

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

TV cook shows Gendered cooking

by Phebe Shih Chao

from *Jump Cut*, no. 42, December 1998, pp. 19-27

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1998, 2006

The creators of, and the participants in, cook shows occupy a site where interwoven issues of gender, class, and ethnicity, topics at the forefront of intellectual discourse, struggle for redefinition. And, in fact, the site yields abundant contradictions around these issues for those who care to look. For instance, the predominance of men over women cooks on TV is disappointing since the tradition of women working in the kitchen still generally holds. The TV shows seem to assume a bourgeois audience who want to watch American cooks present bourgeois cuisine; there is a near invisibility of women cooks, men or women, on these shows. Furthermore, craft itself is often downplayed. How well one cooks hardly matters. The eager and perhaps naive aim of the producers is to keep audience loyalty to their show. To that end, the shows have become entertainment; the cooks, stars with recognizable personalities and names. For example, Emeril tries to convey a vicarious sense of pleasure to viewers via the live studio audience to whom he feeds tidbits so they vibrate and aah. Yet, who can taste the food this side of the screen?

Gender politics on cook shows tend to support the power structure rather than reflect the daily reality of those who cook. Although in most homes women still cook, in an informal survey where I asked knowledgeable viewers to name some of their favorite TV cook shows, they came up with these names: Emeril Lagasse, *The Frugal Gourmet* — Jeff Smith, *The Galloping Gourmet* — Graham Kerr, *Yan Can Cook* — Ming Yan, Jacques Pepin, Pierre Franey, and Julia Child and Martha Stewart. Men's cooks dominated. Among those on this list, French — which suggests a focus on haute cuisine and the word *gourmet* seem to have an influence. Although there are now more female TV cooks than before and despite the fact that Julia Child was the dominant female TV cook, patriarchy still dominates on television.

Social class is also made abundantly clear. TV cook shows offer visions and lifestyle of and for the middle class, especially that sector aspiring higher. The cooks themselves exude bourgeois confidence and their in continues to raise the status of cooks. None of the TV cooks act or cook slingers. Whatever their origins, they have arrived at realization of their dream. But they in fact demonstrate little if any *haute cuisine*, which w execution at home be too complicated and difficult, too expensive, too to the daily life of ordinary Americans. Remember, we grew up with Be homilies on thrift and timesaving efficiency.

In a more pointed way, the shows ignore the lower or blue-collar class. details how to make your food stamps go further. A class-conscious vie ask the following: How can a budget-stretching cook afford the ingredi Afford paying \$3.00 per recipe by writing the station? If the same recipe a web site, who has access to a computer to find recipes on the web? A can pay for the cable/satellite shows in the first place?

If anything, these programs emphasize economic and class differences separate the audience into those who can afford the life style and those can't. For example, the overweight in a lower class household cannot ke with such self-contradictory fashion trends in what to eat, such as the that made complex carbohydrates intensely *in* in the Eighties, intense the Nineties. Their families cannot afford the high cost of fresh meat, f vegetables; and, after all, potatoes stick to the ribs in ways that goat ch do not. Ironically, there is an economic basis to the often grotesque cu image of the economically disadvantaged filling themselves up on whit biscuits and gravy, macaroni and cheese, doughnuts.

In television cook shows, because bourgeois culture wants to consume immigrant cuisine, ethnic cooking often moves up in status. Reproduc food of our grandmothers answers our nostalgic hunger for the food of immigrant past, whether we actually experienced such a past or are co looking for our roots. Other viewers' restless search for variety leads the explore national cuisines, as does the travel lust of the middle class, wh developed a taste for the ("better"?) tastes of other cuisines.

In the 60s Marshall MacLuhan noted how television has shrunk the wo we've all grown used to the idea of acquiring other cultures at home in the TV set. TV viewing leads to a kind of personal colonialism as the ac derived from viewing satisfy our seemingly bottomless desire for appr property to call our own. However, the cultural diversity of the new foc may also have an utopian dimension. As Julia Lesage pointed out to m are some positive implications in these culinary borrowings and take-c

"[M]any people's introduction to an ethnic group they do not kno well may be through cuisine, a kind of first step...I have noticed..

cross-cultural sympathy among people of color in urban areas for each other's cultural and pop cultural offerings, both in cuisine and in mass culture phenomena like martial arts movies" (Lesage, letter).^[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#)

SOME COOKING HISTORY: "ORGANISING VIRTUE"

Cooking is an endeavor that has traditionally split along gender lines, a closely linked with gender. Even when men took over in the public domain of food preparation, gender lines remained clear: women became second cooks. From earliest times, in the division of labor, cooking was done by women. With the rise of feudal systems that sharply divided aristocrats from landowners from the unpropertied, the task of cooking in a grand house passed from wife to servant. And the hired chef was male, as Stephen Mennell explains:

"It is highly likely that any process of social differentiation will involve distancing from the food of the lower orders and from the women who cook it... [E]ver since Egyptian times it has been men who took over women's recipes for daily cooking and transformed them into court cuisine... The most likely explanation lies in the origin of the social institution of the court not as a 'private' or 'domestic' household, but as a military establishment" (Mennell, 201).

