachusetts born, Louisiana restaurateur become a celebrity-chef? What does his quick rise to fame and the increasing popularity of food television reveal about contemporary American culture?

This article considers the role of food television in American popular culture. After tracing the growth of the television industry, I explore the growth of food television in the United States, growth which, during the late 1990s, progressed from simmering to a rolling boil with the success of Food Network.¹ Food Network is the first and only channel to date completely devoted to food and entertaining. Consideration of Emeril Lagasse, one of the network's most well-known personalities, reveals ambiguities in food television's message about food and cooking. This article contends that food television incorporates the vicarious pleasures of watching someone else cook and eat; the emulsion of entertainment and cooking; the jumbling of traditional gender roles; and ambivalence toward cultural standards of body, consumption, and health. Food television also addresses and simultaneously perpetuates the stresses of social expectations, and sprinkles sexual innuendoes in a venue traditionally associated with maternal security. These ambiguities, I contend, are part of what makes food television increasingly popular among American consumers. I situate the current interest in food television, and a parallel interest in ready-made meals, in the ambiguity of modernity, a symptom and consequence of real and perceived time-pressures, increasingly complex social networks, and an ongoing hunger for comfort and security, traditionally sated in the home kitchen and encoded in home-cooked food.² This essay is not about food consumption, *per se*, but

about the consumption of food television and what that pattern of consumption suggests about contemporary American culture.

I. The Growth of An Industry

Television secured its place as "the primary site of exhibition" in the years following World War II (Spigel 1). By 1950, the nascent television industry was booming, benefiting from increased spending power of most American families, manufacturing improvements that made televisions affordable to more consumers, and technological advancements that improved the industry's ability to provide programming across the country. By 1955, nearly two-thirds of the nation's homes had at least one television set, completing the transfer of spectator amusements from the public space of the movie theater to the private space of the home (*Ibid*).

In television's early years, three broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) provided a majority of the nation's programming. As audiences grew, America's broadcast networks responded with programming designed to win the loyalty of viewers. They succeeded: one hundred million viewers watched the final episode of "Cheers" in 1993 ("It's the end of the world as we know it"). As the television industry matured, additional networks and cable stations fragmented a nation of viewers while offering seemingly endless special-interest channels to its media-savvy audience. Fewer than seven percent of households in the United States received cable television in 1970; in 1975, the median household got six channels. By 1995 more than 66% of American households subscribed to cable television, enabling them to choose from more than 30 channels (Samuelson 58, 221). By the early 1990s, basic cable, digital cable and satellite service offered American viewers a cornucopia of program choices for modest fees. Given the incredible range of viewing alternatives available, television is, more than ever before, about consumer choice and

control. The viewer, or at least the person holding the remote control, is empowered by her freedom to choose which programs will provide her entertainment or education each time she turns on the television.

Cultural theorists have rightly expanded their critique of popular culture to embrace the interactive relationships between consumer and producer, rejecting the "mass culture" approach that accepted the audience as passive receptors (Denning, Hall, Levine 1992). While this expanded approach may complicate the analysis of contemporary culture, it is realistic. Discourses in popular culture are dynamic, participants are active, and messages are usually deliberately ambivalent. I submit that growing numbers of viewers are tuning in to and watching food television because it feeds a hunger for emotional and physical pleasures vicariously gratified by watching someone cook, talk about and eat food.

II. Food for your viewing pleasure

Since television became a fixture in the domestic landscape, food and television have been closely linked, both on and off screen. Swanson introduced the first TV dinner to American consumers in 1954. It was, as the name suggested, intended for consumption in front of the television. James Beard pioneered cooking shows in the United States in 1946. He was followed in the 1950s by Dionne Lucas, whose British accent and haughty style perpetuated the mystique of French cuisine. Cooking segments were featured on 1950s shows such as "At Your Service" to promote sales of the latest kitchen gadgets and appliances to housewives. Julia Child revolutionized American cooking shows when her program, "The French Chef," first appeared on February 11, 1963. Her straight-forward yet formal demonstrations of French cuisine changed the way Americans thought about French food. Graham Kerr, the London born Royal New Zealand Air Force Flight Lieutenant and chef, debuted his program "The Galloping Gourmet" in 1969. It quickly became the most popular cooking show on television. These two television chefs set the standard for cooking programs in the ensuing decades. Child and Kerr were followed by several television cooks, none of whom achieved their level of national notoriety until the 1980s, when the omniscient Martha Stewart took the spotlight. She encouraged her audience not only to cook, but to grow their own fruits and vegetables in between doing crafts and refinishing furniture. As interest in cooking shows increased into the 1990s, Stewart took a back burner to more realistic, regional and charismatic television

chefs.³ By the late 1990s, several television chefs had achieved national recognition, due in part to increased viewership of Food Network.

