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Top Chef and Taste

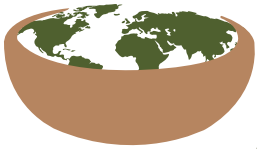
Traditional Foods as Trends

By: Ryan S. Eanes

Arguably Bravo's *Top Chef* has become television's most popular reality competition program related to food. Despite the mainstream or lowbrow connotations that are often associated with reality television, *Top Chef* retains at least a veneer of sophistication that is typically associated with the gourmand—haute cuisine is the object of the game, and food is to be respected. However, in an episode from the most recent season, the *Top Chef* judges challenged the show's "chefeftestants" to rethink a number of food "trends," despite these foods' significant histories and arguable importance as traditional foods. This paper examines the paradox created by *Top Chef*, a mainstream television program, as it creates value judgments about traditional foods by reframing them as trends. The program's judgments about taste and class are considered, and an examination of the concept of "omnivorousness" as a potential explanation for this paradox is offered.

Top Chef and Cultural Relevance

Food shows have been a part of the television landscape since the early days of broadcasting, with larger-than-life personalities like James Beard appearing in cooking segments on daytime variety shows in the 1940s, home economists and cooks on local programs through the 1950s, and iconic figures like Julia Child emerging in the 1960s. By the time the Food Network launched in the 1990s, food and cooking had long been part of the programming lineup for the Public Broadcasting Service, and cooking segments were popular on morning and late-night talk shows alike (Collins 2009). While procedural cooking shows had been around for decades already, it was likely the Food Network's introduction of the Japanese series *Iron Chef* in the early 1990s that introduced the element of competition to cooking on TV, despite the fact that food competitions—in the form of harvest competitions at fairs, not to mention cook-offs—had been going on nationwide for many decades and were not unfamiliar to Americans (Saltzman 2014). For whatever reason, though, it was likely this Japanese influence—combined with the introduction of popular reality show competitions like *Survivor* and high-stakes game shows like *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* at roughly the same time—that led food competition



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

shows to explode in popularity. Today, the Food Network alone lists well over a dozen competition shows on its comprehensive program guide, including *Chopped*, *Cutthroat Kitchen*, *Iron Chef America*, and *Beat Bobby Flay* (Food Network 2014). However, it is the Bravo cable network's *Top Chef* that is arguably the most popular; it has been renewed for twelve seasons, it has spawned several spin-offs and a line of products available for purchase online, and its ratings regularly top a million viewers per episode (Nededog 2014).

The structure of each episode of *Top Chef* follows a particular pattern. Each program begins with a "Quickfire" challenge, followed by a main or primary challenge. Quickfire challenges are generally fast-paced, with one hour or less on the clock; typically, the winner will receive some sort of advantage in the main challenge. More rarely, a competitor is eliminated for losing a Quickfire challenge. However, main challenges, which can last hours or even days, always result in the elimination of at least one cheftestant.

It is important to note that *Top Chef* actually shows a great deal of respect (indeed, almost reverence) for food. Everything about the show is designed to showcase food: the gleaming kitchen, the lovingly crafted displays of ingredients and the chefs' white jackets, which symbolize cleanliness (Jackets and Toques 2010). Consider the set of *Top Chef*, a kitchen specially built for television and designed to direct focus towards food preparation. It is outfitted with top-of-the-line, restaurant-quality workstations, sinks, stoves and ranges, not to mention that it is beautifully lit, spotlessly clean, and features a number of decorative touches (stylized doors, particular paint colors) that evoke New Orleans, the location for the most recent season. As Alison Pearlman might say, this studio set is a true "temple of gastronomy" (2013:2)—this is a television-ready kitchen that was made with glamour in mind. *Top Chef*'s production values echo a popular design trend present in many restaurants today—the open, or display, kitchen. Pearlman explains that open kitchens allow the chefs in restaurants to perform; they also allow restaurant patrons to form a psychological connection with the preparation of their meals. However, display kitchens—including the one that the *Top Chef* competitors use—rarely reveal the full story. Restaurants use their back-of-the-house or basement kitchens to hide the messy, bloody, or otherwise visually unappealing grunt work that goes into prepping and stocking the display kitchen. The same is true of the *Top Chef* kitchen; while there are indeed plenty of shots of havoc in the kitchen alongside depictions of often-sloppy food prep, all of the mess and debris simply vanishes when it comes time to present the plate. Nothing remains of the prep or the gore that went into making it.