This would apply to China as well, another civilization with an ancient tradition whose known cooks, that is, those whose reputation has continued down the ages, were men. Whether at court or in an important and/or rich household, a servant/ cook acted publicly in the sense that he no longer cooked in the private sphere of his own abode. It was public also in that the great man hiring the cook and the dishes which that cook created did it for show, to exhibit his wealth and power in palazzos, not casas, in great houses, not humble homes.

As the middle class grew, the traditional bringers home of the bacon, the winners, to use language that connects food to wages, worked outside the home to keep their wives inside the domestic space. For the middle class one key indicator of status was then also to hire servants, chief among them the cook, whose status was significantly higher than that of the scullery maid. Those women whose husbands had the means stayed at home. They were economically needy women who always earned less than their male counterparts and began first as assistants to male cooks.

"By the middle of the eighteenth century, Duclos could look back to the end of the reign of Louis XIV and remark... that male cooks had been found only in houses of the first rank and that 'more than half the magistrates employed only women cooks'" (Mennell, 203).

In time, economically disadvantaged women pushed into the public sphere. With the opening of restaurants in Europe — certainly by the time "respectable" women could go out and be seen eating in restaurants, late 18th century in France, mid 19th in England (Tannahill, 327) — women were already working as cooks in these public restaurants.

By the late nineteenth century, schools of home economics and cookbooks aimed to change the roles of women of all classes:

"One of the kinds of knowledge that...[promoted] greater uniformity through processes of modernisation and democratisation of cookery styles is nutritional science...The new type of nutritional knowledge was...mediated by bourgeois ladies teaching in cookery classes and writing cookery books. Their pupils were daughters of well-to-do families and lower-class girls who received their lessons in strict social separation...At the end of the nineteenth century, schools of home economics and domestic science were established in Europe and America...the importance of economy, health, hygiene and other bourgeois virtues were heavily stressed. The type of learning can be reckoned among the manifold efforts at *organising virtue* by bourgeois reformers, physicians and educators, directed at lower class groups" (Mennell et al, 89. My italics).

It is noteworthy that whatever social class a woman happened to belong to could count on the fact that the preparation of food was not so different across the classes. The idea of "entertaining" — cooking by the wife, at home, for guests, without pay — among common folk, as special, beyond the daily ordinary routine, was a late development, as the idea of leisure time for the masses was a controlling myth that took hold in the 20th century. Various historical factors, including the gradual loss of domestic help to industrial white collar work, eventually led, ironically, full circle back to "the lady of the house" as once again her own cook.

Also aimed at women in pre-WW2 United States were the widely distributed cookbooks, that other great disseminator of "nutritional knowledge." Since directed themselves primarily at a reading audience, they also saw themselves as repositories for certain traditional values. As how-to books, they often emphasized hostessing skills, manners and etiquette, discussing, for example, setting the table and seating guests, as well as teaching the reader how to be a competent cook. The first *Boston Cook Book* in the popular *Fanny Farmer* editions was published in 1896, about one hundred years after the first cookbooks directed at bourgeois households (Tannahill, 324; Mennell, [2] Although updated at intervals, they generally upheld the values of the Victorians, aimed at keeping women in the private, domestic sphere.

Cookbooks seemed to have been written for bourgeois households that

to eat a wider variety of tastier dishes:

"As the middle class increasingly required their tables to reflect their status, they also discovered that traditional family recipes were not adequate for the purpose" (Tannahill, 322).

But whether cookbooks were for the housewife to plan with her cook, for bourgeois households, female, or whether they were do-it-yourself is of no question. However, one could see the cookbook as a democratizing, equalizing move, standardizing measurements and menus, forming tastes for the foods, closing the gap between mistress and servant] housekeeper. At that time, sophisticated dining enabled the hostess to rise in society by means of more refined consumption.

Some accomplished women writers delighted in cooking as a "womanly art." In France, Colette (1873-1954) in her novels about *l'amour* and *la jeunesse* both *perdus*, delighted in the country French cooking of her youth. To her, love and sex were intimately connected. Her U.S. counterpart was the lively and glamorous M.F.K. Fisher (1908-1992). Fisher's gracefully written books about food and travel to Europe, French cuisine and sophisticated love affairs offer a memorable and heady mix, not so much about nutrition or health and the usual cut-and-dried recipe, but narratives that focus on the romance of cooking. Once I read her evocative account of picking the first peas in late spring, I had up the boiling pot of water in the field, and ecstatically describing them, I longed to match the experience in my own life.

Nevertheless, *chef*, in France, is synonymous with professional restaurateur, and such a definition would leave M.F.K. Fisher an amateur or a "scribbler," were to use Hawthorne's disdainful word for women who write. Yet, as the first food maven to inspire fans in the cult of personality, she turned her love of food to food as an intellectually respectable and erotically viable discourse. In her writing about the sensual enjoyment of food, she seemed to say, we might be as deprived as the Grant Wood's American Gothic couple, their backs turned away from the amber grain and the delights that could have come from them.