The commercial success of a network devoted to food and cooking confirms the near-obsessions some Americans have with food. Food Network offers vicarious pleasure for the arm chair cook and the couch potato alike. It epitomizes the culture of visual and psychological consumption: consumption of cooking, of tasting, of hunger, of passion, of the familiar and the exotic, and of the television viewer's willingness to be entertained by someone performing in the kitchen. Not only are these pleasures of consumption, they are pleasures deferred: the home viewer defers the sensual pleasures of cooking, and most important, of eating what is being made. Food Network has little to do with food as nutrition and survival, and everything to do with pleasure. As philosopher Elizabeth Telfer suggested, people with leisure time and ample food resources devote more attention to food than is needed to stay alive because we think food will give us pleasure.

Food Network was launched in November 1993, with only a few hours of original programming. To complete the broadcast day, the network offered reruns of old cooking shows featuring James Beard, Jacques Pépin, or Dionne Lucas. Both new and old programs were repeated during the 24-hour period. Viewers and reviewers were critical of Food Network as it expanded into new markets. One week before its debut on the Manhattan, New York, cable provider in February 1994, Food Network received lukewarm reviews. Two *New York Times* commentators, having previewed the channel's existing programs, determined the network was "no-frill, low-cost television, [with an] emphasis on information, not production values" (Goodman C8) for "die-hard eaters and those who like to watch" (Goldner C1). *The New Yorker* magazine's "The Talk of the Town" column noted the channel's debut by asking, "has there ever been anything to eat worth watching?" (30). Given these disparaging introductions, we can marvel at the channel's success. Since 1993, Food Network has undergone significant remodeling. During one ten-month period between its debut and June 1996, Food Network had three different owners and three different CEOs. Apparently those who could not stand the heat got out of the kitchen.

The turning point for the network was in June 1996, when the then-new president and CEO Erica Gruen gave the network a complete facelift. She eliminated the "talking-head-behind-the-stove" model and replaced it with chefs who could entertain while cook-

ing. During her tenure, Food Network transformed host-chefs, including Emeril, into celebrity-chefs. Ms. Gruen introduced shows like "Ready, Set, Cook," a 30-minute game show that pits celebrity chefs against each other; and "Two Fat Ladies," two overweight British women who tour England by motorcycle, shopping in farmer's markets, cooking sumptuous entrees and desserts, and extolling the virtues of high caloric and fatty food. Ms. Gruen began shifting the network's emphasis "'from people who like to cook to people who love to eat'" by making shows personality driven (Essex). In December 1997, E. W. Scripps Co., the Cincinnati, Ohio-based media company, took a controlling interest in Food Network (Booker, Essex, Cooper). Also in 1997, Eileen Opatut joined Scripps as the network's programming chief. Under her leadership the network launched 30 series and 125 specials. Opatut acknowledged that the success of food shows is unpredictable, but that the network, like a good chef, is "'always experimenting'" (Sutel).⁴ In addition to cooking up captivating programs, the network maintains a recipe database, along with biographical information about chefs, program schedules and other food-related information of its Web site (<http://www.foodtv.com>).

Food Network whet an appetite for and is feeding Americans' hunger for food programming. By early 1995, the channel had achieved a "small cable penetration" of only 11 million homes. Food Network's first quarter ratings were "barely detectable" (0.3 on the Nielsen Rating), but Food Network executives declared that their channel's audience was "the purest in cable": 51% of their viewers were working women (Burgi 41). Between 1996 and August 1998, with Gruen at the helm, the channel's prime time ratings tripled (Moss). More than 80 new advertisers signed on in 1997. By early 1998, the network could be seen by 34 million cable subscribers (Essex, Moss). In the first quarter of 2001, Food Network was available in 54-56 million homes (Sutel). This does not mean, of course, that all potential viewers are watching Food Network; those numbers represent the channel's potential audience. Nielsen Media Research estimated that prime time viewership of Food Network at the turn of the 21st century was 295,000 people (Sutel).

The number one show on Food Network for several years has been "Emeril Live." Hosted by chef Emeril Lagasse, the show has given food television a new meaning. Emeril is the son of a French-Canadian textile worker father and a Portuguese mother who loved to cook. He turned down a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music to pursue a career in cooking. After completing the Culinary

Program at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1978, Emeril worked his way into and up through established, professional kitchens. In the 1980s and 1990s, Emeril created a name for himself as a chef and restaurateur.⁵ By the mid-1990s, he was on his way to becoming a celebrity-chef.