The editing of the program hides another type of gore—specifically, the jibes, crudeness,



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

violence, and overt sexuality that plague many other reality television programs. While reality TV is often guilty of flaunting “all kinds of cultural ills” (Donvan and Demchuk 2001), *Top Chef* keeps personal antics to a minimum. Most cheftestants show a great deal of focus as they work on any given challenge; chit-chat is minimal, though the action is often interspersed with “confessional” cut-aways, transitional segments that allow them to share their true thoughts with home viewers. Virtually all of the commentary focuses on the food, with an occasional complaint about the challenge’s difficulty or the methods that other cheftestants employ. Even Padma Lakshmi’s presence as the show’s host is tame; with her modest attire and professional demeanor, a viewer could be forgiven for not knowing that she is a former model who has appeared in *Playboy*, among other publications. The *food* is what is sexy here; the presence of a successful model only enhances that theme. Indeed, when food is judged on *Top Chef*, each dish literally gets its own close-up. Every chef’s finished product is shown in a cut-away shot that features a slow-motion pan of the food as well as a dissolve to at least one detail on the plate. Each of these mini-montages includes a lower-third screen caption that identifies the chef that prepared the dish and includes a menu-style description of the completed dish. In a typical Quickfire challenge, the judges will taste each dish and offer minimal feedback although in some cases, dishes are sampled with no comment at all, and in rare instances, sound effects and close-up of grimacing faces are added to emphasize the judges’ displeasure with a particular dish. These types of reactions are rare, however; more typically, the judges will conclude the Quickfire with praise for a range of chefs before announcing the winner.

Media scholar Raymond Williams noted that pieces of art could be analyzed to reveal “the communication of certain values by certain artistic means” (1998:50). When this sort of analysis is applied to *Top Chef*, it is clear that the producers are expressing reverence or respect for food as a value. Williams goes on to say that such an analysis is incomplete without consideration given to the society that produced the particular piece of art. Such a consideration of American culture reveals a sort of obsession with food—the slow food movement, for example, has never been more popular; organic foods are the subject of ongoing discussion; school lunches, community gardens, and local food pantries routinely make the news cycle; and food-related media has never been more available on either TV or the Internet. *Top Chef* has tapped into a mainstream cultural interest and put food—the prepared plate—atop a pedestal, transforming it into art. Dan-Ben Amos noted that folklore is “an artistic action... a social interaction via the art media” (1972:9). This suggests that *Top Chef* is much more than a reality



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

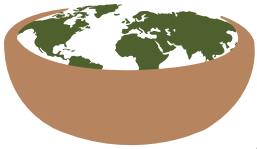
competition show. It can also be seen as a folkloristic vehicle that conveys and amplifies a deeply valued element of American culture—namely, a passion for food.

Trend or Tradition?

In the third episode of the eleventh season of *Top Chef*, the cheftestants enter the kitchen to find out about that episode's Quickfire challenge. Two judges are waiting for them: Padma Lakshmi, a former model turned recipe book author, and Emeril Lagasse, a well-known television chef and restaurateur but relatively recent addition to the *Top Chef* family. Dana Cowin, the editor-in-chief of *Food & Wine* magazine, joins them as the guest judge for the Quickfire challenge. Lakshmi describes Cowin as “the person who has to know it all” about the food world, and turns the floor over to her. Cowin declares that chefs can have “unhealthy relationships” with particular fads, and she identifies four “trends” that are allegedly past their prime: topping dishes with an egg, kale salad or chips, smoked foods, and bacon as an ingredient. The challenge is for the cheftestants to create dishes that will ostensibly persuade the judges “why [these trends] still have a place on menus.” After the cheftestants draw labeled knives from a block in order to reveal who will work on what trend, Lakshmi ups the ante when she reveals that one cheftestant will be eliminated based on his or her performance during this challenge. With only thirty minutes to work, the cheftestants scramble to complete the challenge.

Once time has been called and the judges have tasted all of the dishes, Cowin proclaims that some “succeeded in making me feel these trends should be brought back, and some made me feel like they should be buried.” Shirley Chung, who prepared a rice congee with a shirred egg on top, wins the challenge; Nina Compton's dish, a Scotch-style quail egg atop confit potatoes, is also praised, as is Stephanie Cmar's candied bacon pasta with flash-fried sweet potatoes. The judges then single out three dishes as less than desirable. First, Bret Pelaggi is criticized for topping his gazpacho soup with a kale salad, even after Cowin had warned the competitors to avoid making either kale salad or kale chips. On the other hand, Louis Maldonado's smoked trout is panned for not being smoky enough, seemingly a contradiction. However, it is Aaron Cuschieri's offering of crispy kale chips—fried and then dredged in a concoction made from mirin, rice vinegar, and soy sauce—that sends him home, as the judges indicate that the dish was too salty to eat.

