

**“Beer, sweat and ‘cojones’: the masculinization of cooking and the FoodTV Network”**

A revolution has taken place in kitchens across America, and the she-cooks are being joined by the he-cooks in huge numbers. Thank Emeril, Mario, Bobby or the Iron Chef for firing up the culinary Imagination of guys...

Jan Norris

While Ms. Norris is certainly not alone in her perception of what she calls a revolution in the kitchen, there are others who see it more as a storm in a teacup. The reality, as I will argue, is probably somewhere in between—short of a revolution, but far from a negligible fad. It isn’t too long ago that we were told by the popular slogan of the 1970s, that “real men don’t eat quiche.” Yet now that quintessentially macho, blue-collar cook, Emeril Lagasse, is even offering us a recipe for “Kicked up Quiche for Manly Men.”

While men have always been involved in the restaurant business, and the majority of professional chefs have always been male, the new attitude (and trend) involves the home cook. Over and over we read statements like, “People used to think cooking was a sissified thing. Used to—and then BAM!,” along came the Food Television Network in November 1993, and its favorite son, Emeril Lagasse, shortly after. Needless to say, it would be utterly simplistic to claim that it was this fact alone that started what amounts to a masculinization of food and cooking. I believe that at the very least the change must be attributed to a confluence of social and economic factors, as we will see. Yet the FoodTV Network and its male celebrity chefs planted their seeds in fertile ground and now even

macho super athletes like Bo Jackson proudly tell the world on the *Celebrity Chefs* FoodTV program, that they love to cook. Nor is this trend only an American phenomenon. While in the U.S. many believe that “Cooking is a guy thing,” (Norris 2), in England, where the same boom is attributed to home-grown high-profile chefs like Keith Floyd and Jamie Oliver, studies by the NOP Research Group suggest that today “cooking [is] cool” (Marlow 53). How pervasive are the signs of this trend? As we are about to see, they are found in the fields of education, the media, books and marketing.

However, before we look closely at these areas, it might be beneficial to examine Emeril’s rise and the evolution of his “act,” because we will see evidence of its impact in all the fields we mentioned above. Furthermore, it is Emeril who is consistently either praised or blamed for the changes that have occurred in television food programming.

When the FoodTV Network was launched, it initially entered 17 million households (Scripps 3), resulting in an unprecedented exposure by American viewers to food and everything related to it. Although cooking shows had been on national and local television since the late 1940’s (Scripps 4), for the first time the FoodTV network was in our homes 24 hours a day with programs that covered food and its production, purchasing, preparation, presentation, consumption, appreciation, and enjoyment. In short, these were not simply cooking shows, this was an immersion into the world of food.

At the start the audience was predominantly female, 64%, yet already soon after its birth the Network’s executives’ goal was to “Not only get more people watching, but to get younger people and a more even mix of men and women. (Scripps 4). Although Emeril had been in the programming line-up since the start, his popularity didn’t explode

until *Essence of Emeril*, which started in 1995<sup>1</sup> and almost immediately became the FoodTV Network's top-rated show. Not only did it gain audience approval, and thus fulfilled the Network executives' stated goal, it also received critical praise, eventually named by *Time* magazine as one of the best television shows of 1996 (Scripps 4).

Eager to cash in on the chef's popularity, FoodTV gave him a second show in 1997, *Emeril Live*, which featured a much freer Emeril, a band, a studio audience and celebrity guests. The formula proved to be magic, *Emeril Live* becoming the most popular program on FoodTV and nominated for two ACE awards (the cable network's equivalent of the Emmy) in its first year. Even more importantly, Emeril quickly became an icon, his presence felt not only on FoodTV, but in bookstores (with five cookbooks out simultaneously), on the Internet (76,000 sites listed on Google), and for a short while, even on national television with still another program, this time his self-titled sitcom.