Emeril's first show, "How to Boil Water," was one of the network's original programs. An early reviewer criticized him for shouting at the camera "as if he were commanding dogs" ("The Talk of the Town"). Less than three years later, Emeril's show was celebrated as one of the "Best of 1996" by *Time* magazine. Coming in at number eight of the ten best television shows, *Time* magazine wrote of his "Essence of Emeril": "Cooking shows have been notoriously bland offerings during the past few years, but the brash New Orleans chef Emeril Lagasse has arrived to bring on the spice. Spirited and prone to free-association, he is a kind of Frank Sinatra of cooking show hosts, a kitchen-bound swinger. . ." (74). "Essence of Emeril" was replaced in 1996 by "Emeril Live," a 30-minute show during which Emeril performs his cooking in front of a live audience, with live music, and during which he favors showmanship over instruction.⁶ One journalist described Emeril as "less of a professor in a classroom than a preacher in a gospel tabernacle" (Matthews 42).

Audience response is an essential part of the show's appeal and success. Emeril engages the studio and television audiences by talking to them, teasing them, posing rhetorical questions to them. Comments that might be interpreted as insulting are applauded by his adoring audience as jocular good humor. Not only do contemporary television chefs converse with the studio audience, they look directly at the camera to engage the home audience. Gone are the days of maintaining "aesthetic distance" between performer and audience.⁷ Some shows, for example Food Network's "Cooking Live," invite home-viewers to telephone and ask food-related questions on the air. Aesthetic distance is completely inverted on shows such as Food Network's "Gordon Elliott's Door Knock Dinners," when host Gordon Elliott and a gourmet chef "turn an ordinary family dinner into a media event. Surprising unsuspecting residents in their homes, Gordon and chef (hopefully!) are invited in to make a party with the ingredients in the fridge. As preparations are underway, Gordon wields his considerable charm. It's the ultimate nosy neighbor experience" (*Food Network Home Page*, "Gordon Elliott").

While Emeril does not barge into people's homes in person, he does cultivate seemingly personal relationships with his audiences. A predictable result of Emeril's relationship with the audience is the evolution of Emeril fans, "Emerilytes." The enthusiasm of his studio audience is vicarious for the home audience. Contemporary research on fandom recognizes fans as "cultural producers and creative respondents to the social milieu" (Lewis 6). Emeril fans, in the absence of a social milieu, express their admiration for Emeril by buying cookbooks, cooking his recipes, watching his shows, adopting Lagasse-isms (e.g., "BAM!," "Kick it up a notch," "Pork fat rules!"), and entering the network's lottery to try and win tickets for his show. Emerilytes exemplify hyperconsumerism, defined by Lawrence Grossberg as "the situation in which the very act of consuming becomes more important, more pleasurable, more active as the site of the cultural relationship, than the object of consumption itself" (56). Food television is not about eating: It is about watching food and being entertained by the personality. For home viewers of "Emeril Live," and cooking shows in general, being a couch potato, a consumer of food television, becomes more pleasurable than actually cooking and eating.

III. *A Recipe for Success*

Emeril has been called a "cooking Elvis" and a "cult figure." He has multiple top-selling cookbooks. *GQ* magazine voted him "Chef of the Year, 1998," *Time* magazine selected him as one of the 25 most intriguing people of 1998, and *Wine Spectator* author Thomas Matthews described Emeril as "the biggest thing since Julia Child" (40). Part of Emeril's success is his aggressive approach to cooking. He is not showing viewers how to cook so much as he is leading a cooking pep-rally. Each time he adds his trademark 'Essence' (pre-mixed spices) he does so with a rowdy—"BAM!" He "kicks it up a notch" by adding more garlic, more butter, more of whatever the appropriate flavoring agent is for each dish—more spices, more flavor, more fun. As he completes an onion reduction sauce, one that promises to be rich from all the cream he added ("add a little cream [no audience response] . . . Okay, a lot! [audience cheers and applauds]"), he comments, "This ain't no TV dinner, y'a know." Yes, it is. Emeril prepares dinner in front of approximately 200,000 viewers nightly. Food Network has given new meaning to the concept of TV dinners. No longer pulled from the freezer, these TV dinners are lovingly prepared in the comfort of your home by professional chefs. And while viewers can not taste the finished product, as food voyeurs they can nevertheless savor the meal.

Emeril's success is due, in part, to his accessible personality. He is every American man—which may account for the fact that more than 48% of his viewers in prime time are male (Fitzgerald). No longer is fixing dinner woman's work.⁸ Food television is transforming cooking from an essentially feminine chore to a glamorous hobby for men, women, and children. Many men, not just television chefs, are appropriating power in the domestic sphere which for centuries has been relegated to women. At the same time, men who crave the security of the kitchen, to say nothing of their hunger for comfort food, are finding surrogate care-givers to whom they can relate on television.