The dishes created by the winning and losing chefs are worthy of further examination, particularly as it seems that the winning cheftestants may have simply modernized the traditional—in other words, the winning dishes simply highlighted the dreaded “trends” in a simple, appealing, and delicious way. Compton's dish of confit potatoes



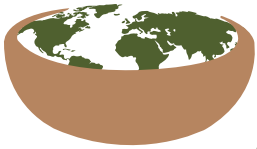
Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

topped with a Scotch-style quail egg is praised by Cowin for being “simple” and for featuring “incredible flavor.” Likewise, Lagasse praises Chung for her preparation of rice congee, a dish with ancient Asian origins, calling it “homey.” Cmar’s dish, while perhaps the most unusual of the three, heavily featured bacon—her pasta was coated in bacon fat, and the dish was topped with a preparation of candied bacon. Indeed, Cowin says that her dish “reminded us why [bacon] became a trend in the first place” after admitting that she greatly enjoyed the plate.

While it is clear that all three of the top dishes were successful in embracing traditional ingredients and showcasing them in an appealing way, it is much less clear as to why two of the bottom three dishes were specifically singled out. It would seem that the judges correctly selected the most flawed dish as the loser; overseasoning food is a grievous sin in any gourmet kitchen, and even Cuschieri acknowledged that his fried-and-dredged kale chips were far too salty. However, the judges’ reasoning for selecting the remaining two losing dishes is inconsistent at best. Pelaggi’s dish, for example, was a bowl of gazpacho topped with a small kale salad as a garnish. The judges offer no feedback on his soup at all, instead complaining specifically that he chose to make a kale salad (this does not seem much different than complaining about a decorative sprig of parsley on a plate while ignoring the rest of the meal). Even more baffling: the third and final losing dish, Maldonado’s smoked trout, is criticized for not being smoky *enough*. The inconsistency is puzzling—the judges react poorly to Pelaggi’s dish simply because it attempted to approach a trend in a new way, while Maldonado’s plate is panned because it doesn’t sufficiently push the envelope.

In the end, the challenge could be seen as entirely artificial—nothing more than a construct fabricated by a cultural elite, enabled by the producers of a mainstream television program—particularly as the choice of “trends” is questionable at best. Two of the trends, kale and bacon, are simple ingredients that have been used by home cooks and chefs alike for centuries. Kale, for example, despite its recent spike in popularity among health food enthusiasts, has been cultivated for thousands of years; unlike Janet Jackson’s breast at the Super Bowl, it did not suddenly burst onto the cultural scene with no warning. Likewise, bacon has been a common foodstuff since at least the sixteenth century; it is popular because it is delicious, versatile, and relatively inexpensive. Topping foods with an egg has been going on even longer—certain traditional Asian preparations of rice congee (not at all dissimilar to the dish made by cheftestant Chung) have been topped with an egg for centuries, while on the other side of the globe, sausage-and-crumb-coated Scotch eggs have been common since at



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

least the eighteenth century. The technique of smoking foods, the only non-ingredient trend, has been practiced ever since man learned how to control fire; it wouldn't have taken long for primitive man to discover that smoke imparts flavor to meats and that it can be used as a preservation technique. It would seem that the only thing that these four "trends" have in common is a long history; otherwise, they seem to have been arbitrarily selected—fried foods, cheese curds, quinoa, and gluten-free preparations (or any other combination of four "popular" ingredients or preparations) might just as easily have been chosen. The choice of trends presented, along with the judges' inconsistent treatment of the cheftestants' "reimagination" of trends, raises a question: What is a trend, anyway, and where does the authority to decide what is "trendy" come from?

Trends vs. Taste

The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (2013) defines a trend as "the general course or prevailing tendency" of something; it also notes that trends typically denote popularity. Popularity requires critical mass, which makes the popular a product of mainstream tastes. John Storey describes popular culture as "the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture... in other words, it is a definition of popular culture as inferior culture" (2012:5-6). In so many words, trends, as elements of popular culture, are inferior phenomena to be rejected by the cultural elite. Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, concurs, arguing that education and socioeconomic status (i.e., the "habitus") influence taste. These differences create stratifications between cultural elites and mainstream masses:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (Bourdieu 1984:6)

Bourdieu is speaking primarily of the preference for "forms over function, of manner over matter" (1984:5) as an identifier of highbrow taste; indeed, he notes that

nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common'... or the ability to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing, or decoration... (1984:5)

