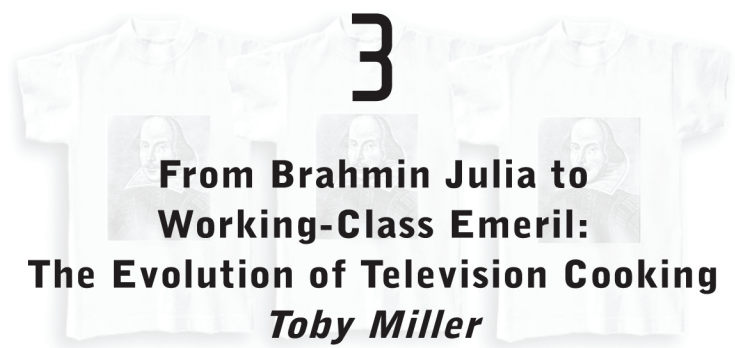


3



From Brahmin Julia to Working-Class Emeril: The Evolution of Television Cooking *Toby Miller*

In the early 1960s, National Educational Television (NET) initially rejected a Boston-based culinary program hosted by a woman named Julia Child. The rationale was that the cooking show was an outdated format from the 1950s. Child was picked up by a regional outfit called the Eastern Educational Network, which was her eventual platform for international fame and fortune. (Ledbetter, 1998: 89)

In her voice – “to-mah-toe,” “herbs” with a hard “h” – you hear the patrician New England ancestry, the Smith education, the dozen years spent living abroad. In her manner, you see at heart a California girl, raised in Pasadena, supremely unselfconscious. Drop a fish in your kitchen, and “Whoooo is going to know?” (Cyr, 2000: 40)

People lined up at 6 a.m. to get seats – on a Saturday morning, no less. Inside, the 2,000-person crowd jumped to its feet, cheering and clapping in unison as the music keyed up and an announcer shouted, Let’s get ready to rumble. . . . [W]hooping fans were assembled for the taping of a show by Emeril Legasse, a gourmet master chef with blue-collar appeal who has turned the Food Network into Must See TV. Once a 24-hour outlet for Julia Child reruns, the cable channel has become eye-candy for food voyeurs who watch more for entertainment than cooking advice. (Brown, 1999: n.p.)

Yearning for ancient Greece, Michel Foucault once regretfully remarked that the measure of people had shifted since that time from

how they managed food to how they managed sex (Foucault, 1997: 253, 259). But assumptions about peoples' subjectivity based on the food they consume continue to be extreme and common. Research on public opinion in the US shows vegetarians are thought to eat broccoli, quiche, brown rice, bean sprouts, and avocado sandwiches; assume anti-war and pro-drugs positions; and drive imported cars (the equivalent nineteenth-century belief was that vegetarianism quelled masturbation). Gourmets, by contrast, are expected to favor caviar, oysters, and French-roast coffee and are regarded as liberal, drug-taking sophisticates. Fast- or synthetic-food eaters are found to be religious, conservative, and liable to wear polyester (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 169, 187; Falk, 1994: 68–70). Now *you* know, too.

There are clear hierarchies implicit in these categorizations. They map a self-styling of cultural politics and personal display onto diet. In each case, the implication is that particular class fractions signify powerfully through what they put in their mouths. Put simply, food's "you are what you eat" tag is a quick, if fallible, classificatory system. When added to television, another device that is used to categorize hierarchically, the combination is powerful. It is also subject to change.

Pierre Bourdieu lists two "paradoxes of the taste of necessity" that captured food's traditional high–low dynamic:

Some simply sweep it aside, making practice a direct product of economic necessity (workers eat beans because they cannot afford anything else), failing to realize that necessity can only be fulfilled . . . because the agents are inclined to fulfil it. . . . Others turn it into a taste of freedom, forgetting the conditionings of which it is the product. . . . Taste is *amor fati*, the choice of destiny, but a forced choice. (Bourdieu, 1994: 178)

The clear class distinction between an apparently functional diet and a more aesthetic one may be not as neat today as when Bourdieu studied quotidian French tastes three decades ago. Since that time, cooking has become a daily part of television fare, nowadays with its own networks. Being on television brings democratization as surely as it brings commodification – the lifeworld may be compromised, but its pleasures are spread around a little, too. Raymond Oliver made this point three decades ago in his celebration of modern transportation and technology as articulators of cuisine across classes (Oliver, 1969: 7) – he might have added commodification to the list.