Other viewers think Emeril makes cooking sexy. One female commentator suggested his show is about lust, "about viewers hungry for the swarthy 37 [now 41] year old chef who oozes sex appeal as he sweats over his boiling pots" (Booker 36). I suggest that it is not just the chef the audience lusts after, but also the food he prepares and what the food symbolizes. Here is a man who is cooking *for* you, looking and speaking *to* you, and he is passionate and entertaining: This is many women's dream. By exuding female-directed sexual appeal and male-directed machismo, Emeril can appeal to viewers of both genders. Food television is no exception to Foucault's astute observation that discourses on sexuality permeate virtually all realms of interactions in Western society.

Part of Emeril's success lies in his Horatio Algeresque rise to fame. He is a self-made celebrity—with help, of course, from television—who rose from the working class to stardom. He is a blue-collar guy fixing blue-ribbon food. Despite his immersion in the restaurant and television industries, and subsequent wealth and popularity, he retains his humility and his Massachusetts working-class accent. His enunciation of some words (e.g., "gah-lic"), his choice of words ("This ain't rocket science, y'a know?"), and the informality with which he addresses his audience make him accessible to all viewers. Emeril makes cooking understandable because he eschews haughty language. He laughs at big words and culinary terms that might intimidate the novice or amateur cook, explaining them as he discounts them. "*Génoise*," he tells his audience, "is just a big, fancy word, don't be afraid of it," and goes on to make his chocolate sponge cake.⁹ Viewers who know the difference between a *génoise* and a sponge cake chuckle at his oversimplification. Yet by presenting sophisticated foods in ways that break down social and language barriers, Emeril can retain an audience with diverse culinary backgrounds, as well as spark the interest of channel surfers.

Most important, Emeril is successful because he is entertaining. His shows, like other television food shows, are about having fun with food. As popular television scholar Robert J. Thompson noted "[t]he real goal is to make the subject of the show disappear into the background Even on the how-to-shows, it's really about watching the dance. You don't really intend to make the food any more than you come away from 'E.R.' expecting to perform CPR" (Grimes 5).

IV. Food as Cultural Capital

In his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine noted that the development late in the nineteenth century of chromolithography (the process by which original paintings were reproduced lithographically in color and thus affordable to the general population) was hailed as bringing art within reach of all economic classes. At the same time, it was criticized as being a force of cultural dilution, the packaging of "pseudo-culture." Critics argued that such pseudo-culture gave people a false confidence of being cultured (160). The same can be said for contemporary food television. Viewing food preparation on television requires minimal culinary knowledge or cooking skills. As additional cable companies add Food Network to their program packages, the number of informed participants in the food television and gourmet food crazes grows. Increased availability of gourmet food items and gadgets at grocery stores and kitchen boutiques further facilitates familiarity of gourmet foods and cooking techniques among consumers. Emeril and other television chefs are empowering people to speak the languages of cooking and cuisine. Yet, food television shows that demystify traditionally elite foodways are threatening the social hierarchy in which food serves as cultural capital.

Pierre Bourdieu used the notion of cultural capital to explain the means by which distinctions between social classes could be expressed and reinforced. Traditionally those in upper levels of society had cooks to prepare their meals, but socialites used their familiarity with gourmet foods and exotic flavors as cultural capital. Over time, a shift took place: as time became a valued commodity and as fewer people took the time to prepare home-cooked meals themselves, having leisure time to cook elaborate meals for friends and family became a positive indicator of social and economic status. The constant variable throughout this transformation is that a wider knowledge of foods, an appreciation for foods that are "acquired tastes," and familiarity with advanced preparation

techniques remain cultural capital. Knowing and using the language of cuisine, including exercising one's educated palate, separates those with cultural capital from ordinary eaters. As more people become familiar with gourmet foods, flavors, and preparation techniques, the value of gourmet food and cooking as cultural capital decreases.

Emeril literally and linguistically deconstructs what have traditionally been elite foodways. By denying the presumed social differences between the food and his audience, Emeril invites all viewers equally to enjoy and have fun with food and cooking. While he is creating homogeneity within the audience, he simultaneously redefines distinctions among audience members. The latter transgression he achieves by inaccurately simplifying some explanations or directions, as with the *génoise* example mentioned above, and by introducing elaborate or unusual food combinations and preparation techniques that appeal to experienced cooks and sophisticated palates.¹⁰ From Emeril, and food television in general, we read the various, and at times conflicting, messages and symbols that reinforce or undermine the apparent social order. Meanwhile, people are learning how to prepare *coq au vin* "kicked up a few notches" by Emeril's Essence.

