

Reality Bites: Consuming Food Television

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The first episode of the four-part Netflix series *Cooked*, based on journalist Michael Pollan's bestselling 2013 book, opens with a montage of TV cooking show clips. The sequence combines vintage footage of cooking shows starring such television personalities as French chef Julia Child and loud-and-funny, cleaver-wielding Martin Yan before transitioning to clips of contemporary reality food competition series like *Chopped* and *Top Chef*. Layered over the montage, Pollan, the executive producer and narrator of the *Cooked* series, ponders, "This phenomenon of cooking shows has just grown and grown and grown. I was really puzzling over this, the less time we invest in cooking for ourselves, the more time we seem to spend watching other people cook on television—food, of course, that we never get to eat!" While Pollan contemplates the *why* of food television, the montage turns to a series of sepia-toned home movie images accompanied by a piano score reminiscent of the opening sequence of the Amazon series *Transparent*. Pollan's hypothesis at the end of the montage: images of food and cooking are pleasurable because we yearn for hearth, and instinctually feel loved and comforted when we see someone in the act of cooking as it reminds us of a mother or father who once cooked for us.

The rest of the episode in this documentary-like series pursues Pollan's simple thesis, developed only slightly by the episode's conclusion when Pollan claims that we—spoiled Americans—have become passive consumers, and thus crave more active involvement in food production. Subsequently, to extend Pollan's logic, our consumption of food television has risen as our actual time spent making and preparing food has declined. But what are the dominant forms of reality food television? And what methods are most suitable to the study of the images, pleasures, and context surrounding reality food television?

A synaesthetic approach to food television focused on the seductive power of images to incite taste, texture, smell, and feel, as well as unlock stored memories, can provide an entry point to the corporeal dimensions and pleasures of food television. But increasingly, reality food television, it would seem, does not so much activate sensual memories as much as it titillates with the unknown, avant-garde, and out-of-reach—what Pollan describes as "food we never get to eat." While Pollan's focus is on bringing a political fight to agribusiness food corporations, critical work on reality food television might further grapple with the largely unseen racial, gendered, and classed dimensions of food production, food colonialism, food deserts and hunger, and global food instability due to climate change. In today's televisual and social media landscape, so-called "food porn," often associated with hipster gentrification, proliferates, tempting us with forbidden morsels. There is no denying the power and entertainment value of such representations. However, what I am proposing is more rigorous engagement with the pleasure *and* politics of food television grounded in the aesthetics and conventions of reality television and television history.

Reality food and cooking series run the gamut from domestic and intimate, competitive and dramatic, earnest and highbrow, to goofy and absurd. Much of reality food TV relies on and reproduces a colonizer's gaze. The precursor for shows like Andrew Zimmerman's *Bizarre Eats* and Anthony Bourdain's *Parts Unknown*, for example, can be found in the late 1950s ABC travelogue series *Bold Journey*, which featured film footage of "exotic" locales such as the Amazon and Congo. Another target for a colonizer's gaze in reality food television is the elite gourmet kitchen, as one sees on the Emmy-nominated Netflix series *Chef's Table*, a show that dramatizes the gender, sexual, ethnic, and national identities of world-class chefs. Finally, cooking competitions like The Food Network's *The Next Food Network Star* and Fox's *Masterchef* highlight the dog-eat-dog nature of the neoliberal order: only the best, most skilled rise to the top. Across these formats, chefs, cooks, food producers, and the appetizing prepared foods mediate viewers' sensory experience of other cultures, communities, and countries. In this worldmaking way, reality food television is perhaps radically democratic, offering all viewers a momentary taste of something new, different, and remote. As active consumers of food television, though, we in turn mediate the community, region, and world in which we imagine ourselves living. The political stakes lie with how different the world imagined by and in reality food television is from the actual world in which we live.