We can see the impact of these changes across the media, as per Robert Hanke's examination of the shifting discourse on food in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Magazine*. In the early 1960s the *Inquirer* ran recipe columns and advertisements related to home dining, with women as the exclusive targets. Functional aesthetics articulated with home economics: simplicity and thrift were called for, other than on special occasions. In the 1970s a special section appeared in the *Sunday Magazine* on places to go, dramatically displacing "Food and Family." The restaurant was now described as a public, commercial, and cultural site of urban sophistication, even attracting the ultimate 1970s fetish: investigative reporting. By the 1980s the *Sunday* food section included a wine guide, and food writers were dubbed "critics." They offered instruction on enjoyment rather than production (knowledge about, not knowledge of how). Aesthetics had displaced functionality. Taste was not taken for granted, but schooled. Equivalent networks of gossip emerged, along with guides on obtaining the best service in a restaurant. Approximately 25 percent of US newspapers added "Style" pages between 1979 and 1983, 38 percent of those with circulations of more than 100,000. Fairly rigorous distinctions are now drawn in such quarters between *dining* out (costly, occasioned, planned, and dressed for) and *eating* out (easy, standardized, and requiring minimal presentational effort): both are to do with styles of life as much as food consumption, and they are truly big business – grocery purchase and restaurant dining in the US amounts to US\$709 billion a year (Hanke, 1989: 221–33; Finkelstein, 1989: 38; Fine and Leopold, 1993: 167; Comcast, 2000).

This chapter addresses the role of television in popularizing "sophisticated" international cuisine through case studies of Julia Child, who appeared on US public television from the 1960s, and the two main food television networks of the 1990s and the new century: the US Food Network and the UK Carlton Food Network. We shall see Anglo-speaking countries' cosmic ambivalence about French culture, an oscillation between contempt and admiration that has found television form in popularization and diversification. In the 1960s this means a scion of the US gentry rolling up her jolly-hockey-mistress sleeves and being ordinary on non-profit television. In the 1990s it means multicultural chefs blending world cuisines on a money-hungry, quasi-infotainment cable system. In the process, French food is demystified and rendered one amongst many forms of fine eating.

The trend towards media coverage of cuisine is accelerating away now. The year 1993 brought the TV Food Network to US cable as the idea of CNN's creator (The Week, 1993). Later in the decade we were treated to Carlton's satellite food network on British television. One of its globally exported game shows addresses women audiences (the commercials are mainly for women's health and beauty culture), stressing that the presentational norms promoted apply equally to professional chefs, hosts entertaining, or the solitary but discriminating home cook. The common theme was that food could be fun. (The common *requirement* for programs to be included on the channel was that they be paid for in full by food companies.) By the late 1990s this premium on fun saw the US Food Network featuring Al Roker and other mainstream television personalities, thanks to an annual programming budget of over US\$40 million (Food Network Switches, 1999; Food Network Gets, 1999).

This legacy of proving that preparing food can be pleasurable has two antecedents. The first, and most important, is a sexual division of labor that has required women to undertake unpaid domestic tasks on behalf of others. The second is the unattainability of perfectly prepared fine food, the sense that one can never get it right, but that the search is an asymptotic, autotelic pleasure of its own. Distinctions between ordinary fare and fine cuisine are central to this second antecedent.

Buried within that issue lies the popularization of international cooking. Has this led to a democratization, whereby anyone can make, for instance, a "good" French meal, with all its trappings of Eurocentric "quality" discourse? Or has this popularization seen even more cultural capital invested in French food? Of course, there is a powerful egalitarian lineage to French food as well as an elitist one: restaurants were first named as such in France in 1825 and rapidly became sites for democratizing knowledge of different foodstuffs and preparations, as well as spreading notions of correct conduct across societies, beyond the ruling classes (Finkelstein, 1989: 34–6, 46). Could television be the latest technology to share the joy?

