



**Erotic Nightmares** *The request was straightforward enough: Procure permission rights to reproduce some still shots from television cooking shows as illustrations for Andrew Chan's article on cooking shows as pornography. We decided to use shots of celebrity chefs whose expressions depicted the intensity of their cooking, along with close-ups of audiences titillated by the chefs' performances. And perhaps we might find other images that would work well with the article. But try typing in "gastroporn" on Google and see what you come up with! Not much in terms of visuals. "Food porn," "food + pornography," and "food + eroticism" also drew few satisfactory results, and I grew increasingly nervous about the electronic cookie trail I was leaving behind.*

*Yet despite our best efforts, the article you're about to read has no illustrations. This little message is taking their place. Even though the still shots and Internet images we found circulate among millions of viewers around the world, their owners would not grant us unqualified permission for use in *Gastronomica*.*

*Our first step was to approach TVFN with a dramatic collage of audience and celebrity shots from several cooking shows. Although TVFN granted permission to use the audience shots, we were not allowed to reproduce the pictures of celebrity chefs. So we sent a new collage for final approval, disappointingly lacking Emeril and Jamie. At that point TVFN upped the ante, stating that they now had to review the entire article before granting permission. Their response, we felt, intruded upon editorial integrity, so that was the end of that.*

*A search for other images proved similarly frustrating. It began promisingly enough with a photo from the Two Fat Ladies cooking show depicting a pair of pudgy hands smoothing a filling for kidney pie. This Internet image was credited to CNN, but a call to CNN's image bank disproved their ownership. I was referred to TVFN's legal department, which in turn pointed me to the BBC. Meanwhile, I had happened upon what seemed like the best illustration yet for the article: a photo of the Two Fat Ladies naked from the waist up, each holding over their breasts two flesh-colored puddings with a strawberry in the center. Here was an absolutely perfect match for the article, both playful and erotic! This image, it turned out, was in the photograph library of the BBC archives, and the BBC agreed to sell us a copy once we had obtained permission from The Two Fat Ladies' estate. This task, however, was complicated by the fact that one lady is dead and the other divides her time between academia and a cookbook shop in Edinburgh. Repeated phone calls finally brought me to Optomen Television in London, which confirmed ownership of the desired image—it didn't belong to the BBC after all. Ultimately, however, the surviving Fat Lady refused to grant us permission for its use, and so our hopes for lively illustration for Andrew's article were dashed—we had run out of time. In the end we decided simply to write up this little saga to express our mystification at the ways of the corporate world. • JANE CANOVA*

# ‘La grande bouffe’

## Cooking Shows as Pornography

TV COOKING SHOWS TODAY ARE, in a word, pornography.

As in the contemporary pornographic film industry, the modern TV cooking programs appeal to our hidden or perverse side. They seduce us to desire the virtual, while complicating our relationship to what is real (or desired). Media outlets such as the Food Network cable TV channel provide special insight into the perversity of contemporary American culture, yet the genealogy reaches further back, as brilliantly visualized in Marco Ferreri’s 1973 film *La Grande Bouffe*, in which four men eat, screw, and fart themselves to death.

Today’s TV cooking shows arouse our senses not only through the material shown but in the way it is presented. Food preparation is a form of foreplay in which the ritual of cooking is announced with sensory cues: the sizzle of oil in the frying pan, pots bubbling away, the crescendo of chopping, dicing, and slicing. The chef starts building the viewer’s expectations and hunger by his cleaving, stirring, and whisking—every gesture, raised eyebrow, and licked lip a sign of what is to come.