While many regard Food Network, and Emeril in particular, as empowering the masses by breaking down food barriers, let us remember that they sit on both sides of the fence that divides the landscape of consumption. Food Network turned a small profit in 1999, one year ahead of schedule (Essex, Sutel). Emeril does not tell viewers exact measurements of all the ingredients he uses ("Add about 40 cloves of gah-lic"); nor does he always give details of how long to bake or chill food ("Leave it in there a long time"). These details can be found in his cookbooks, for sale in bookstores across the country, or on the Food Network commercially-underwritten Web site. Dedicated fans and eaters can taste his creations at one of his six restaurants. Emeril merchandise (clothing, cookware, foodstuffs) can be purchased on the official Emeril Web site (<http://www.emerils.com>). Like prominent athletes, Emeril is featured in advertisements (e.g., television advertisement for Century 21 Real Estate Corporation which featured Emeril and Cal Ripken, Jr.) and has product endorsements (e.g., Fetzer Vineyards).

Emeril embodies simultaneous tensions and ambiguities prevalent throughout contemporary culture: he actively participates as a maker and marketer of commodities in the landscape of consumerism while he simultaneously empowers viewers to participate in

consumerism by expanding their familiarity with food traditions emblematic of elite culture. While empowering his viewers, he hooks them more completely into the culture of consumption

V. If food is the medium, what is the message?

With the emergence of clocks and measured time in the industrial era, E. P. Thompson explained, our conception of time became one of commodity-valuation. Into the twenty-first century, our relationship with time continues to be one of commodity-valuation: we speak of time-“saving” measures and of “spending” time wisely, as if time were a currency to be saved or spent. Real and perceived time pressures imposed by work, family, errands, commuting, and other obligations fragment our time and similarly corrupt traditional time distinctions. Work is no longer confined to Monday through Friday, eight-to-five. Instead, work stretches into what had been non-work time, degrading the distinction between working time and time “off.” The kids’ athletic practices, a project at work that must be completed, and errands that must be done in the evening after work interfere with traditional family dinner time. The pace of suburbanization is made more frenzied by traffic that congests the roads between home and work. Global communications and commerce take place around the clock. Technology advances so quickly that we can barely keep up with last week’s developments, much less stay on the cutting edge. News and information can be heard, read and seen 24 hours a day. There are so many information media that it can be overwhelming. Time continues to be a valuable commodity in America into the twenty-first century.

What has been called a “national dilemma” is one component of the current food craze: consumers with too little time for cooking want convenient, quick meals but they are less inclined than in years past to settle for fast food (Vozenilek 753). Grocery stores and food boutiques responded to this market demand with the fastest-growing food trend of the 1990s: home meal replacements. One can purchase a sumptuous variety of single or family-sized servings of ready-to-eat foods, ranging from rotisserie chicken to grilled salmon with mango salsa, asparagus with dill sauce to zucchini casserole, apple crisp, or vanilla pudding from grocery or specialty stores across the country. Another consequence of perceived time pressure as it relates to food is the enhanced value of home-prepared food. Whether it be a home-made cake or a four-course meal, expending effort on preparing food confers it with added intangible value, value revealed through the appreciation of those for

whom it was prepared. The lack of time devoted to preparing food at home for daily consumption has elevated home-cooked food’s significance as a commodity and as a symbol. Cooking as a family activity is earning “rarity values,” a nostalgic value ascribed to something based in its scarcity.¹¹ The scarcity of something that 20 years ago was common is valued for its absence from contemporary everyday life. Time that used to be spent cooking is now spent fulfilling other work or leisure obligations, or watching television.

Food Network is successful not because we have become a nation of people who love to cook. On the contrary; we want to be entertained in the comfort of our own home, we crave a home-cooked meal but don’t want to cook it. We are a nation hungry for the comfort of the family kitchen and quality time with loved ones. The tradition of family meal time is present only by implication as television chefs prepare food and talk about the benefits of sharing meals with loved ones. Emeril’s motto is “Cook together, eat together, be together” (*Emeril Lagasse Home Page*, “Emeril Speaks”). He explained, “If I can convince one person [who is in the audience or watching his show] a day to make an effort to cook for their families and sit down around the dinner table with them and share the love that goes into making good food, then I think I’ve done my job” (Matthews 47). Nostalgia for the idealized kitchen and family meal gathering have reinforced the symbolic power of food.

Food television invites viewers into the kitchen, traditionally a site of family interaction. The absence of aesthetic distance between chef and viewer enables viewers to feel an intimate connection with the chefs. Food television challenges our perceived distinctions between public and private spheres; and, by featuring both male and female chefs, between commercial and domestic cooking.