This passage speaks almost directly to the challenge in question from Top Chef. Dana



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Cowin, representing a “luxury-lifestyle [*sic*] authority” (*Food & Wine* 2012), serves as a voice for the bourgeoisie; she, along with the other judges, all of whom are celebrities in their own rights, are the arbiters of which dishes are distinguished and those that are just “banal or even ‘common’” (Bourdieu 1984:5). This rejection of the common—the popular—is *precisely* what Cowin, as an ambassador for the cultural cognoscenti, is doing when she states that certain food trends (more accurately described as popular methods of preparing and serving food, particularly in the restaurant environment) “should be buried.” This is exactly the sort of rejection of the mainstream that Bourdieu anticipates from cultural elites:

The denial of lower, course, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences (1984:7).

By identifying and disparaging food trends, Cowin cements her position as a cultural elite; she and the judges further assert their authority as cultural elites by judging the value of the dishes prepared by the cheftestants, despite the fact that Cowin ultimately praises dishes that do the best job of highlighting the “trendy” ingredient or technique in question. In a certain respect, this makes *Top Chef* not so dissimilar from other display events like festivals and fairs that “dramatize and reinforce the existing social structure [while] they also insist often enough that such structure be ignored, or inverted, or flatly denied” (Abrahams 1981:304).

It is Cowin’s praise for the elevation of trends that demonstrates a certain paradox. While Cowin is indeed openly disparaging trends, she is simultaneously asserting herself and her fellow judges as trendsetters by challenging the cheftestants to elevate the common to a new level. While trendsetters need not necessarily be cultural elites, it certainly can’t hurt; Tadashi Suzuki and Joel Best note that “trendsetting requires resources—particularly leisure time to devote to [a given passion], disposable income, and [access to] communication networks” (2003:61). By way of example, consider Zygmunt Bauman’s examination of British “actor, wit, and raconteur” (2010:327) Stephen Fry as an elite who is also an undisputed trendsetter:

Stephen Fry is known to be a trend-setter, but he is also a most reliable spokesman for (and walking embodiment of) the trends set; he may be



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

trusted to speak not just in his own name, but in the name of hundreds of thousands of card-carrying and millions of aspiring members of the ‘cultural elite’—people who know the difference between *comme il faut* and *comme il ne faut pas*, and are first to note the moment when that difference becomes different from what it used a moment earlier to be. (2010:328)

Cowin, as the representative of Food & Wine, is similarly positioned. With a few strokes of her pen, Cowin can define a trend and demote it to “common” status; likewise, she also holds the power to recover a trend and make it relevant, e.g., when she tells the cheftestants that “some [of their] dishes succeeded in making me feel these trends should be brought back, and some made me feel like they should be buried.” Lagasse is in a similar position of power, particularly as a cookbook author, television food star, and massively successful restaurateur. As one of the original stars created by the Food Network (everyone knows who “Emeril” is—David Letterman frequently asks, “When is that big Emeril guy going to go away?”), he runs his own food empire, effectively setting trends simply by offering them for sale.

Lakshmi, though respected as a television personality, does not wield the same kind of power as a food trendsetter. She undermines her own authority early in the challenge by proclaiming “I love kale! That’s not a trend to me!” She also holds significantly less clout as a food expert than either Emeril Lagasse or Dana Cowin. Though Lakshmi has authored two cookbooks, her renown derives primarily from her modeling career, her marriage to novelist Salman Rushdie, and her status as a television personality.

Beyond the cult of personality and the power wielded by celebrities, the complicating frame of television as the medium by which these trends are being critiqued and potentially reinvented demands consideration, as television is a direct distributor of mainstream, lowbrow culture to the masses, given that “higher education and income levels correspond with less TV usage” overall (Friedman 2013). Here we see a mainstream, popular television program elevating the idea of the cultural elite, despite the fact that the majority of the program’s viewers are not members of the cognoscenti. *Top Chef* may not be able to transcend its status as a product of mainstream television, but by associating itself with high culture markers (e.g., Food & Wine, revered chefs like Lagasse, respected restaurants), it certainly reinforces the divide between mainstream and highbrow culture.

There is room here to criticize Bourdieu; his arguments suggest that it is solely the cultural elite who can confer status on objects or determine what is worthy of attention. This



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

elitist view runs counter to the very notion of folklore, which concerns itself with—and finds value in—the banal, the everyday, and the commonplace. George Schoemaker explains that “folklore is part of the experiences and practice of our everyday life... we are all involved in the processes of performing folklore even though we may not always be aware of it” (2008:1). By condescending to the everyday, Bourdieu is dismissing an entire arena worthy of study and reinforcing the notion of the cultural elite. Bourdieu’s concepts are not in full force here, however—given that Cowin and the other *Top Chef* judges sit in a paradoxical position where cultural elitism is conveyed by a popular/banal/mainstream television program, can the concept of “omnivorousness” help to explain why the commonplace is being increasingly embraced by the cognoscenti?