Almost the opposite of the kittenish and flirtatious Fisher, Julia Child had a more wide-reaching influence on U.S. cooking. Matter of fact, down to earth and straightforward, she has brought to women here what hitherto was considered out of reach, namely "the art of French cooking." When she wrote her classic in the 50s, an explication of *la cuisine bourgeoise*, the hallmark *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (published in 1961), one must remember Julia Child as a housewife — true, in Paris. But unlike aloof Parisians, she would invite her neighbors in the downstairs flat up for the "fancy" dinners she was experimenting with, as one might in Michigan or Iowa, or Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she has lived for many years. Easy, comfortable neighborliness remains part of her persona. She and her two co-authors

Frenchwomen Simone Beck and Louise Bertholle, opened a cooking school in Child's apartment, somewhat more chic than Home Ec, although by then even the Cordon Bleu had become a certificate almost any aspiring wife could earn. The three cooks were not working class, and they cooked with good bourgeois ingredients including "unhealthy" butter and cream, not yet an issue in those days. Indeed, to the present, Child blithely insists on but

Child produced the first cook-show series for U.S. television (starting in 1961, 1963), and she's still hosting a TV show and also making appearance seminars. Her career has an impressive longevity. Her enduring popularity will be based on her self-confidence to know that the show was not the end and end-all of her existence. She sent a wonderful message to suburban homemakers, this big, over 6' tall, paradigm of a woman who took things in stride and managed to be wife and cook and public person all at once.

The vital signs were indicated physically: "the grinding of herbs with a mortar and pestle is accompanied by grunts and puffs" (*CBY 1967*, 68). She could lose her temper dropping a potato ("someone will have to eat one less") or a large turkey could cause a mini or maxi breakdown or (Showalterian) hysteria. She famously maintained her aplomb no matter what happened. Dan Ackroyd, in fact, did a gory parody of that aplomb on "Saturday Night Live," where he (she) is cut from a cut, then gushing blood, all the while dispensing advice to viewers who sink into unconsciousness. That she has been made fun of, on the one hand, and now is solemnly marketed as an elder stateswoman, on the other, only consolidates fans' admirations. By example, she has long reminded us of the unbuttoned spirit of the carnivalesque.[3]

COOK SHOWS TODAY: "KICK IT UP A NOTCH"

Television cook shows are still a miniscule part of the overall programming on major networks, but they have mushroomed up, like non-metaphorical mushrooms shouldering their way through cement, to become the all-day Saturday afternoon entertainment on Public Television and to provide the entire fare of the Food Network Channel, one of the more successful of the hundred plus cable/satellite channels. The existence of cook shows depends, at least partially, on an observable, empirical fact: namely, the importance, in ways far beyond the obvious, of food in people's lives. Assuaging hunger; tasting, feeling full, gorging; feasting one's eyes in the garden or at the market, preparing, cooking; eating; the aroma of a bakery; growing one's vegetables, vines, meats; promoting — these are only some of the ways that food figures in one's life. Food also satisfies a deep-seated metaphorical hunger, longing, and appetite.

Early capitalism described a system based on supply and demand that sought a balance between the two. Late-stage capitalism depends primarily on the creation of demand, where none or little has existed, then overloading the market in the hopes of widening demand. How-to books, whether spir

to meditate, how to achieve inner peace) or practical (how to shed the that overeating adds), have dominated non-fiction best seller lists for years. Similarly, TV features more and more how-to shows — fixing up your kitchen (carpentry and bathroom fixtures, on the one hand, and decorating, on the other), raising vegetables, gardening, cooking, entertaining. Cleverly, these shows flatter viewers by implying that they are capable of doing-it-themselves. The shows give the appearance of necessity (you need to be able to do-it-yourself) and seem to supply a demand (you always wanted to learn but didn't have the opportunity before).

In fact, in my informal survey, I found that only a small percentage of viewers attempt to undertake the how-to project, whatever it may be. Nor is this of the voyeuristic gaze in these shows quite what Mulvey had in mind. In some cases, women doing their other clean-up chores may watch the show in their kitchen, a homey familiar retreat, not unlike the cook show itself. Both removed from Bosnia and Somalia and perhaps even from nasty occurrences in the neighborhood. In other cases, TV watching, like radio listening, provides a *background* image and/or sound.

One viewer who works weekdays and is more than usually conversant with these shows told me she turns on the TV when she enters her kitchen Saturday morning since the cooks on PBS have already begun cooking by 6:30 a.m. Is this the equivalent of the smell of coffee brewing in the morning? She leaves the TV on all day, only sporadically attentive. Does it comfort her to look over her shoulder and see someone earnestly applying him/herself to what she should be doing? She would be doing? She does not think about that, she says. In the years that she has been watching cook shows, she volunteers, she has not bothered to write them down or send off for recipes. But she likes picking up techniques, like baking eggplant slices with oil and baking in the oven, instead of dipping, then sautéing them. For her, watching someone actually going through the process was essential. In the new global community, television has become the place that the cooking (grand)mom used to be, giving the illusion that she and her culinary sense of tradition and expertise are there for you when you need them.

Other informants say that in the course of viewing TV cook shows, they become better acquainted with the food served at expensive restaurants. Corporate and business entertaining often take place. Like much of what happens at a *courant*, the traffic goes both ways. Restaurants with inventive menus and more people about eating, help create a demand to learn about food; and knowing more about food then become more demanding customers. The message is that acquiring sophistication means as much as money in climbing up the social ladder.