As a measure of his popularity, consider that *Emeril Live*, which recruits a studio audience, recently received 775,000 requests for the 2,000 tickets available to the taping (Owen 2). Furthermore, the chef's visit to Detroit's restaurants for a television shoot made such an impact on the local residents that they proclaimed it to be second in importance only to (the then-President) Clinton's visit (Lawson 1). In short, we can agree with Richards when she states that, "it's safe to say that there has never been a chef with the impact and following of Emeril Lagasse" (1). His tag phrases, "kick it up another notch," "pork fat rules," and the ubiquitous "BAM!" have become part of the everyday speak of Americans.

Most people who have watched both *Essence of Emeril* and his phenomenally popular *Emeril Live* may have noticed that the chef seems to have a dual personality.

Whereas in the former he is subdued (indeed, almost stilted), calm and business-like, in *Emeril Live* he is vastly different. Linda Richards refers to his (in)famous tag phrases as the “dedicated screaming that has endeared him to millions—millions—of fans...” (1). Whether the persona he cultivates in *Emeril Live* is authentic or just an act is hinted at by Richards’ remark that the man she meets in person for an interview is nothing like the man you see on television (1). Various described by others as loud, brash, vulgar, a “hyped-up windbag” and worse (*Murderize*1), the man Richards meets is “quietly spoken, articulate and thoughtful” (1). In short, he is more similar to the Emeril we first saw in *Essence of Emeril* and even more similar to the one that viewers originally met in his first two programs, *How to Boil Water* and *Emeril and Friends*. It is notable that the latter two have been described as having been scripted and predictable and failed to ever attract a sizeable audience. Nevertheless, despite the restraint shown by the earlier Emeril, the Network knew a good thing when they saw it—at least what was good for their bottom line—and gave him progressively more freedom. The result was a “freewheeling and spontaneous” *Emeril Live*, attracting people who were not typical cooking show viewers—men from college age on—and it “grew wilder by the week” (*Playboy* 2).

While Richards is not the only interviewer who has commented on the chef’s dual personality, it is of interest to note that this duality only underscores what we already suspected, that this is not a cooking show we are dealing with, it is instead pure entertainment, and Emeril is an actor as well as a chef. In any case, we know that the emergence of the “new” Emeril coincided with FoodTV’s stated goal of attracting more male viewers. Thus the successful but shy restaurateur gave way to the wild man whom

some have described as being able to cook cassoulet for the Super Bowl, talk football, and emerge as “Emeril LaGuy,” a totally credible macho guy-next-door who happened to know how to cook—unlike the “prissy francophiles” we had been used to seeing on cooking shows (Poniewozik 3-4).

Emeril Lagasse has certainly captured the attention of men, women, and even children in America.<sup>2</sup> But what we read over and over is that Emeril appeals to men. Not only are men over the age of 30 the largest segment of his audience, but some, like firehouse crews, watch his programs in groups. Knowing how valuable this segment of the viewing public is both to his popularity and to the FoodTV Network’s bottom line, Emeril and his producers (one supposes) have organized themed shows where all the invited guests were men, many either firefighters or police officers; an audience described as “cheering,” “stomping,” and “raucous” (Playboy 1). And in order to better promote the event, it was advertised as “Manly Man Day.”<sup>3</sup>

His own manliness is frequently highlighted. At different times he has been referred to as “Rocky Balboa with oven mitts” (Playboy 2) and the “Ozzy Osbourne of FoodTV, two metaphors (music and sports) that seem to crop up repeatedly in relation to Emeril and which underline his popular image as being simultaneously macho, cool and just a regular guy. The author of “Blue-Collar Gourmet,” in discussing the democratization of haute cuisine, credits Lagasse with being a “blue-ribbon chef with the blue-collar moxie of a short-order cook” (Marin 1), while Poniewozik claims that he reaches out to the “Dockers-clad millions“(4). The sports metaphors are just as numerous. At times we see him “slam-dunking ingredients into the pot,” and compared to Shaq O’Neal, at others he “explodes with aggressive athletic catchphrases” (Marin 1). In “Full

Metal Skillet” he is pictured as a heavy metal rocker in vinyl pants and waist-long hair, playing a frying pan-cum-guitar. And if Emeril as rock’n’roll star seems plausible, then Poniewizik’s claim that “food today is rock’n’roll” is even more significant and believable.