Omnivorousness

In her book *Smart Casual: The Transformation of Gourmet Restaurant Style in America*, Alison Pearlman uses the idea of “omnivorousness” to explain the trend in restaurants away from stiff presentation, elaborate décor, and strict dress codes in favor of a more relaxed environment that highlights the food as the star of the show. As she explains, omnivorousness is “an elite appreciation of not simply formal ‘high’ culture but rather a range of the ‘high’ and the ‘low’” (2013:4). An example of a restaurant that embodies the concept of omnivorousness might be Wolfgang Puck’s Spago, which was designed to simultaneously address demands for both quality cuisine and less formal (pretentious?) service, offering such menu items as gourmet wood-fired pizzas topped with relatively exotic ingredients (e.g., prosciutto, morel mushrooms) that a run-of-the-mill pizza parlor wouldn’t have on hand. The food is allowed to speak for itself in an environment that is free of snobbery—indeed, such establishments make gourmet food more accessible to a broader segment of the population that might typically avoid a fussy or frou-frou dining experience.

Richard Peterson and Roger Kern investigated the notion of omnivorousness and determined that elites have, in fact, broadened their proverbial palates; indeed, “highbrows are more omnivorous than others and... they have become increasingly omnivorous over time” (1996:900). Omnivorousness, they explain, “signifies an *openness* to appreciating everything. In this sense it is antithetical to snobbishness, which is based fundamentally on rigid rules of exclusion” (Peterson and Kern 1996:904). This drive towards omnivorousness may represent the broadening of common foodways, defined by Lucy Long as “the network of activities and beliefs surrounding food” (2009:256);



Digest

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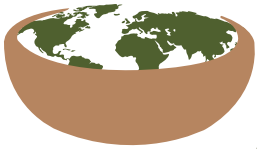
just as elites are opening themselves to the “common,” so are the masses opening themselves to “exotic” ingredients and preparations. Mainstream consumers now routinely purchase gourmet products, such as flavored coffees, elaborate syrups and other coffee embellishments; these affordable luxuries are no longer inaccessible, nor do the masses view them as out of reach (Roseberry 2002). At the same time, there may be some circularity at work, as examples abound of undesirable or peasant food being appropriated by the upper class—alpaca meat in Peru, for example, is now being marketed as a luxury to certain consumers (Markowitz 2012), just as offal and organ meats are proudly listed on many high-end restaurant menus. Even lobster, at one point in time, was considered a lowbrow food. Whether there is a relationship between the emergence of omnivorousness and the elevation of “low” cuisine remains to be seen, however.

While the precise reasons for the emergence of omnivorousness remain elusive, Peterson and Kern theorize that the pervasiveness of media may be a partial explanation, with “presentation of the arts via the media [making] elite aesthetic taste more accessible to wider segments of the population” (1996:905). Certainly this explanation seems to reflect what is going on in this *Top Chef* challenge; despite television’s reputation as a mainstream, lowbrow medium, it is conveying highbrow sensibilities into the mainstream. This also reflects a folkloristic understanding of television as a medium; Ben-Amos, as mentioned previously, noted that folklore is comprised of “real social and literary interchange between cultures and artistic media and channels of communication” (1972:14). *Top Chef* can aptly be characterized as a channel of communication that facilitates an interchange of food knowledge between chefs, food critics, and food fans alike.

In just one small piece of one episode of a popular reality television program, so much is said about the value of food, the distinctions between high and low culture, and the changing tastes of elites and the mainstream alike. Further study could tease out these distinctions to an even greater extent, and could address additional questions regarding the interplay of old/traditional media forms (i.e., the magazine, embodied by Food & Wine’s association with the program, as well as the television program itself, as television is increasingly being considered a “traditional” media channel), new media forms (i.e., the *Top Chef* website, hosted on BravoTV.com, and its interactive components), and how class roles are involved in selection and use of these media channels.

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Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

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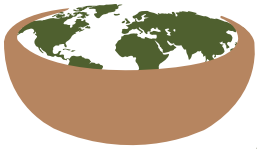
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Digest

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Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Notes

¹ A shirred egg is essentially a style of baked egg; typically a shirred egg is baked in a shallow dish called a shirrer, though any dish can be used.