More than half the shows on Food Network feature women hosts. Some of them follow the traditional format of a female chef talking viewers through the preparation of a particular dish. In this format, the chef plays the role of a nurturing teacher. For example, Sara Moulton, a professional chef, magazine editor, wife and mother makes time to answer food-related questions called in by viewers while she demonstrates cooking on television. There are exceptions to this nurturing, maternal demeanor, of course. Most notable are Jennifer Paterson and Clarissa Dickson Wright of “Two Fat Ladies” but they are British, they are eccentric, they represent the exotic “other.”¹² Despite the emergence of male celebrity chefs encouraging cooking among men, the domestic

kitchen remains fundamentally a feminine sphere and the association between kitchen and women remains intact. It is ironic that men continue to outnumber women as professional chefs in commercial kitchens. This is part of food television's ambiguity: It sends mixed messages, blurring gender and spatial boundaries while simultaneously reinforcing traditional roles and expectations.

Increased consumption of food might satiate some emotional needs, but in a society that values control over indulgence, especially for women, excessive eating can generate other problems. Anxiety about food and consumption may become a personal obsession that manifests itself as an eating disorder or as hard-core body building. Susan Bordo portrays obsessive eating disorders as "the logical (if extreme) manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered in our culture" (15). A safer way to benefit from the comfort inherent in food is to increase consumption vicariously, by ingesting food television. Food television delivers calorie- and labor-free pleasure, important characteristics in a body- and time-conscious society. Food television is a way to consume food without consequence.

We can read food television as a symptom *and* a product of our culture's obsession with control, health and ideals of physical beauty. Emeril preaches excess in his cooking, but he does not embody excess. Despite working with food for a living, Emeril is a man of average build. He is a man who exhibits control: control over his food, his cooking, his career, and (from what we can see of his body) his consumption. In contrast, chef Paul Prudhomme embodies excess: his obesity is debilitating. Whom would you rather watch cook and eat? In contemporary American society there is a not-so-fine line between one who indulges to the point of being grotesque, and one who visibly enjoys food, perhaps even an occasional over-indulgence, but maintains control over consumption and Self. Notions of restraint and refinement are, of course, subject to the moods of society. In her work on the domestic science reform movement of the late-nineteenth century, Laura Shapiro explained that food was dulled-down so as not to stimulate appetites or sensual desires. In the food craze of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, food is "kicked up a notch" so it will stimulate, and hopefully satiate, desires. And while enthusiasm toward food and eating is socially acceptable in contemporary America, this enthusiasm is accompanied by an expectation of control. One is expected to experience gustatory pleasures with moderation so as not to appear out of control, fat, or gluttonous. Being out of control, as discussed pre-

viously, may take the form of eating disorders, obsessive exercising or obesity. Diets are always in style, but having to diet is not. Therefore, we must exhibit control through means other than dieting. Food television confounds issues of control and excess, of body and health, of education and entertainment, and of real and imagined pleasure.

The programs on Food Network are a mixture of "how-to" shows hosted by celebrity- and non-celebrity chefs, game and magazine food shows, and travelogue food shows. Many of the latter programs expose viewers to the foodways and cultures of people in foreign lands. High viewership of travelogue shows amid a national interest in tradition and home-cooking is a symptom and a consequence of the ambivalence of modernity. Sociologist Alan Warde argued that the ambivalence of modernity is caused by the "mutual incompatibility of the simultaneous desires for individual freedom and collective security" (173). In her study of the development of American eating habits, Donna Gabaccia suggested a related tension is at the foundation of American eating habits. She argued that, historically, we are torn between the preference for the culinary familiar and the pursuit of pleasure in the form of culinary novelty, creativity, and variety. While we are at ease with comfort foods, we are excited to learn about far away places through their foods. Food television offers safe and economical ways to experience familiar and exotic pleasures.

Most important, however, television chefs provide surrogate comfort food for Americans pulled in different directions by modernity's ambivalent messages. Emeril embodies many of the ambiguities of modernity. He is a professional chef, one of many men making his living doing what women have traditionally done without pay or public acknowledgment. He values the importance of cooking for family and advocates food as a medium for bringing families together. But between his six restaurants in three cities, cookbook and cooking show tours, and recording television shows, the divorced father of two has little time to cook meals each day for his family.¹³