The style of his cooking, like his personal image, is just as forceful. Indeed, Emeril Lagasse seems to deliberately cultivate an image of “cojones,” beer and sweat. Not surprisingly, some critics have gone so far as to describe his cooking as being “reckless” (Rosenthal 2). Contrasting Emeril to other popular male celebrity chefs of the FoodTV Network such as Mario Batali and David Rosengarten, Rosenthal extols Lagasse’s devil-may-care way of never measuring ingredients, though admittedly she acknowledges that this is seen as a serious problem by what she calls the “hoity-toity food types” (2). However, while Rosenthal enthuses about the fact that he adds alcohol to his food with “the heart of a frat boy,” (2) it is doubtful whether this puerile machismo improves the flavor of his cooking. What’s more, it can be argued that Emeril’s credo of “Pork Fat Rules!” along with the outrageous amounts of butter, lard, cream and sausages that he uses, qualifies his cooking as virtually criminal, certainly irresponsible. Yet, I would suggest that it is precisely this kind of abandon that appeals to men. Rosenthal’s comparison to a frat boy is very appropriate, for this kind of culinary irresponsibility could very well be considered high-risk and self-destructive behavior. Flying in the face of all medical knowledge and advice, Emeril gives the audience a vicarious thrill as he urges them to live dangerously. His implicit and sometimes explicit message is that only wimps and weak-minded people care about their arteries, only sissies can’t handle forty cloves of garlic in one dish, or enough “heat” to put your palate on fire. This is bold,

super-spicy, Cajun cuisine--never mind that in reality, as any decent cook will tell you, the resulting dish must surely be inedible.

Along with the high-risk behavior most often characteristic of adolescent and young adult males, Emeril also indulges in sly locker-room type sexual innuendo. A typical example of this finds him winking at the camera and telling us, “There I am rubbing my butt...” while of course massaging “essence” into a pork roast and swilling beer. Whether we like Emeril or not may be subjective, but one thing is clear, Emeril is not at all about food, he is about “attitude.”

Yet despite Emeril’s high visibility and wide appeal, his is not the only cooking show on FoodTV that capitalizes on machismo or that inspires fierce loyalty on the part of some viewers and anger on the part of others. Very possibly *Iron Chef* has even more intensely passionate followers, being repeatedly described as a “cult favorite” and a show that has “pervaded the lives of college students all over the country” (Bell 1). If the numbers of Web sites for each means anything, then *Iron Chef* with 576,000 leaves Emeril Lagasse in the dust, with only 76,000. Indeed, many of the *Iron Chef* viewers are self-proclaimed addicts. The reasons for such popularity are heavily debated by critics and public alike, since at first glance the offbeat premise, the setting and the style of *Iron Chef* are all a far cry from what the average American viewer is used to. <sup>4</sup>

Mina Mita, a sales executive at Fuji Television, which produced the show in Tokyo, states that “*Iron Chef* is shot as if it were a sporting event...People see it and are intrigued by this fascinating contest” (Struck 33). The contest takes place in what is called the Kitchen Stadium, and the chefs are conceived by the director, Kiichi Tanaka, as “gladiators doing battle before a rich and demonic lord” (Struck 33). Chefs rise on an

ascending stage “glaring in warrior pose” clutching their cooking utensils like weapons. The atmosphere is deliberately tense and suspenseful, as everyone waits to see what this week’s mystery ingredient will be. The weekly episodes are merely the preliminary skirmishes that will lead to the series’ culminating battle, the final showdown between the two finalists that will see only one emerge as the King of the Iron Chefs.

Like a sporting event, the contest is truly a test not only of the chefs’ ingenuity, but also of their coordination, speed and stamina as they work at a frantic pace, dripping buckets of sweat (alas, inevitably into the food as well!). The crane camera captures the chef’s every move as he flies around the kitchen. Two other cameras cover the rest of the space while reporters swoop down on the chef for in-your-face mini interviews. In short, the format provides what in sports is called play-by-play commentary.