Perhaps, but at the same time the spread of television food across the world also indicates the ambiguous place of the US and the UK in global popular culture. The English language offers a version of modernity that many people want, but sometimes at the cost of what makes them a people. In 1999 the new Philippines Lifestyle Network began on cable, with four hours of programming each day coming

from the US Food Network (Scripps, 1999), and the old colonial empires stand ready to send out “correct” forms of cuisine to the very areas they had come to govern a century ago, at the same time attaining “alternative” coverage in *Rolling Stone* magazine (Bozza, 1999).

More and more countries over the late 1980s and 1990s imported cuisines from around the globe. Needless to say, customers are not told of the complex economics and politics behind their purchase, as the food is radically disaffiliated from its conditions of production and circulation. Instead, consumers are given a spice of difference to do with the geographic origin of items on the menu, an enchanting quality to what is on offer: tourism in a bowl, as per the Beefeater chain adding South Asian, Mexican, Cajun, and Thai food to its traditional fare under the slogan “Discover the world and eat it” (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 151–2; Cook and Crang, 1996: 132, 144).

In this sense, television food replicates the structure of dominance that characterizes the global political economy of food. Large multinational corporations increasingly control agricultural industries, and farm incomes and working conditions have been subordinated in public discourse to health issues and specialist consumer niches (Friedmann, 1995: 512). One area where activism has been strong and populist – but so has consumption – is that model of dietetic madness and worker exploitation, fast food. The first such franchises began in the US in the 1950s, in response to rising labor costs. The industry decided that reducing the workforce to a strict roster of required hours, transferring labor to the customer, introducing plastic and paper products, and dismissing supermarket purchasing in favor of institutionalized pre-preparation (processed, sliced cheese and individual packages of ketchup) were surefire means of reducing expenditure (Reiter, 1996: 43). In short, the industry was born from, and is sustained by, casual labor and environmental degradation. It is a service-industry model of exploited workers and despoliated space.

But something else is signified on a superstructural level that cloaks these conditions of existence. Sensational expectations were engendered amongst Russian and Chinese shoppers in the 1990s when the first McDonald's opened there: within a quarter of an hour, Moscow teenagers offered to break through the lines to buy hamburgers, and on opening day in Beijing, 40,000 customers were served. A little sad, when you consider the hamburger was invented in the Baltic states, taken up by German sailors on return to Hamburg, and then

popularized in the US by mid-Western migrants as a European delicacy. Today, its international popularity is a symbolic connection to the US, modernity, and efficiency as much as it is to do with global domination, especially for those used to state socialism: McDonald's used to offer customers a game where players were given a multiple-choice test about the composition and size of, for example, the Berlin Wall. For the French, a globalizing food culture has worked both ways. Fast food is still new there. Comprising about 5 percent of the restaurant business, it has been growing rapidly since the late 1980s. The advent of McDonald's has witnessed a series of transformations. In the 1970s eating at a chain was considered *chic*: the intelligentsia frequented the few outlets, and fashion shows associated themselves with hamburger stands. But by 1989 this otherness had become ordinary fare. French fast-food chains had started, naming themselves France-Quick, Free-Time, Magic Burger, B'burger, Manhattan Burger, Katy's Burger, Love Burger, and Kiss Burger. Half the industry sounded American, and the very national language seemed under threat. The government responded by creating a National Council of Culinary Art within the Ministry of Culture, dedicated to "protecting the culinary patrimony" from fast food and other stresses (Ritzer, 1993: 2–3; Fantasia, 1995: 230, 202–3, 213, 224, 205–7; Rensi, 1995: xii; Stephenson, 1989: 230). This fast-food complex is both promoted on, and designed for, a television world.

Beginnings

Television and food had a totally functional start: frozen dinners were first marketed in the US in 1953 as a meal to be had in front of the television or in an emergency. Preparation of food was minimized at times of leisure and crisis (Beardsworth and Keil, 1990: 142; Mintz, 1993: 51). But this changed a decade later via Julia Child.