The idealization of cooking is subtly evident in the surreally colored foods, anatomically perfect chickens, and super-sized “vertical” displays of cooking shows, comparable to the cosmetically altered, human sex-toy actors in porno films. Contemporary TV cooking shows create a gap that separates the viewer from the reality of actual cookery. This gap is evident in the setting itself, an environment far removed from the real goings-on of either a professional restaurant kitchen or the everyday domestic kitchen of the viewers. In the TV program’s fantasy kitchen there is copious space and ventilation; there also are no dishes to wash, no mounds of trash to throw out, and no impatient waiters checking on orders. Everything has been carefully planned and prepared beforehand to appear spontaneous and effortless on-camera. Everything has also been meticulously edited and orchestrated, often to the strains of classical music, so that the master chef and his happy minions can sauté and garnish to the melodies of Vivaldi or Mozart.

Yet these programs only tease us, since the complete steps involved in cooking have been omitted, just as the

bedroom scenes in post-Hays-Code films only hint at intercourse.<sup>1</sup> The viewer is left to imagine what has transpired between scenes—or commercial breaks—after which the chef and/or host can be seen *à table*, metaphorical cigarette in hand, the detritus of a partially consumed meal strewn on the table like tousled bedsheets. We are physically unable to taste the meal the host presents to us; thus, for us, the relationship between the chef’s exertions on the program and the resulting by-product is never consummated. We are always left wanting more, so there is a reason to tune in again.

If television audiences really knew what went on in kitchens during the preparation of food, would they be so receptive to the allure of the visual representation of a recipe? If they saw the pig being slaughtered and butchered prior to making the stuffed pork loins, or the fresh lobsters being drawn and quartered, then—claws still twitching—boiled alive, would they be as enticed by the televised demonstration of the meal? Classic cookery often involves every part of the animal—the entrails, hoofs, tongue, liver, tail, brain, heart—so that nothing is wasted. Indeed, the more aesthetically ugly, the more challenging to beautify. Hence, by its nature, the cooking program is deceptive, because the primary nature of food is disguised or excised.

And the same goes with real life: our sense of reality is always sustained by a minimum of disidentification. Thus the viewer is not only spared the real-life, violent aspects of food preparation, but also cheated of the full extent of the work and the physical exertions required to accomplish the results. Often, these shows are edited so that the viewer sees a simplified process, which then cuts to the chef pulling out an already-cooked version of the same dish from a hidden oven.

As in pornography, the abbreviated preparations parallel the brief or non-existent use of foreplay during sexual intercourse before getting to the climax in a porno film, where the usual *modus operandi* is “Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am.” But in real-life cooking or lovemaking, foreplay is perhaps the most important part of the process, with the completed dish serving as almost an anticlimax. For many people, sex is predicated on the ability of the participants

either to “successfully” achieve orgasm (singularly or simultaneously), or, at the very least, to stave off ejaculation for as long as possible. In essence, TV’s cooks are demonstrating how to fornicate or fuck, and not very well at that, whereas real chefs are engaged in making love—or art, which is how many chefs view their passion and profession.

That they get paid for making meals many times a day does not make professional chefs prostitutes. The television cooking show, however, can be viewed as the illegitimate love child, or even the prostitute, of the real world of gastronomy. Each show offers a virtual form of fast food or a “quickie” instead of a real meal or mutually satisfying experience. This, of course, fulfills the producers’ and the networks’ needs—by leaving viewers unsatisfied or still hungry, they’ll keep coming back for more.

The demonstrative aspect of contemporary TV cooking shows is, in effect, a rehearsed and studied performance. With slick production values, the program itself has less to do with food and cooking and more to do with the manufacture and packaging of the host/chef himself or herself—and the manufacture of emotions surrounding eating. In the BBC’s long-running TV series *Gourmet Ireland*, for instance, Jeanne and Paul Rankin—a married couple who are also professional chefs and restaurateurs—travel around Ireland in a Range Rover to visit their homeland’s most picturesque landscapes. When the show finally cuts to the studio (which resembles a high-tech disco more than a serious cooking environment) for their recipe demonstrations, the viewer gets to watch the couple “do it,” as it were. We watch them banter and chuckle in a type of foreplay as he prepares the meat and she the vegetables and the dessert, reinforcing stereotypical male/female dominant behavior and sexual role-playing as they argue and tease each other over the preparation methods.