The popularity of *Iron Chef* is particularly strong among male college students. We learn in fact that *Iron Chef* drinking games have popped up, and that their rules are “scattered all over the Internet” (Bell 1). What’s more, apparently other students plan parties around their viewing of the program. “We drink wine, and it’s sort of like the show, with a theme ingredient” they declare (Bell 2). Why it has become so popular among this segment of the population remains unclear, not for lack of possible explanations, but for an overabundance of them. Some declare that it is the *kitsch* value of the show that has turned them into addicts while others love the campy dubbing. One student interviewed found that “Japanese people speaking with Canadian accents” was hilarious (Bell 2). Still others claim that it is the culinary aspects or even more implausibly, “because it is a smart show and viewers can get different things out of it” (Bell 3).



Matthew Stillman, former Manager of Program Development at FoodTV, and the man responsible for convincing the initially reluctant Network to buy and air *Iron Chef*, offers his own theory. According to Stillman, in 1996 the Food Network abandoned their initial identity as a “pure cooking network” and adopted an entertainment-first policy. Stillman sees *Iron Chef* as supremely fulfilling the expectations introduced by this new policy. He believes that the show has what he calls vast appeal precisely because it satisfies the entertainment needs of college students (Bell 3). Not surprisingly, not everyone has positive feelings about *Iron Chef*. Writer Shoba Narayan, for one, says she is seriously annoyed by the pervasive machismo that she sees all over the FoodTV Network, and doesn’t even want to discuss *Iron Chef*, citing it as a leading offender in this area (3).

However, this unprecedented interest in cooking shows among males is not confined to college students. We see signs of this new trend in Education in general. On the High School level we have much evidence, both statistical (in the number of course offerings and the number of students either already enrolled or wait-listed) and anecdotal, that suggests that whereas previously courses in “Home Economics” were almost exclusively the domain of girls and young women, now young men are actually competing for spots in the currently renamed “Consumer Food Science” courses (Kennedy1).

Not only do the students name celebrities such as Emeril, Mario Batali, Bobby Flay, Jamie Oliver, and Alton Brown (aka “the cool guy”), as figures that have fueled their interest, but the courses themselves have been revamped to follow the new educational/entertainment paradigm that is a hallmark of FoodTV. Today’s course

offerings are a far cry from the boring “Home Ec” courses many of us remember from our school days. The newly spruced up Food Science Curriculum boasts offerings such as Chinese or Mexican cuisine, “International Foods,” “Dinner is Served,” “The Art of Baking” and even “Experimental Foods” (Kennedy 1). Courses such as these stimulate the students to great creativity while providing a lot of fun as well. They have therefore proved to be so popular that in some schools across the country there are waiting lists of students eagerly hoping to get in. In one school alone eighty students were turned away from a course (Kennedy 3). I believe that the impetus for this new-found popularity is coming from two directions at once—first from the teachers, who in some cases are videotaping shows for use in the classroom, and second from the students themselves. In many cases students are bringing their program preferences into the classroom and thus driving the curriculum. For example, in one instance students suggested that they pretend to be Emeril, do their presentation, and have the teacher tape it (Kennedy 3).

As a result of this budding interest and confidence in cooking, students are even becoming competitive at showing off their skills, and not exclusively in the classroom. We learn from Kennedy that in the Central Westmoreland Career and Technology Center <sup>5</sup> students may compete locally and nationally for scholarships and prizes (3). Christie Park, a culinary instructor at the Center, has little doubt about the origin of this new commitment: “I think watching Food Network has inspired my students to compete,” she declares, adding also that FoodTV has put the “culinary field into overdrive” (Kennedy 3).

On a different level of education, or as a new twist on it, and again thanks to these same celebrity chefs, a new concept has emerged, “edible entertainment” (Olejnik 1).

“Dubbed the new age of dinner parties, hosts and hostesses across the country are inviting chef entertainers into their homes to prepare meals and amuse guests” (Olejnik 1). Needless to say, it not only the form of such entertainment that is new, but the very concept of chef/entertainer or even chef/celebrity is a radical departure from when chefs had little more status than “cooks.” Eminent but practical chef, Jacques Pepin, as did Pierre Franey before him, frequently reminds the viewers of this—and of the fact that while pre-Emeril chefs used to earn a pittance, today Emeril rakes in about 3 million dollars a year (Goodbody 1).