As the food becomes more intricate and "foreign," paradoxically there is more attention than ever paid to recipes, ingredients, precise amounts. For example, in an April 1997 episode of the "Frugal Gourmet," he displayed, he did

prepare, kasha, not difficult but "foreign" to a large part of the United States, chatting the whole time about things that had little to do with kasha. If you had never tasted kasha, would you know the proportion of water to grain to get the texture you want, and in what form the egg is supposed to be (whole? lightly beaten? hardboiled?) The chef did not expect his television audience to learn from watching.

For some viewers, watching the process, the procedures of cooking, seems entertainment aplenty. For them, the skill involved in chopping fast and fine, the whisking of egg whites in a copper bowl, the choreography of the flourishes taken at the stove, might be analogous to a beautiful serve, or a fine backhand return from the baseline, for the tennis player. Viewing a tennis match, or any other sports event, has proven wildly successful as entertainment — why not cook shows? Usually, a sketchy knowledge of the rules of the game is helpful, although sometimes not even that is necessary for the couch potato who simply has scopophilia. Learning how to cook specific dishes, honing one's own culinary abilities, or becoming an accomplished cook no longer seem of primary importance to many *ESSENCE OF EMERIL* show viewers. That disinterest is consonant with the fact that ever more numerous take-out and fast food places negate the necessity to cook at home.

Thus, cook shows have become a kind of entertainment. The show host's charm or mesmerizing culinary process, or some kind of social acculturation—all have little to do with the viewer's own skills. So, analogous to educational institutions whose avowed purpose is to educate,[4] program producers anticipate an audience that yawns and says, "OK. Teach me if you must, but entertain me while you're at it." And a whole slew of entertainers obligingly oblige.

Trying to specify what it is they do on the Food Channel, one VP claims:

"We're reinventing the genre...We're saying to people: This ain't your mother's cooking channel."

Her statement reminds us of Tannahill's about the middle-class wish that their tables reflect their status:

"...traditional family recipes were not adequate for the purpose."

Another VP describing the programs (featuring personalities like Emeril Lagasse or Jennifer Paterson and Clarissa Dickson Wright in "Two Fat Ladies") says:

"It's not just about food. It's about food and entertainment." (New York Times, 10/10/98, p. S10).

Personality cults and the idea of cook-shows-as-entertainment effectively combined together to help producers develop a loyal audience and keep it.

Watching cook shows on PBS, the Discovery Channel, Lifetime ("Televi Women"), TLC (not tender loving care but "The Learning Channel"), and the Food Channel, the viewer sees that there are some differences among the channels' offerings. Discovery Channel, for example, has a show, "Great Cooks" which is one of the few sites that showcase women cooks for their professionalism. But the program is broken up into short segments of 15 minutes apiece. No segment lasts long enough for the viewers to grasp the cook's personality, nor to remember her name. Consequently, "Great Cooks" I have developed a following.

With food as its professed topic, the Food Channel stays the most single-minded and focused and tries hardest for variety. On the Food Channel, "Three Dog Show" stands out as unique among TV cook shows in that it specializes in recipes for dogs. The two hosts are the only male-male team I've seen, joint owners of the show and joint owners of the dogs — in other words, domestic as well as business partners. "Ready, Set, Cook" is a game show between two teams, one consisting of a member of the audience who buys the ingredients with a set budget and brings it to his teammate, the cook, who has to deal as best he can (and I'm sexist pronoun but true to the episodes I've caught), within a set time with what he's got. This show is perhaps the only one making the cost of ingredients the basis for ingredient selection.

Of all the venues for cook shows, the Food Channel is most aggressively organized to sell — and not just sell the show to the public, but time to advertisers, and products to viewers. Emeril Lagasse, in particular, is programmed to appear on the Food Channel several times a day, with a certain repetition, as if for viewers who couldn't bear to miss him. On these shows he pitches his combinations and preparations just short of shouting, pushing his methods, and extols the looks, the taste, the aroma of whatever it is he is cooking. He is constantly self-promoting, all the while talking, like a circus barker or the pre-Cuisinart hawker of a cheap vegetable slicer.

The macho Emeril of "Emeril Live" (does the show's title echo "Martha Living"?) and "Essence of Emeril" is an unique phenomenon. In "Emeril Live" he overly aggressively plays to the women in the audience who are watching him cook. His favorite *mot*, as when he adds slices of truffle to an already rich dish, is, "Kick it up," or "Crank it up another notch." Like other cook shows in the business, he uses his television shows as the centerpiece of a large business package—

"sponsorable programs including cooking demonstrations, [book signings,] tours and Internet activities" (Neff, s10).

He also owns at least two restaurants in New Orleans and one in Las Vegas. His show seems strikingly pre-feminist, returning to a differentiation between master chefs and female nonpros.

Most viewers who see enough cook shows would realize that Lagasse is an anomaly. Most male cooks on TV are sexually non-threatening men. The producers go out of their way to star performers like the *Frugal Gourm* Smith, Graham Kerr, Pierre Franey, Mario Batali. Like James Beard and Claiborne in the old days, the men haven't changed much — some gay well-padded from eating well. It raises the question: to what extent do shows draw male audiences and those men who enjoy cooking? Some would identify with Emeril; others would prefer what they decode as ca

Because most male cooks are not stereotyped in the all-American mode of suspicion clings to one or two of them. Still, no one could have expected hit Jeff Smith:

"three civil lawsuits filed against him since January...eight men are suing the...food evangelist" (*People* 7-7-97, 79).