Another popular type of cooking show portrays the chef as pioneer or, dare I say, missionary, venturing out into the great wide world in order to evangelize the surrounding profane worlds, in order to reveal the culinary secrets of foreign lands. In the BBC series *Far Flung Floyd* the eponymous chef/host goes off on a series of culinary adventures in remote locations, such as cooking on board a sampan in Bangkok’s floating market. The viewer marvels at his virile confidence, dash, and flair as he dares seemingly impossible feats, such as cooking with a saucepan in each hand while enduring driving rain, howling winds, or sub-zero temperatures. In a sexy, breathy touch, the steam from his pots inevitably fogs up the camera lens while a bewildered penguin or local looks on. The inherent message: enjoy the spectacle but don’t try this at home! Similarly, pornographic

movies filmed in nature offer similar bemusements of the intrusion of the real—be it ants crawling up the actors’ legs or sand clinging to the creases of their flesh.

One of the more recent incarnations of the cook as missionary is New York chef Anthony Bourdain. On his show, *A Cook’s Tour*, he is a chef on a quest, traveling the globe in search of new memories and experiences. He will try anything, risk everything...and he has nothing to lose. In contrast to Floyd’s bringing the message to the natives, Bourdain never actually cooks and is the willing guinea pig—almost a stand-in or surrogate—for cross-cultural experimentation for the viewer.

This voyeurism seems almost kinky, as though Bourdain is living out our darkest desires and fantasies by dining off the carcass of some freshly slaughtered beast or sucking the flesh from deep-fried spiders in a market in Thailand or Vietnam (and that’s only breakfast). It is visceral, covert television at times. Through the grainy, blurry footage, we see our intrepid chef on the move and in possible danger—venturing into parts unknown and meeting someone he doesn’t know, every image caught in a steamy, pseudo-wildlife-documentary style.

At the beginning of each episode we get a prelude to the cult of the chef in his kitchen. Bourdain’s persona as the head chef of Les Halles is that of a foolish, romantic man who is the “leader of cooks, a wrangler of psychopaths, the captain of his own pirate-ship.”<sup>2</sup> He makes it look cool as he reinvents the classic French chef as a sexy stud, paddling down a river in Southeast Asia in search of food to the bemused looks of locals. Bourdain cuts quite an image in his sleeveless khaki army fatigues, somewhere between battle-hardened war correspondent and the Marlboro Man as chef. On his home turf of Manhattan, we see the virile silver fox with his curly hair, sinewy body, bad-boy stud earring and tattoo (even if it is tastefully small). Bourdain dares the viewer to keep watching as he revels in breaking taboos, testing his toughness and manliness in feats of eating and wanton consumption where cigarettes and alcohol are always involved in each feat of derring-do. In the safety of our living rooms, we eat this up (via TV) as he tests his virility. Testosterone oozing from every pore, Bourdain eats and partakes in what the locals do...and as in hardcore porn or bondage films, he constantly ups the ante while doing what we deem unthinkable.

Another British series breaks our cultural taboos—against fat, butter, and daring to enjoy one’s food without watching the waistline. One of the highest-rated and critically acclaimed cooking shows in recent years, *Two Fat Ladies* features Clarissa Dickson Wright and Jennifer Paterson. They are enormously watchable because they represent the

antithesis of what is nowadays considered appropriate food for a healthy diet. Their cooking is an extension of their corpulent bodies, their physical beings emblematic of their approach and attitude towards cooking and life.