The immense exposure to food that FoodTV Network provides has raised the culinary IQ of the average American to unprecedented heights. Chef Judd Canepari of Professional Chefs and Edible Entertainment of San Diego relates that he brings haute cuisine into homes where today wasabi sauce and chili oil are as commonplace as mustard and ketchup (Olejnik 1). Moreover, as cooking teacher at Professional Shefs and Design Studio West in La Jolla, California, he has noticed that, not only are men buying into the idea of edible entertainment, but that his first student, as well as some of his most loyal, are men (Olejnik 2).

Not surprisingly American corporations have sat up and taken notice of these changes, all the more because a male cook’s purchasing patterns appear to be different from a woman’s—and in ways that are highly exploitable by marketers. Hugh Rushing, Executive Vice President of the Cookware Manufacturers Association, declares that “growing male interest in cooking is one of the bright spots in the kitchen retail market” (Guzman 1). It is easy to understand why when we learn that men tend to buy specialty equipment, like a special pan for paella, where women will make do with whatever they

have on hand that is suitable. Men love gadgets, and if we ever had any doubts about that, we have only to examine some of the catalogs that these marketing executives and their companies produce in order to dispel them. Among the more significant details, we learn that, “It’s only since men have been cooking that you can justify the \$275 knife” and that whereas previously some men splurged on luxury cars, now they boost their egos with “glistening granite trophy kitchens packed tight with All-Clad pans and stainless steel professional-style appliances” (Guzman 2).

No doubt anticipating Father’s Day, the *Byerly Bag Catalog* for June 2003 features “A Slant on Men’s Cooking” as their theme. The reader/shopper is advised to “present him with his grilling *weapons* of choice” (3, my emphasis), among which we find, for what we conclude must be aspiring cowboy-backyard chefs, a “Branding Iron” to help take the guesswork out of grilling by “allowing you to brand the steak to assure each steak is cooked to the individual’s desired doneness” (3). Believe it or not, this 18.5 inch branding iron offers the kitchen cowboy a three-sided head, R, M, and W. If this gadget doesn’t appeal to him, then perhaps he would prefer the “Polder Smart Fork,” which “will make any father feel smart grilling, as it tells dad when the food is done” (3).

Thus we see that the influx of men into the kitchen is a multi-faceted trend that touches society on many levels: social, educational, commercial, and as we are about to see, even the sexual. For at least one source has suggested that the “Food Network...has mutated into a sort of food pornography channel” (Fish Innards 2) where taste is celebrated above all else, including the health hazards associated with pork fat, global food distribution and environmental concerns such as pesticides (Fish Innards 2). In *Fish Innards* the author argues that because both food and pornography are concerned with

pleasure, yet both are presented in a medium where the pleasure can only be savored indirectly, visual memories must therefore substitute the physical experience (2). Yet this general trend to eroticize food also extends to the social customs associated with food preparation. FoodTV Programs such as “Date Plate,” in which a woman blindly chooses her date based solely on the meal he has created for her, have their counterpart in the real world. For example, although Jonathan Wright bemoans the fact that, in his view, there are still too few men cooking, he contends that “dates love it when you cook for them” (1) and provides recipes and advice for men who are game to try it. Wright is certainly not the only one to make the connection between cooking and what women want, or at least what he believes women want. Safari Joe (aka Spiro Paizes) has a series of books and videos that aim to teach men how to cook and be more romantic. According to Wright, the new release, “Safari Joe’s Men Only Cooking, No Women Allowed! Show Her You Care For Her” has been welcomed by women with even greater enthusiasm than men, and that women believe it’s sexy for a man to cook for them (1).