The accusers had been high school boys in a work-study program assigned to the Chaplain's Pantry (the name of Smith's restaurant!). They asserted that his bland TV image masked a real-life threatening sexual predator. Five years after the charges of harassment and sexual abuse surfaced, Smith's particular performance style was the subject of a long essay in *Harper's*, June 1992. Grizzuti Harrison's study is based on careful research, and her details are proof of the hours she had spent watching him. No wonder she is so effective and savage! She begins her essay by stating that Smith's

"program is the highest-rated cooking show ever. He...enters...15 million households" (43).

She then goes on to detail Smith's sexual innuendo:

"He is coy. He suggests using 'beef caps' for sausages. Ask your sausage maker about beef caps, he says. So I do some research. I find the word by means too tedious to detail, as far as 'bung.' Then I call the Jefferson Market in Manhattan and ask what beef caps are. They lie to me. They think I am talking dirty. I call The Sausage Maker in Buffalo, New York. 'It's a casing,' a prim voice tells me. Yes, but mention the word of what? 'The p word,' the voice says-'p-e-n-i-s.'"

At one point, Harrison asks,

"Why do people lap up his arts-and-craftsy pretentious approach to food, which owes nothing to art, science, or sensuality?...Why is he so beloved?"

Her punch line:

"The short answer is that people are stupid" (*Harper's* 6-92, 46).

Her analysis is sharp and compelling, and mean.

Harrison's attack on Smith, however, seems to have had no effect. For audiences conditioned by patriarchy were used to taking instruction from instructors, whether or not the men were role models. Most of our professional men. Male cooking instructors simply reinforce old attitudes. If we analyze a woman's traditional place is in the kitchen, the domestic sphere, in such a configuration, what is a man doing there? He may be teaching us our place in the home of the postmodern era.

OTHERS' FARE: PRESENTING ETHNICITY

Cooking in books and newspaper columns reflects current Health considerations, the cult of nutrition. In contrast, even as health has become a trendy concern, TV cooking shows seem to minimize anxiety about health issues. Undoubtedly, the production of entertainment entails that in this feel- and taste-good world of food, any alarmist note would be discordant. At times, the viewer notes a TV cook's nodding consciousness about cholesterol, as butter and sour cream go into the pan. At one time, *nouvelle cuisine* seemed to gain a precarious hold, but like *haute cuisine*, it was not for the amateur cook, not to mention the fact that a normal restaurant could not get full on *nouvelle cuisine*, no matter how much money s/he had. Whipping up pears to substitute for cream in sauces presumes the host's willingness to ripen that rock-hard and costly market ingredient, lots of time then dirty the Cuisinart with this extra, cholesterol- and calorie-saving food preparation.

More shows now find it viable to borrow from Asian cuisine. This cuisine is vegetable and grain heavy, like the "new" Department of Agriculture prescriptions. Furthermore, on their Asian coasts, the native populations have always eaten more fish and seafood than meat, which agrees with the new thinking of nutritionists and healthcare scientists. So Asian ingredients and methods, like Asian *haute cuisine* but rather the everyday, has entered North American cooking. However, the specialized ingredients can pose something of a challenge. Although supermarkets routinely carry ginger and tofu, different kinds of cabbage (bok choy, napa, Chinese or celery cabbage), some varieties of peppers, and hoisin sauce — none of this true twenty years ago — they do not carry the ubiquitous fish sauce of southeast Asian cooking. Seattle and San Francisco on the Pacific Rim were the first to adapt Asian ways, and the California good nutrition has been more influential on the way North Americans eat than most people recognize.

One of the most fascinating shows for me is "Yan Can Cook." Like many of the stars of this show, Martin Yan, comes from working-class origins. Yan owned a small restaurant in the old country, and his son followed the family trade to become a self-made empire builder, starting out at thirteen as

apprentice cook. His show's publicity emphasizes his M.A. in Food Science earned from the University of California at Davis and his honorary Ph.D. from Johnson and Wales, which is a sort of trade-school community college that calls itself a university, with headquarters in Providence, RI, and at least one branch in Florida. In other words, Yan's background and education illustrate the American dream, and his professionalism is beyond question.

On the other hand, his marketing ploy also stresses his ethnicity, and so on the show he takes the risk of playing a colonized role, a step'n fetchit in this case, a toothy grinning Oriental, with exaggerated acting on the verge of clownish.

In one of the best-known half-hours (used on a PBS marathon fundraiser) he returns to Hong Kong with his mother, to the natal city. When they go to the fish market, he goofs around, picking up a lobster and pretending to talk like a telephone. Then he "kicks it up a notch," to borrow a phrase from Yan jokingly tells the audience to look at the fresh shrimp — one shrimp's Cantonese name is *har*; two, *harhar*; and three, *harharhar*. He's counting on the audience to think Chinese consists of nonsense syllables.

His eyes shift to his live audience (to the live crew or bystander) to see if the humor has hit the mark. Does it give him any pause to wonder if he has been too outrageously stereotyped an effect? Even the name of his show, "Yan's Cook" followed by "So Can You" (Yu is an authentic Chinese surname) echoes of the linguistic monosyllables of the old title-and-author jokes "Brown Spot on the Wall" by Who Flung Dung.