Of all the culinary TV series in recent years, *Two Fat Ladies* perhaps comes closest to embodying a philosophy of cooking and living. The Fat Ladies gleefully and emphatically say “no” to the food police and foist on an unsuspecting world (i.e., the audience) some time-tested truths about basic cooking skills. They announce and then proceed to act out a series of forbidden fantasies, showing that it is not only permitted but downright delicious to dally with off-limits substances such as cream, that adding a little bacon to a dish won’t kill you. The Fat Ladies are exotic, eccentric, and naughty, exhibiting an almost sexual pleasure in debunking the no-carb/no-fat food fetishists.

By breaking rules they are transgressors; by watching, observing, and leering at their wares, we play the role of pervert and thus become the inherent transgressor par excellence along with them. Their favorite lubricant for their act, one which they apply with quivering squeals of delight, is that much-maligned ingredient in most other cooking shows and homes: butter. Most TV chefs today would apply it sparingly, if at all, or recommend substitutes. To the Fat Ladies, however, butter is everything. “*Monter au beurre!*” (or “Lay on the butter!”) is their rallying cry, another commandment from the law books of today’s kitchen and lifestyle police that viewers love to observe being violated, but dare not enact in their own homes.

We drool and leer because we want to see how far they will go and what they will do next. Their grand operatic voices, their garishly inappropriate nail polish, their thick, fleshy hands performing dainty little tasks...with their ridiculous appearances they don’t seem to be cooking professionals, although they are professional chefs and cooking writers (or were, as Jennifer Paterson has since passed away; the fact that reruns are still shown attests to the show’s popularity). Instead, the Fat Ladies seem to take great delight in appearing on camera as culinary prostitutes of sorts, kitchen dominatrices who enact their viewers’/voyeurs’ fantasies.

Whether they cook for a group of nuns, a troop of bare-legged boy scouts, or the muscle-bound champion rowing team at Oxford, their on-screen audiences (the more innocent the better) are also willing victims to their pots and pans. In a typical episode, the Fat Ladies double the cream, rub in some oil, add lard to their blood sausages, set sail to icebergs of meringues in a sea of chocolate and—if that weren’t enough to make the viewer’s arteries shudder—each episode climaxes with a post-performance cigarette and drink.

Most engaging of all, the Two Fat Ladies are complete naturals in front of the camera, cooking pros who are polar opposites of the usual polished, coiffed, and thin hosts of most television shows. Their bodies are imperfect, yet they love what they do and are proud, feisty performers of their art. This parallels the way in which the most popular pornographic videos in recent years have been produced by and star non-actors—“real” people such as housewives and husbands or the “never-before-seen” celebrity home sex video taken via hidden camera.

Another cheeky British series, *The Naked Chef*, promises erotic cookery, when actually the title is a metaphoric displacement, or perhaps transference, governed by the pleasure principle for the stripped-down cooking style of Jamie Oliver, the young chef whose antics the series follows. With the title as a teaser and a come-on, our imaginations run amok. Sexual scenarios become manifest with every gesture, as when Oliver pokes at some meat he is preparing, or verbalizes his desires and preferences for certain combinations of ingredients. This sense is further reinforced when the viewer realizes that the chef is not directly addressing him but an interviewer who is just off camera and offscreen.

Not only is the action mediated in the guise of cooking program, but we are complicit agents—we actively stalk the chef as he leaves work, eavesdrop on his private conversations, and check out his friends when they drop in. The camera’s point of view is always at a distance, jerky, and moving—as though we were on a police stakeout, playing the role of an international spy or observing Oliver’s moves as a sexual predator might. This further heightens his image as an object of desire and the viewer’s role of voyeur. The frustrations of not exactly seeing everything he is doing, the jump cuts, different film stocks, the hip-hop music, etc., are necessary obstacles that sustain our desire in our own desperate attempts to attain the object of our desire. The idea of nakedness is further reinforced in the sense that the chef is perceptibly vulnerable and does not know we are there.