While this is not the place to analyze the role feminism has played in these attitudinal changes, it would nevertheless be difficult to deny that there is a connection between feminism and the evolution of gender roles. Some would even say that gender roles themselves have become blurred as a result of feminism (Marlow 53). Although this is surely a result of many forces, we can surmise that one of them is that more and more women work outside the home. According to the *Journal of American Dietetic Association*, in 1996 fully 70% of women with children worked outside the home. At the same time, the number of single dads went from 393 thousand in 1970 to 2 million in 2000. The number of stay-at-home dads grew from 1 million in 1970 to 2.5 million in

2000 (Yankelovitch Monitor). These are significant statistics that go a long way towards explaining the changes we have been discussing. Without a doubt the FoodTV Network has been a powerful force, but I believe that it would be wise to admit that the Network's success was aided by a fortuitous confluence of the social and economic factors that we have mentioned. One of these factors is that more and more women are finding fulfillment and self-expression through their professional lives outside the home. It has even been suggested that today, "a woman's sense of self doesn't rise and fall depending on whether her soufflé does" (Guzman 2), and that consequently, they not only have no regrets in conceding the kitchen to their male partner, but that "not knowing how to cook has become a kind of badge of feminist honor" (Guzman 2) and many are proud not to cook at all.

Nevertheless, despite the undeniable statistics and anecdotes that clearly show the strong trend of men in the kitchen, many would assert that it is far from the revolution that Norris claims it to be. For one thing, in spite of the impressive statistics, the fact is that it is still women by a great majority, who bear the principal responsibility of shopping, planning and preparing food. Although numbers have risen sharply, from 13% in 1985, it is still only 27% <sup>6</sup>of men who are the principal food purchasers in their households (Guzman 1). In addition, many critics also agree that men cook mostly as a hobby, on weekends, for special occasions and for entertainment purposes, whereas doing what is generally considered survival food is still mostly the woman's job (Guzman 2; Marlow 53). In short, men are more likely to be cooking for the same reasons as the chef/entertainers/celebrities do on television. Another suggestive parallel between the male home cook and the television chefs is the fact that for both the attention and

approval they get is a prime motivator. As Brian Loube confesses, “The ability to cook is impressive and gets you enormous kudos” (Guzman 2). Some women recognize the powerful appeal that the theatrical aspect holds for the male cook and work it to their advantage. For instance, referring to her husband, Sheri Warshaw acknowledges that “Jeffrey is the star in the kitchen” (Guzman 2) and she fully allows him to enjoy the stage, knowing that in the end his enjoyment spares her the need to cook.

While some of the men spotlighted in Jan Norris’ *Men Who Cook* do so out of necessity, there are others, like Jesus Puente, who appear to be the incarnation of all the trends and fads associated with the he-cook that we have discussed in this paper. Puente is competitive about his cooking, does it as a hobby and as entertainment, basks in the attention it garners him, and is a self-confessed gadget freak. In short, he is the Marketing Executive’s dream guy, down to the elaborate redone kitchen with all the “fancy pots and pans, knives and all the cooking accoutrements” (Accent 3)-- proof positive that there are indeed men who fit the profile of the newly emerged macho home cook in every respect.

And lastly, you may be wondering how Emeril kicks up his quiche to make it “manly.” The answer? It’s as simple as throwing in a little of his famous (and costly) “essence.” Now that’s what I call marketing savvy!

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<sup>1</sup> Emeril first appeared on FoodTV right at the start with two programs, *How to Boil Water* and *Emeril and Friends*, but neither one of these programs caught the fancy of the viewing audience in any large numbers.

<sup>2</sup> The chef has promoted a number of contests in which schools competed to win a visit from him with the object of “kicking up” their boring menus. These visits were later aired as programs on the Food Network. In addition, he has been interviewed by *Parenting* magazine, to give one example, for advice on how to introduce children to cooking.

<sup>3</sup> The Emeril approach is apparently catching on. On a recent episode of the popular, quirky, campy, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* we saw another reemergence of the “kicked-up quiche.” This time they called it a “quiche with balls.” (Program aired on 8-26-03 on channel 43, Long Island)

<sup>4</sup> Of course, we are discussing the original *Iron Chef*, not the current spin-off, *Iron Chef America*.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy does not make it clear in her brief article exactly where this community is located.

<sup>6</sup> These statistics vary a great deal from source to source, going from 21% to 31%. I have taken a figure that falls somewhere around the middle.