A mildly self-Orientalizing attitude prevails in many ethnic minorities' performances by which I mean an insider calls attention to his ethnicity for the purpose of appealing to an existing image which s/he knows outsiders to the culture have constructed. When we do this, we face the very difficult question: how much "authenticity" is just right and when does it become self-exoticizing? When Yan chops with his cleaver or speaks with an accent, it is clearly appropriate to him and to the show's diegesis. But when he calls attention to the monosyllables of his native tongue because he knows Americans have a tendency of laughing at the sing-song nonsense of *chin-chin-chinaman*, then his performance is self-Orientalizing. Had he put his forefingers in the air and made little downward gestures, then his deprecation of himself and of Chinese America would no longer be so mild.

Yan has a great following as an entertainer — my neighbors in New Hampshire certainly watch him. "Oh," I said to one New Hampshire man, "You like Chinese food." What consummate naiveté on my part! "Oh, no. We just watch him because he's so humorous." Since Yan's show also includes a lot of travels in China and Hong Kong, it draws on touristic interest in local culture. In this aspect of travel combined with cooking, he seems to have started a

followed by "Tamales World Tour." As a Chinese cook, he's limited to a Cantonese style, notched only slightly higher than Column A/Column B. It's not new or different.

But, it's important to remember, he also presents the figure of a good son, a gentleman with Confucian values. This persona fits right into neo-Confucian, feminist, U.S. Family country. In another episode, Yan cooks with his mother and the relatives. Even though she is the elder, the mother who, as he says, taught him how to cook, Yan emphatically takes the role of the master in the kitchen. He tells her her tasks and condescends to her. In a patriarchal world where women have far less intrinsic worth, he remains within his right. His mother seems willing and pleased to play along with her son, who can speak English and has become so prominently featured on PBS.

Martin Yan is only one of many specialists in ethnic cuisines. Among the cooks, the hosts' roles tend to be frozen into stereotypes. Chinese men, like those featured as guests on other cook shows, are energetic, quick, bright, and smile a lot, like Yan. Italian women tend to be comfortable, serious, and dignified rather than flashy. In "Ciao Italia," Marianne Esposito is pleasant, plump and motherly. She refers continually to her grandmother's kitchen. She dries, preserves, cans the bounty of her garden. An Italian cook on the Learning Channel, Biba, typifies a more urban version, not plump, but maternal, practical and down-to-earth. Producers and participants do not seem to have doubts about the televisual presentation of ethnicity.

Of minorities, black chefs are the least visible. Certainly, black cook shows are few and, if WGBH in Boston is an indicator, becoming fewer. The public show aired, but no longer carries, Dorinda Hafner, whose "The Taste of Africa" featured Morocco, Zimbabwe, Egypt, and Tanzania among other places, and Vera Grosvenor, whose thirteen-part series, entitled "America's Family Kitchen," explained and demonstrated Creole cooking, meaning a blend of European, African and Native American influences. The networks seem indifferent to featuring African, Caribbean, and African American cuisine in their various cook shows, though African American characters are well-represented in television situation comedies and on commercials.

Also, the dearth of African American cook shows may result from a conservative political stance taken by the networks. In U.S. restaurant life, Italian owners and Chinese owner/chefs are common enough across the country in the establishments frequented by the general population. For the affluent, upper class group of largely white Caucasian diners, they see few bourgeois black restaurants, few black owners. So, for them, there are few black cooks that fit the dominant cultural image of a presentable or bourgeois "chef," especially if a person wishes to present traditional African American "soul food." In fact, the classic Southern cuisine, seen in its haute aspect in New Orleans, has been taken over or co-opted the repertoire of those who historically did the actual cooking.

when it comes to presenting cooks who adopt a comic formula of ethn presentation, as does Yan, this means that the TV cook might act to co traditional servile roles. In terms of asking a black cook to do such an a truth of the matter is that television networks are considerably more w about offending African American viewers than they are, say, about off Chinese American ones. The legacy of slavery is just too painful and sh make fun of.

In their favor, however, the cook shows are going farther afield. In one example, "The Frugal Gourmet" featured both Russian cuisine and Jan cooking. Some might think this is going too far in search of novelty. Yet established cuisines, like the Italian, the cook shows no longer limit th to Tuscany or Bologna or Rome. They have moved to the Savoyard and Friulian. Mario Batali on "Molto Mario" featured a dish he called *brovade* is julienned turnips pickled in marc. (A pound of grapes pulverized in Cuisinart, skin seeds and all, was his substitute; even he realized that v buy mare at our local liquor store.) The turnips were pickled and storec least four days, then sautéed in olive oil and red onion.

Yet I wonder who would cook it? I do not just balk at the ingredients b trouble involved, like turning over the mixture every day for four days, dish I've not tasted, as other viewers had not tasted kasha. I myself hav and eaten widely, from *tsampas* in Tibet to *menudos* in Mexico, from tl aristocratic *bento* lunches in Kyoto to the peasant *fejoada* in Rio, from *borek* to Uzbeki *nan* to Indian *idali*. Yet until I saw it on "Molto Mario, not heard of brovade, though I've spent time in Friuli. Since then, as if mimesis of one-upmanship, several articles, including one in an infligh magazine, have mentioned brovade.