*Nigella Bites* is the natural successor to *The Naked Chef*. If *The Naked Chef* is about “stripping down food to its bare essentials,” as stated in the introductory promotion at the start of each episode, then in *Nigella Bites*, the emphasis is on stripping down our lives. *The Naked Chef* retains an element of the professional chef: we can admire Oliver’s knife skills or the deft way he handles a saucepan. Nigella Lawson, on the other hand, jokes about her inadequacies with a knife or her weakness for licking the bowl and then sensuously licking her fingers. As the naughty (and seemingly unfulfilled) housewife and self-declared amateur cook, her

premise (and promise) is that at home—or at least in her TV home—we can and indeed should all get down and dirty. She assures the viewer that it's perfectly natural and not shameful to cook like she does, or at least to watch her cook—and like a spectator at a nudist camp, we buy into her libertine ways.

The beautiful and curvy Lawson seems to have it all—another fantasy for the viewer. She appears able to juggle career, kids, a husband, and three-course meals including dessert and still look fabulous. In reality, her husband was dying of cancer while she shot the first series, and she was struggling to keep her family on track while making extra money on television for her children's (and her own) future.

The TV Nigella appeals to both sexes. She's seemingly problem free, except for her constant bemoaning of her weight—which just points out her voluptuousness and love of food. Men are attracted to her like naughty schoolboys with a crush on their teacher; women love her because she is their virtual girlfriend, a confidante. Nigella presents herself as just as vulnerable as they are, and no better or worse in the kitchen (or presumably bed). Her life is a (sex) object lesson—if she can do it and enjoy herself, so can the viewer. She makes mistakes but laughs them off with a toss of her hair, for the fun is in trying.

She becomes our sultry food-as-sex therapist, confidently dispensing advice and offering opinions, but always with a recipe/prescription for every woe. There is no problem that cannot be cured with the perfect dessert. If you are going through a breakup—or, as she states in one of her shows, “for when you've been chucked”—she advises making and devouring a dark chocolate cake with double-whipped cream. She is a kitchen goddess presenting food as salvation, eating as therapy. Indeed, one of her books is titled *How To Be A Domestic Goddess*; it presents page after page of tempting tarts, cakes, and pastries.

Nigella leads by example, exuding passion and emotion as she handles food, which she fondles and caresses before voraciously devouring it in front of our eyes. She flirts with her unseen audience as the camera plays up her physicality. Her dark, northern Italian looks are coupled with knowing and suggestive actions. She winks as she sucks on an oyster, licks cream from a spoon, or spills a little food as she eats, the crumbs bouncing off her too-tight sweater—every move captured in a mute, pale, soft focus or startlingly revealing close-up. In the show's promos we are teased by a full-lipped and soft-focused siren, her dark, curly locks cascading over her ample bosom as she deftly holds a cooking implement. She appears enticing but dangerous—coolly beyond reach, but ours to watch at will.

Nigella constantly reminds us that she is a real woman who is on a quest—fighting society's notions of the ever-decreasing dress size (we'll soon be in the negatives, as she says). Nigella plays up her common-sense attitude that you don't have to starve yourself to look good. By promoting a healthy attitude and appetite for food, she is empowering. Her sense of “love thy food as thyself” fits right in with the talk-show or self-help-book craze of modern times. She accepts the way she looks but reaches out to her viewers. Her problems are shared problems, for they are our problems. She is not perfect, she struggles with her weight, yet she doesn't hate herself—and that's a turn-on. At times she comes across like a type of fertility goddess, not only in the more traditional sense of having full-figured, child-bearing hips and sensual lips, but for the glimpses we see of her off-screen life. The show is filmed in her large house in a trendy London suburb, which is full of running and laughing children and happy friends. The kitchen pantry is always fully stocked with food, and she boasts a cookbook library that occupies a whole room. But her producers also take pains to stress the ordinariness of her life so that she isn't too remote or inaccessible—or a turn-off. We see her pick up the children from school, take them to the park, give them a bath, and then read them bedtime stories—all staged for the camera, as this isn't a reality show where cameras are supposed to live with her family. In spying on her busy, full life, the message is that even we TV-watching schlumps at home should be able to find some time to cook in our own busy lives.