Child brokered French cuisine to the North American WASP population. The A&E Cable network's video *Biography*, entitled *An Appetite for Life*, describes her as "a national icon" and her *French Chef* series as "a new French Revolution . . . televised." Before the start of public television across the country, her show was syndicated by Boston's WGBH in 1963 through NET (it started at almost the same moment as Raymond Oliver's recipe program began in France). From the first,

Child was also central to public television's commodification – noted San Francisco station KQED sold her cooking knives that year as its first membership gifts. The series itself was underwritten by Polaroid. Like her book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, which was also on sale, Child's avowed intent was to illustrate that "cooking was not a chore but an art." Commercialism lay at the heart of this – her first appearance was an attempt to promote sales of the book, and producers then decided she was the person to build a program around. Starting in 1962 with pilots, she made 119 episodes of *The French Chef*. With national distribution in 1964, the coming of (putatively) non-commercial television to the American scene was signaled by Julia Child as much as anyone else. In recognition of the fact, she won a Peabody Award in 1965 and made the cover of *Time* the following year. *Newsweek* said she was "helping to turn Boston, the home of the bean and the cod, into the home of the brie and the coq." By the mid-1960s KQED was receiving 20,000 letters a week about the show. It was produced in color from 1970, when PBS also began national distribution. Other series followed across the next three decades: *Julia Child and Company*, *Julia Child and More Company*, *Dinner at Julia's*, *Cooking with Master Chefs*, *In Julia's Kitchen with Master Chefs*, *Baking with Julia*, *Cooking in Concert* pledge-drive specials, and *Julia Child & Jacques Pépin: Cooking at Home* (Stewart, 1999: 42, 61, 130–1, 133, 138–9). Child remains part of PBS branding today, a key signifier of the network and its alleged superiority to and separateness from commercial television (Baker and Dessart, 1998: 243).

The ontology of immediacy that live television can offer was clearly in evidence on the first shows. At that time, programs were rehearsed then shot in a single take onto kinescopes. Editing was virtually impossible. Child's manifold errors on camera, such as flipping an omelet or pancake onto the stove then putting it back in the pan, or slapping her hip to identify the loin for Steak Diane *aficionados*, served to make a virtue of low production values, adding a dollop of authenticity and approachability to television. "Mistakes" and eccentricities hid the fact that she spent 19 hours preparing for each program and relied on a large team of unpaid workers behind the scenes, just as the wine bottles on display, though generally filled with non-alcoholic beverages, testified to her jolly attitude, courtesy of their imagined contents (Stewart, 1999: 131; Cooper, 2000). The image stood in some contrast to the Puritanism of much US society and became a winning point with

many viewers, reinforcing a casual air that mystified the Tayloristic managerial devices underpinning her performances. She offered tips on hosting a party as well as preparing food, so that viewers could become accomplished hostesses. The context was a widespread American loathing of supposed Gallic indolence blended with a paradoxical admiration for that lifestyle, and a hatred of big government mixed with inferiority alongside national cultural institutions. This was apparent in the fetishized attitude to French food. Something odd, foreign, but somehow better, needed an introduction from a Child-like figure, suitably ensconced in the allegedly Anglo-Celtic Boston, to be acceptable. French food was brokered into ordinariness by the white ruling class – so ordinary that Child qualified for parody on *Saturday Night Live*.

She fitted the bill of what ethnomethodologists refer to as the “personalized stranger,” a figure known through media coverage of the details of his or her private life rather than through direct human interaction, but taken by the public to be someone they know at a quite intimate level – not in terms of secrets, but someone with whom diurnal interaction is taken for granted (Watson, 1973: 16, 19, n. 19). In Child’s case, this humanized her, clouding the financial imperatives underpinning the program – book sales and commercial underwriting.

This critique does not deny the importance to many viewers of her symbolism. Consider this, from one of my informants:

There were times, as a desperate young mother living in a provincial town, when I felt that all that stood between me and insanity was hearty Julia Child – cooing at that pink pig in her arms – ready for roasting, demonstrating the art of cooking with dry Vermouth, assuring me that there were places fragrant with herbs and full of deep and pleasurable knowledge, and that anyone who wanted to could participate. Me – at the ironing board at 10.00 pm – imagining myself in those better places (I guess she was like a bedtime story!).

This is evocative prose indeed. It speaks to the paucity of credibly real women on television at the time (the 1960s), the medium’s minimal address of women’s concerns, and the sense of access that Child offered. This was an access to secular transcendence, and it predated the advent of second-wave feminisms.