Americans' obsession with food and cooking is not unique to the late twentieth century. The mid- to late-1800s were witness to the New Nutritionists and the domestic science movements as men, and especially women, sought to reform society through food (Leventein 1988, Shapiro, McIntosh). Growth in the manufactured food industry around the turn of the twentieth century sought to combine convenience with the cachet of "scientific" eating, the most tenacious example being the "flaked food" or cereal industry (Carson). In 1940 the government took a

studied interest in Americans' eating habits and developed the first Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA). The counter culture of the 1960s challenged established eating habits and cooking practices. Cooking and eating became forms of self-expression and were allowed to be sensual experiences. A new generation of cooks and eaters demanded healthy and organic foods, and incorporated previously eschewed "ethnic" foods. Public discourse on food and cooking were diversified: Circulation of *Gourmet* magazine increased dramatically, cookbooks reflected a growing acceptance of ethnic foods, the food industry was producing an ever-increasing number of supposedly health-conscious foods, and television networks aired cooking shows. Extensions of the 1960s and 1970s reconception of food as more than physical nourishment are present in contemporary society, where a gourmet foods industry co-exists alongside a highly profitable diet industry and a television station has food-related programming 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These manifestations, like previous American food movements, reflect a preoccupation with food, consumption and the body.

Early in 2001, Food Network again announced plans to further diversify its programming with shows intending to appeal to a general-interest audience rather than food professionals ("Food Network Expands Menu"). While this is distressing to some die-hard viewers of cooking shows, it suggests that the network recognizes that it is not only those who are passionate about cooking who are interested in watching food. It is responding to and cultivating the nation's ongoing preoccupation with food. The network is successful because it conflates entertainment and consumerism. It is a site for discourses about cultural expectations. What is significant about the historic and contemporary movements is the centrality of food—its preparation, its consumption, its role as an expression of individuality or community—and the way food—conceptually and literally—assumes places of prominence in various cultural discourses.

Notes

¹Certainly other channels air cooking shows. PBS, for example, carries a tremendous number and variety of shows featuring celebrity chefs (e.g., "Great Chefs"), cooking techniques (e.g., "J. Pépin's Cooking Techniques"), regional or ethnic cuisines (e.g., "Jewish Cooking," "Flavors of America," "The Texas Provincial Kitchen"), or genre foods (e.g., "Home Cooking with Amy Coleman"). The American Program Service, which distributes shows to

public television stations across the country, circulated 43 cooking shows in 1998, up from 28 in 1993 (Grimes). Commercial television networks also have continued, with success, to incorporate cooking shows into their regular schedules. The abundance of cooking shows on non-cable television is indeed significant and, in general, supports the theses of this essay. This essay focuses on Food Network because it is the only 24-hour channel dedicated to food, and thus is the extreme embodiment of the issues and concerns raised herein.

²I use the term "modernity" to refer to contemporary American society, to the era in which this article was written. The term embraces our self-consciousness about the contemporary world. The ambiguities of modernity, some of which are outlined in this paper, are many and comprise the general term "ambiguity of modernity," as used here. My concept of the ambiguity of modernity stems from Marshall Berman's explanation of the contradiction of modernity: "Our desire to be rooted in a stable and coherent personal and social past, and our insatiable desire for growth—not merely for economic growth but for growth of experience, in pleasure, in knowledge, in sensibility—growth that destroys both the physical and social landscapes of the past, and our emotional links with those lost worlds; . . . our desire for clear and solid values to live by, and our desire to embrace the limitless possibilities of modern life and experience that obliterates all values" (35).

³This is not to suggest that Martha Stewart is not a popular chef and entertainment celebrity, or that she does not have a following. Indeed she has a significant following, and a sizeable empire. Her empire includes a magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, books, a mail-order business, a newspaper column, endorsements, and television show. Her television show, "From Martha's Kitchen," appears on Food Network 14 times per week (some of these are rebroadcasts; this number reflects Food Network scheduling as of spring 2001). "From Martha's Kitchen" has cooking segments, special guests (e.g., Colin Powell, March 24 & 25, 2001), recipes, and "culinary and entertaining secrets" from Martha herself. The Food Network web site does not post recipes from Martha Stewart's show, as it does for recipes from most other Food Network shows. Stewart's recipes can be found exclusively at her web site (<http://www.marthastewart.com>).

⁴Articles in *Multichannel News* (Moss), a trade publication, the *Cincinnati Business Courier* (Curtis) noted that in November 1998, "by mutual" and "amicable" agreement Erica Gruen stepped down as CEO of Food Network and was replaced by Eric Ober, former president of CBS News. Ober joined E.W. Scripps in 1997. Prior to his Food Network assignment he was president and CEO of Cinetel Productions, an in-house production arm of Scripps, for which he produced reality programming. E. W. Scripps Co.

operates 20 daily newspapers, nine television stations, two cable TV networks and a licensing division that provides syndicated comics and other features.