During the course of a half-hour show, Nigella typically zips through preparing breakfast, lunch, dinner, and often a midnight snack on the side. With the filming done at her home, using her family recipes and stock of ingredients, she makes us feel like one of her visitors or even part of the family, touching a memory of sitting around the kitchen watching or helping our own mothers cook. This sense of intimacy and the feeling that we are watching a real person who is providing for her family is a crucial ingredient that drives the success of the show—and perhaps separates it from the normal fluff of many cooking shows. But, of course, it is all fake and staged for our benefit.

Such British cooking shows touch on the archetypal brand of British humor and attitude towards sex—naughty and lascivious tempters and temptresses who don't take themselves or their efforts that seriously. Indeed, laughter is part of the turn-on and recipe for manufacturing desire. To be truly dominated and not just teased, we have to look across the Atlantic, to the visual and physical affirmation of masculinity: Emeril Lagasse.



*Incidentally, the provocative puddings that you'll fail to see here were inspired by Marinetti's Futurist Cookbook. The recipe for fragomammella can be found in The Two Fat Ladies Full Throttle cookbook. And check out Clarissa tweaking her "strawberry" at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/twofatladies/>.*

Lagasse is seemingly the master of his domain, a larger-than-life human phallus. He's large and in charge: loud, testosterone-driven, cocky. This burly, verbose chef is a consummate entertainer, driving viewers into a frenzy of oohs and aahs and emotional responses. The mostly female audience sits on the edges of their seats, leaning forward towards the action. Even the introduction of the ingredients is a performance in itself, with a loud exclamation of "Bam!" every time Emeril adds a handful of spice to a dish, which acts like a laugh track to cue the studio audience and work it up into a frenzy.

The audience serves as an exulting Greek chorus, standing in for the at-home viewer's wishes and desires. Whether the on-camera emotions are genuine or not doesn't matter—there's a winking knowledge that it's being done for the at-home viewer. The audience gets giddy with anticipation and excitement as Lagasse throws in a whole clove of garlic or a dash of paprika. The purpose of the show is not to produce the perfect bouillabaisse, coq au vin, or shrimp gumbo, but to facilitate Emeril's role as that of primitive Pietà.<sup>3</sup> The camera lingers on his contorted face as he feigns ecstasy while stuffing a chicken or caressing its skin as he seasons it. His actions are a marked contrast to the usually

sober instructions in cookbooks that typically tell us what to do and when to do it, not *how* to do it.

Emeril is the king of the culinary come-on, dramatizing every aspect of the compressed cooking process with excessive gestures and theatrical pauses while he sighs and groans at his own performance, whether he is whisking an egg, frying bacon, or whipping up some cream. The audience shudders in anticipation whenever he exclaims his signature "Let's kick it up a notch!" before adding even a hint of spice to a pot. They squeal in delight and unison when he garnishes a dish with a bold flourish punctuated by the ubiquitous "Bam!" (which can't help recall the above-mentioned "Wham, bam, thank you ma'am!" abbreviated sex act).

As the camera jumps from workstation to workstation, from sous-chef to waiter to panting kitchen hand, the viewer is teased, tantalized, and titillated by the unfolding spectacle. Each dish is an act that culminates in the meal, and every finished plate in the succession of acts in each course is like the "money shot" in a pornographic film, providing a mini-climax before we cut to the next act in the show.

The "money shot" is the commonly used descriptor in pornographic films for the scene containing the climax/orgasm scene, i.e., when the male actor ejaculates

for the camera. As Susan Faludi noted in “The Money Shot,” her 1995 *New Yorker* essay on Los Angeles’ pornographic film industry, “The on command male (erection) orgasm is the central convention of the industry: all porn scenes should end with a visible ejaculation. There are various names for it: the pop shot, the payoff shot, the cum shot; most resonant is ‘the money shot.’”<sup>4</sup> Hence in porn the (usually male) viewer is aroused by the on-screen ejaculation as a trigger for his own. Whether or not it confirms his own masculinity, there is a reciprocity of some transferenceal kind through his own off-screen ejaculation.