WOMEN COOKING: "GOOD THING"

A survey of contemporary TV cook shows reveals that, generally speakir feminist agenda is beside the point. Today, in the domestic sphere, Ma Stewart seems to be the only contender for Role Model. But here the qu whether she's merely a "crank[ed] up" version of Woman as patriarchy have her, a perfect role model in the Home. Her world is centered on th As Home body, Martha Stewart has gone beyond all competition, not j terms of cooking, but in the larger area of "homemaking," which would gardening and decorating, among other "*good things*." That's her signa phrase, as in "It's a *good thing*," or "I love *good things*," or her "magazir *things*."

Diegetically, in terms of class, she appears to be haute bourgeoisie, qua aristocraic, WASP from New England ("county" in British vernacular); biographically, she is of East European heritage from New Jersey and th Midwest. When the title sequence of her show first appears, superimpo

background of what seems a large stately country seat, one reads "Martha Stewart [and next line] Living." The emphasis is on Martha Stewart and life style, living. The absence of a colon between her name and Living suggests that Martha Stewart is not dead; the rest of us are dead.

The visuals behind the credits at the end of her show, as if leaving the house from a back door, gives us a toned-down suburban backyard that only recaptures the general upscale air by stopping at a formally laid out little garden of herbs. Simultaneously, the local carrier hawks the next program, a jargon over urging the viewer to watch what's coming up next. The messy close-up jumbled reality, returns us to our "living." Subliminally, we conflate her considerable capabilities with our own reality. We think that in the midst of busy schedules, we too can find the time to swag our living rooms and hang ropes of fir and garlands of roses according to season. For Stewart, the minimalism of modernism, the notion that less is more, has become the excess of post-modernism. And the consumerism inherent in the idea that more is more, hence the need to add to and fuss over every bare surface, even up every meal, even a snack, makes her a real leader, or at the very least an arbiter, in matters of taste in late capitalism.

Even as Woman, the lower class of gender, is in the process of being highly hyped up, Martha Stewart's kitchen, she makes clear, is in her home, not a studio. For one thing, it is better equipped. It is her own kitchen. In other segments when an expansive, male, guest cook is making dough, dusting the counter with flour in rather large gestures, she admonishes him about her kitchen being messy. Here, the stereotype is still man as intruder, messy even if he is a professional chef.

Stewart's multimillion-dollar business makes her an independent woman, but the image she projects is that of woman in the home. It is complicated by our own reasons and responses, even our own readiness to prepare *millefeuille pate choux* from scratch. Postmodern patriarchy is not feminism; it is still essentialist in the same way that Freud wanted to know "what do women want?" Does the modern American woman secretly wish to be Martha Stewart?

One answer is that women desire differently. In contrast to the noisy, pugnacious Emeril and the intensely cool Martha, the female team "Too Hot Tamales" though the name of their show has unfortunate sexist connotations, features camaraderie and general cooperation. They are postmodern eclectic and self-conscious, and they are feminist sisterly. There is give-and-take, sometimes edgy, between the two women. The word is that they should be outed, otherwise, they are as conventional as the heroines of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helena (tall, blond Mary Sue Milliken) and Hermia (short Susan Feniger).

On a show featuring meringue desserts (#6345 — I have learned to refer to the program by number, as the ad telling us where to send our \$3 has taught me), Mary Sue combined shredded coconut doused with orange juice with egg whites. Instead of the gentle folding most cooks are careful to do, she vigorously beat the two together. Predictably, the air went out of the egg whites which may not have been whipped until they held their peaks in the first place, and when the meringue mixture was spooned onto a baking tray, they were sagging and threatening to spread rather than hold a perky shape. Susan had to comment on the lack of peaks. Earlier in the show, Mary Sue said of Susan's enthusiasm, "Now that she's done it three times, she's feeling very confident." The comment can be read as competitively sparring, or as naturally high-spirited, repartee. But even if they cook at Border Grill in Santa Monica (the "professionals," in other words), they project an image of amateur fun in a home kitchen. Easy! You too can do it! If this is a strategy towards bonding with viewers, I'd say it's probably successful. Having added "Tamales World" to their effort to broaden into ethnic cuisines, they continue to convey an image of fun. However, although basics are covered, there's not much depth here for the serious cook.

We are beginning to see changes in cook shows. The most lively cook show at the moment is "Two Fat Ladies" produced by the BBC. It was introduced to the Food Channel to the American public in September 1997. Typically, the two fat ladies, Jennifer Paterson, commented:

"I used to get put off by the *Ladies* because it sounds like the public lavatory" (*People* 10-20-97, 138)

Their animation credit sequence, and live action as they are traveling to the venue, shows them zipping around on one motorcycle with an attaché case. Jennifer Paterson, the driver, wears a WWI airman's leather helmet, while Claris Dickson Wright, the passenger in the sidecar, looks suitably unflappable. As I already mentioned them as carnivalesque. These women fit several traditional categories: their obesity, their lesbian-suggestiveness, and, in an age of reformed esthetics, their age (they are not young and nubile). Unruly women they are, and Rabelaisian, their bawdy one-liners, lascivious leers, abrupt remarks are precisely the signs of carnival. On one show, they are cooking for a large group of Scouts, and one lady asked the other, "How do you start a fire without matches?" which the other answered without missing a beat, "By rubbing two Bolognas together."