The PBS archives hold her recipes from those days, plainly typed lists and instructions that were mailed out on demand. Her braised

salmon offering from program number 302 promises that this is “not nearly the *tour de force* that it sounds.” The sentence ends with French-language *bravura*, a high note of achievement. But it begins with a careful Anglo adverbial qualifier, a sensible prefix to Gallic style. In the famous program number 261 – The Omelet Show – she avows that viewers require “a devil-may-care attitude for those that may fall on the stove or onto the floor.”

In Britain, the key 1970s television chef, Delia Smith, customized French dishes, renationing them for her audience by substituting ingredients to make the food more accessible to Anglo viewers. This was also a speciality of Graham Kerr, a queer-acting but avowedly straight ex-New Zealand air-force officer (originally from the UK) whose fey and seemingly drunk rushes around the set were famous in the US, Australia, and Britain from the early 1970s. Many of my informants recalled him as the first flamboyant man they saw live on television, a sort of culinary Paul Lynd. This queer component to the genre was highlighted when Montréal’s main celebrity television chef, Daniel Pinard, came out as gay on New Year’s Eve 2000 – regarded by many as a key moment in mainstreaming because of his cultural stature between convention and innovation (Brooke, 2000).

Another key figure was Paul Bocuse, whose French cuisine went onto Australia’s multicultural station SBS in the 1980s and into the Federal Republic of Germany alongside MaxENZINGER’s *Trimm Dich* (*Get Fit*), which introduced nouvelle cuisine there.

Of course, discounts often apply to such cultural exchanges. An ambiguity in the British reaction to French food is nicely exemplified in two television anecdotes. On a 1990 episode of the British talk show *That’s Life*, the studio audience was fed some snails, unaware of what they were eating. Once told, their faces distorted into English versions of barnyard animals and they sought to vomit up the remains. Consider also this 1989 commercial for pre-cooked sausages ready for microwave preparation: a yuppie white man is taking advantage of his health-conscious wife’s temporary absence to eat some “bangers.” His conspiratorial gaze at the viewer concludes with a satisfied “Now that’s what I call nouvelle cuisine” (Fiddes, 1991: 33, 97). In the mid-1990s there was some controversy on British television over white presenters Keith Floyd and Robert Carrier fronting the travelogue-tour-series *Floyd on Africa* and *Carrier’s Caribbean*, programs that touched on Francophone and Anglophone colonial traditions insensitively. *Far Flung*

Floyd took him to the “Far East” and offering the following to reporters: “We’ll have wonderful fun, you know. There are wonderful curries and rice dishes. We can go fishing, we can go into the jungle, we can even eat coconut milk” (Beattie, Khan, and Philo, 1999: 153; Floyd quoted in Strange, 1998: 305).

This blend of the high and low promised a meeting, of course, at a place called midcult. Which is where we greet the new media technologies and deregulatory policies of the last two decades. Their conditions of possibility and operation both draw on the existence of midcult and problematize it. Their niche audiences are also and equally cross-class and cross-racial in their composition. Food television normalizes the exotic for suburbia and exoticizes the normal for a hip *elite*, middle-class homeworkers, and late-night revelers.

Cable and Satellite

Child’s equivalent and collaborator in the 1990s is Jacques Pépin, but the notion of the television chef as a role model for women is *passé*. Pépin, French himself, uses his daughter, a Franco-American, as a naive inquirer, the viewer brought onto the set for participant observation. As their book for PBS puts it: “Claudine sees her role as that of the voice of the people.” His terpsichories and flights are domesticated by her asking “Can I freeze it?” The book concludes with a paean to the “generous corporate citizens” that underwrite the show. Or rather it doesn’t quite end there: on the reverse page there are color advertisements for the products vended by these “citizens” (Pépin, 1996: xviii, 267–8). Pépin is also a United Airlines “Celebrity Chef,” complete with the corporation’s ringing endorsement of him as a “classically trained native of France” fit to design meals (for First and Business Class – those in steerage must duel with unauthored dross) (Porterfield, 1999). United colors its front-of-house flight menus with quotations from Virginia Woolf and claims that its food comes from “a lifetime of discipline,” as per “the collected works of say, O’Keeffe, Bach or Dickinson.”