In cooking shows, the money shot is the achievement and presentation of the finished dish, which magically appears at the end along with the dish that was cooked on-air. In TV shows that are based on performance, the actual presentation of the dish needs an accompanying rider or exclamation marks. The money shot as the signifier, as in Emeril’s exclamatory “Bam!,” prompts the audience in the studio (and presumably at home) to issue his/her own groan or sigh in a collective virtual orgasm with the chef/presenter that would be the hook, presumably, to keep them “coming” again. Sometimes the money shot comes when the chef tastes the meal or invites a member of the studio audience (as in *Emeril Live*) or “real people” (as in *The Two Fat Ladies*) to taste along. These TV cooking and dining scenes are usually edited to show partial glimpses of food and consumption in soft focus with lots of laughter, parallel to voyeurism in *Playboy*- or *Penthouse*-style videos.

In contrast, the Japanese show *The Iron Chef* presents the cooking program like a reality show—the ultimate in gustatory voyeurism. It combines exotic, hard-to-get ingredients with colorful and foreign cuisines and the incessant chatter of the presenters, which is reminiscent of the patois of sports commentary. *Iron Chef* represents a kind of mythological fight between Good and Evil, a carefully constructed spectacle of excess. The public is aware of the obviousness of the roles of the participants, whether through their physical traits or their over-acting.

The voyeurism aspect is embodied by a panel of amateur judges, who are never professional chefs or foodies. The group usually includes a handsome young athlete, a pretty (and naïve) starlet, an aging spinster, and an elder-statesman type, such as a lawyer, politician, or some other power-wielder. They are like stock characters in a soap opera, except their plot lines revolve around cooking, eating, and judging food. Like Emeril’s audience, they are stand-ins for the at-home viewer, sampling and judging the food—and squealing and oohing at the culinary feats of derring-do. The spinster is always expected to make advances to the

young sports star and reprimand the young starlet or put her in her place.

In front of this absurd group, the two dueling chefs must prepare four courses with one ridiculous ingredient, such as monkfish head, octopus, or a rare spice. The whole spectacle is carried out in borderline chaos—will the chefs finish their cooking by the one-hour deadline? The challenger is always represented as the underdog, with video vignettes showing his humble upbringing in a small village in Japan or an earlier humiliating defeat from an *Iron Chef*. The *Iron Chef* champion, in contrast, arrives in some grand spectacle, such as striding on-camera through mist, with a clap of thunder, dramatic lighting, or ominous music. This further heightens and/or exaggerates to almost mythic proportions what the challenger has to overcome in order to beat the *Iron Chef*.

Like soft-core fantasy or 1970s porn films, which rely not on what is genuine but more on an idealization of sex, *Iron Chef* operates on a level of heightened imagery to simulate passion. However badly written and/or cheesily acted, it is fictional, and the viewer is aware that these are not real feelings or real emotions. As viewers and consumers we revel in the substitute for real life. With the intervention of cosmetic surgery, porn actors today look more virtual than real, more of a human approximation of an inflatable sex toy. The porn film helps viewers maintain a comfortable distance from facing the inadequacies in their own appearance or sex life. While cooking shows or porn videos don’t actually replace the real experience of eating or having sex, they do at times distort our perceptions of what constitutes real food and sex. We may eat TV dinners, frozen food, or order in foods while watching a cooking show, and we may consider ourselves gourmets for doing so.