⁹Emeril owns six restaurants in three cities. He opened his first, Emeril's, in 1990. Located in a converted warehouse in New Orleans, Louisiana, it serves his signature "new New Orleans cuisine." He opened Nola, in the French Quarter of New Orleans, in 1992. Emeril was an early participant in the trend for famous chefs to open restaurants in Las Vegas, Nevada: he opened Emeril's New Orleans Fish House at the MGM Grand Hotel in 1994. In 1998, he opened Delmonico Restaurant and Bar in New Orleans and Delmonico Steakhouse in Las Vegas. Emeril's Restaurant Orlando, located at Universal Studios City Walk in Orlando, Florida, opened in 1999.

¹⁰As of April 2001, "Emeril Live" and "Essence of Emeril" are each aired on Food Network multiple times a week. The network's Web site (<http://www.foodtv.com>) describes "Emeril Live": "Kick it up to notches unknown with *Emeril Live*. In front of a live audience, Emeril Lagasse—a master chef and owner of New Orleans' most talked-about restaurants—demonstrates gourmet cooking, with a bam! 'Emeril Live' airs every day at 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. Saturdays at 10:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. and Sundays at 3:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. All times ET" (<http://www.foodtv.com/tvshows/emerrilliveindex/0,2236,,00.html>). It describes "Essence of Emeril": "Add some spice to your kitchen with *Essence of Emeril*. Emeril's on the set with classic style, bringing Cajun and Creole cuisine from the Bayou to the big time. 'Essence of Emeril' airs Monday through Friday at 5:00 p.m., Saturday and Sunday at 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. All times ET" (<http://www.foodtv.com/tvshows/essenceindex/0,2237,,00.html>).

¹¹Spigel discussed theatrical traditions, such as aesthetic distance, as they were adapted by and adopted for television programs. She also explored how aesthetic distance was deliberately maintained in early television.

¹²Of course, domestic cooking is not exclusively done by women, but women tend to be in charge of family meal planning and preparation. Levenstein (1993) and Thomas A. Adler each discussed the use of backyard barbeques by men, noting that the barbeque was significant because it was understood as men's domain and it involved men in cooking for their families, albeit not on a daily basis. Neuhaus evaluated cookbooks published in the 1950s, several of which acknowledged men's presence in the kitchen. She argued that such books, or sections for men in cookbooks reinforced the normative discourse of social and gender norms—men's recipes tended to be for amateur cooks, or were for making cocktails or family breakfast.

¹³This exemplifies the criticism against Emeril that he oversimplifies his explanations of food. A *génoise* is like a

sponge cake but its preparation requires an importantly different process. For the former, the batter is made over heat and the eggs are beaten whole. For the latter, preparation of the batter requires no heat and the yolks and whites are usually beaten separately (Lang, ed. 499).

¹⁴For example, Emeril does not make plain macaroni and cheese, he makes Maytag Blue Mac & Cheese. He does not simply fry pork chops, he cooks double-cut pork chops with tamarind glazed sweet potatoes. One show featured "designer" Martinis and Martini "appropriate" snack foods such as fried garlic and fried olives. These are not the everyday foods and drinks of average Americans.

¹⁵Leslie Prosterman introduced the notion of rarity value in her discussion of food categories at midwestern county fairs (81).

¹⁶Jennifer Paterson died of cancer at the age of 77 in August 1999. Food Network continues to air reruns of "Two Fat Ladies" once a week.

¹⁷In February 2001, Emeril filmed his 1000th show on Food Network (*Emeril Lagasse Home Page*, "Emeril Speaks").

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As this article goes to press, Emeril is completing the first season of his own sitcom, "Emeril" (NBC Tuesdays, 8 p.m. ET). NBC describes the show: "Superchef Emeril Lagasse serves up the trials and tribulations of his work life as the

zesty ingredients for this half-hour comedy. . . . Emeril essentially stars as himself in the role of a likable and popular chef who struggles to meet the shifting demands of his popular cable TV cooking series and numerous other requirements as America's top culinary expert" (<http://nbc.com/Emeril/about/index.html>). "Emeril" is reality TV taken to a new level of hyper-reality and reflexivity. With "Emeril" (NBC) and "Emeril Live" (Food Network) airing on Tuesday nights at 8 p.m. ET, Emeril Lagasse may be the first person to have two shows broadcast simultaneously in prime time on a regularly scheduled basis.

Digital television viewers in the United Kingdom can now view their own channel dedicated to food. Launched

on November 5, 2001, UK Food is one of seven BBC-backed channels that comes under the UKTV banner. During its first season, 50% of UK Food's programming will be new and exclusive to the channel. The remainder is drawn from mainstream television and overseas food programming. ("UK Food," *BBC Good Food*, Dec. 2001: 201). The channel airs 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., 7 days a week, leaving Scripps' Food Network holding the distinction of being the only channel in the world at the end of 2001 to offer food programming 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.