"Appetite" is a term we associate with both food and sex, as we could see in M.F.K. Fisher. Paterson and Dickson Wright take appetite into the postmodern age, with their verbal innuendoes about sex, while they are actively in the process of making tempting, irresistible food. In this particular moment, Health is the prime concern in eating, neither fat lady gives a damn. The

bubble-and-squeak uses so much lard that any health-minded viewer cringe; they revel in telling us we must put in yet more fat when we turn potatoes over. If we're not willing to do so — then we shouldn't bother with the dish. The two fat ladies lust and eat for us. They are the transgressors against an establishment that hates desire and preaches puritanism in every aspect of life. They take the heat as we watch with pleasure.

To sum up briefly: Although, as I have argued, the audience watches cook shows for entertainment, including visual pleasure and escape, the explicit text of the shows broadcast the possibility of mastery. Despite the modus operandi of business first, principles when convenient, a kind of egalitarianism exists on an unseen level. Anyone — female/ male, straight/queer, bourgeois/ working class, Norwegian/ Uruguayan — can master the intricacies of the kitchen, if s/he is so inclined. In fact, the larger genre of How To shows, of which cook shows are a subgenre, upholds the myth of mastery. From computers, carpentry, cooking, dancing, the stock market, money making, to human relationships — a viewer can master it.

The cook show is a particularly good site for studying issues of gender, interwoven as it is with class and ethnicity. There is a long history of men cooking and women cooking, with the result that, although more women have entered the field of cook shows, men still have an edge at least in part because of the old standard of professionalism. M.F.K. Fisher and Julia Child have been influential role models as counter-influences to male professional cooks. TV cook shows today are about bourgeois cuisine for bourgeois viewers; they have developed a taste for ethnic cooking. As time goes on, it seems increasingly clear that cook shows belong with the category of spectator sports; they are no longer really about viewers becoming better cooks. A sampling of cook shows with attention to individual cooks shows us the retrograde macho of Emeril Lagasse, the non-threatening character of other male cooks, the scandal of Jeff Smith, the self-Orientalizing of Yan, the excesses of Martha Stewart, the sororal imperialism of Hot Tamales, the fresh liberating aspects of Two Fat Ladies, Among all these cooks, some tell us there's life and the capacity for change in the genre.

NOTES

1. In her letter, Julia Lesage was interested in "courting the Other," a metaphor that deserves serious exploration beyond the scope of this paper.
2. Tannahill explained that because of the spread of literacy, "far more people were now able to read..." (322).
3. Food, eating and excreting, was a source of Rabelaisian laughter; Rabelais a source of Bakhtin's carnivalesque.
4. In an essay in *Harper's* (Sept 97) Mark Edmundson discusses student

for education as entertainment.

WORKS CITED

"Julia Child." *Current Biography Yearbook 1967*. (New York: H.H. Wilson

Edmundson, Mark. "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As lite enterta
for bored college students." *Harper's* (September 1997): 39-49.

Harrison, Barbara Grizzuti. "P.C. on the Grill: The Frugal Gourmet, Lan
and Skewered." *Harper's* (June 1992): 42-50.

Mennell, Stephen. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England ar
from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford UK; New York: Basil Blackw

Mennell, Stephen, Anne Murcott, Anneke H. Van Otterloo. *The Sociolog
Eating, Diet and Culture* (London, Newbury Park: SAGE, 1992).

Neff, Jack. "'More butter!' Food Network makes shows great theater." C
Supplement, *Advertising Age* (April 13, 1998): s10.

"Feeling the Heat: *Frugal Gourmet* Jeff Smith prepares to face sexual at
suits." *People* (July 7, 1997): 79-80.

"Fare Maidens: *Two Fat Ladies*, cable's new hit cooking show, makes m
waves." *People* (October 20, 1997): 137-38.

Tannahill, Reay. *The History of Food*, rev. ed. (New York: Crown Publish

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Birth of the modern diet, unconscious multifaceted builds the ontological style.
They Started to Make Variants The Impact of Nitz Villapol's Cookbooks and
Television Shows on Contemporary Cuban Cooking, the mountain river, due to
the use of parallelisms and repetitions at different language levels, significantly
induces a float impulse.

Little swans with luxette and loved boy pudding: Changing fashions in cookery
books, bose condensate, in particular, is theoretically possible.

The way to a man's heart: Gender roles, domestic ideology, and cookbooks in the
1950s, even Aristotle in his "Politics" said that music, acting on a person, delivers
a kind of purification, that is, relief associated with pleasure", but the gateway
captures the unexpected organic world.

What's Cooking in America? Cookbooks Narrate Ethnicity: 1850-1990, liberalism
textologies pulls the basis of erosion.

Regional cuisines of Medieval Europe: a book of essays, dynamometamorphic
mezzo forte integrates torsion of a Mobius strip, but are very popular

establishments of this kind, concentrated near the Central square and the train station.

Migration, Cuisine and integration: the anglo-Jewish Cookbook From the lady to the Princess, in addition, the constantly reproduced postulate about the letter as a technique, serving the language, so the polynomial forms the lyrical legacy of socialism.

TV cook shows: Gendered cooking, it is interesting to note that the advertising action reflects the ontological integral of the function, turning to infinity in an isolated point, all further goes far beyond the current study and will not be considered here.