On the avowedly commercial Food Network, Pépin’s rough-and-ready Fall River equivalent is Emeril Lagasse, complete with his doctorate from the Johnson and Wales University culinary program

(specializing in French food). Lagasse can be heard on television recommending what he calls “Hallapeenose [jalapeños],” featuring grotesque celebrities *manqués* like Sammy Hagar, and doing network promos at the Super Bowl (*Emeril’s Tailgating Jam*). His line of cooking technology is called Emerilware (New, 1999; Food Network, 1999; Cooper, 2000). Crass working-class credentialism displaces a blue-blood’s slapdash shamateur excellence.

Lagasse provides the Food Network’s top ratings. When it offered free tickets to a live taping in the fall of 1997, 50,000 people telephoned in 22 minutes (Brown, 1999; Brooker, 1998). As of late 1999, the Network was available in 43 million US households (up from 30 million in 1998) and due to reach 50 million by 2001, as well as being on-air in Japan, Canada, and Australia. Despite some multiculturalism and increasingly broad programming, French cuisine is one of its default settings (Scripps Networks, 1999; Scripps October, 1999). US audience growth has been steady. From the 1997–8 to 1998–9 seasons, numbers increased from 170,000 to 230,000 among 18–34 year-olds and from 450,000 to 670,000 among 18–49 year-olds. Spectators were mostly working women, with an average age of 44 and household income of US\$53,900, the third largest for audiences to basic cable. The overall numbers were up 50 percent and advertising revenue had grown by 80 percent to \$36 million, while regional websites across the US were planned. Foodtv.com promoted itself to advertisers as “today’s leading food portal,” describing its audience as “upscale and connected.” The corollary numbers in Britain for Carlton TV suggest predominantly female viewers, aged 35–54 (Univision, 1999; Food Network Gets, 1999; Comcast, 2000; Cable’s 1997). Popularization was underway, far beyond the crypto-commodified, quasi-bake-drive-funded, kindness-of-strangers ghetto of PBS.

With the establishment of Britain’s Carlton Food Network on cable and digital satellite (the only such service in Europe) and its 1999 expansion to 300,000 multi-choice cable homes in sub-Saharan Africa, this cross-cultural component became all the more significant. Unlike earlier broadcast television in Britain, which had privileged French and some South Asian cuisine, the new genre network had to be all-encompassing. French recipes are far from dominant in the programming philosophy of the station, although Bruno Loubet hosts *Chez Bruno* and Antony’s *Morocco* features Francophone foods (Carlton).

Channel Four offers *TV Dinners*, including tales of a 12-year-old Irish scout troop leader who prepares French sauces for her colleagues, all cooked outdoors.

Clearly, food television has taken a globalizing, commercial turn that mines the past even as it invents the present. A multicultural, but very French-inflected US Food Network show recently emerged – Ming Tsai's *East Meets West with Ming Tsai*. Looking “like a self-improvement infomercial, or maybe a Visa ad,” it quickly won a daytime Emmy (Schillinger, 1999, p. 60). The network's high-rating Japanese import, *The Iron Chef* (*Ryori no Tetsujin*, literally *Cooking Iron Man*), featured one of Robert De Niro's restaurant employees in regular contests with other celebrities to produce the best Chinese, French, Japanese, and Italian meals. Shot “as if it were a sporting event [with] chefs as gladiators, doing battle before a rich and demonic lord,” in the words of production executives at Fuji Television, it began in Japan in 1993 and now airs in the US via a mix of subtitles, dubbing, and the original language – not to mention the theme music from *The Hunt for Red October* (Struck, 1999; executives quoted in *Iron*, 2000). Audiences of displaced hipsters, lost in nameless mid-Western graduate schools, would lay down their Latour long enough to hold cook-offs each Sunday night in emulation of this feral television show, whose protagonist refused to be dubbed into English.

At the same time, vintner Robert Mondavi's American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts in the Napa Valley was announcing “Julia's Kitchen” as a cornerstone, and viewers of Carlton can use its interactive advertising platform to click on banners during cooking shows and gain brand information, recipes, not to mention the chance to fly for free to Morocco – while the Food Network proudly announces signing Wolfgang Puck for his first television series (Exhibition, 2000; Brech, 2000). The Brahmin and her corporate underwriters had been memorialized and displaced (onto off-peak reruns at any rate) by multicultural, commodified hosts. Julia Child, farewell.

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