The popularity of the cooking show as fantasy is paralleled by the real-world decline of culinary culture in America. According to Harvard University nutritionist Dr. George Blackburn, the average meal in this country is consumed in less than seven minutes and in one of four ways: alone, watching television, on the run, or standing up.<sup>5</sup> Blackburn also notes that because it takes at least twenty minutes for the brain to register that food has been consumed, the body is cheated of its natural mechanism to warn the eater when the stomach is full, and when it is time to stop.

Recent figures from the American Medical Association also show that one in five Americans is clinically obese, and more than half are overweight, statistics that represent a 12 percent increase since 1990.<sup>6</sup> The evidence is all around us: people slouch along the street eating fast food or have pre-cooked meals delivered to their homes—all because they

don't cook themselves. (A recent *New York Times* article featured a Manhattan couple who had their stove removed in order to make room for a bigger fridge — to store their take-out and delivered meals.)<sup>7</sup>

And when modern TV viewers do not eat at home, where they usually eat standing up or in front of the television, they can be found gobbling food at their desks or while in transit. Not only do they claim they have no time to shop and cook, they're too stressed to care about what they consume, factors that not only rationalize why Americans don't make meals but that are also used to explain why they don't get regular exercise.

This might be the down side of TV cooking shows: rather than increase and improve the viewer's joy of cooking, they might make viewers feel inadequate or unconfident in their own culinary prowess (just as porn might create unrealistic expectations or depression about one's own sexual skills). Cooking shows and porn tap into our primal needs. We are all hungry for love, comfort, passion, gusto, and communal experiences, and we are curious about forbidden pleasures—even if we don't act on our curiosity. These are all experiences and needs that can be vicariously acted out, fantasized about, and observed via both cooking shows and porn.

Just as most clients of prostitutes are lonely men looking for more comfort and understanding than sex, so, too, are cooking-show viewers looking for more than a little distraction from the exigencies of modern living such as preparing food. While viewers may not have a naughty Nigella or cheeky Naked Chef to whip up a little love on a plate at home, they can make a date to catch up with them in a lip-licking saucy mood. These video sirens can be found at most hours, somewhere on the tube, with no complaints, excuses, or headaches to impede the pleasure of their company. Culinary pornography? Perhaps, but why not... especially if leads us to enjoy and partake of such pleasures in our own lives. 🍷

#### NOTES

1. In April 1930, faced with threats of censorship by the federal government, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America created a movie production code, commonly known as the "Hays Code" after Will H. Hays, the organization's first director. An excerpt from the Hays Code states: "No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin. The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation. Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail. Adultery and illicit sex, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated or justified, or presented attractively...Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures are not to be shown. Complete nudity is never permitted. This includes nudity in fact or in silhouette...Undressing scenes should be avoided, and never used save where essential to the plot. Details of crime must never be shown and care should be exercised at all times in discussing such details...There must be no scenes, at any time, showing law-enforcing officers dying at the hands of criminals." In 1968, the Hays Code was replaced by a rating system similar to that in effect today. The Hays Code was designed to

make all films suitable for any audience. The new rating system was designed to restrict children and adolescents from seeing "mature" films. For further information see [www.cinema.ucla.edu/collections/Profiles/pre.html](http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/collections/Profiles/pre.html) and <http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>.

2. Anthony Bourdain, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 247.

3. Emeril's exaggerated expressions evoke the Pietà as the archetypal image of lamentation; the comparison conveys the impression of Emeril's status among his audience as a Christ- or God-like figure.

4. Susan Faludi, "The Money Shot," *The New Yorker*, 30 October 1995, 64–86.

5. Michael D. Lemonick, "Will We Keep Getting Fatter? That's what we're programmed to do—unless we find some genes that will switch off fat metabolism," *Time*, 8 November 1999, 88.

6. "Wider Waistlines, More Diabetes in US Each Year." This Reuters article dated 31 December 2002 refers to an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* 289:76–79 (2003).

7. Amanda Hesser, "So You Think Your Kitchen Is Too Small?," *New York Times*, 24 January 2001.