COMPARING CULINARY QUEENS: PAULA DEEN, GIADA DE LAURENTIIS, AND FEMININITY ON THE FOOD NETWORK
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One woman is a self-made Southern businesswoman, the other woman is an Italian-born professional chef. Both women used food to make a fortune. These descriptions portray Paula Deen and Giada De Laurentiis: Food-Network stars and celebrity chefs who have forged empires built on cookbooks, television shows, and endorsement deals. While these two women seem to have transcended the traditional role of women in the kitchen by treating cooking as a method of empowerment rather than a domestic chore, Deen and De Laurentiis have built their empires on performances of traditional femininity. The two on-air personalities depict familiar tableaus of the conventional American housewife, playing the role of doting wife and mother who cooks out of love, not obligation. Their success in this role raises the question of how heavily the Food Network perpetuates gender stereotypes and encourages performances of traditional femininity in the modern kitchen. Through an exploration of women’s roles on the Food Network, I argue that Deen and De Laurentiis’ achievements both disrupt and subscribe to typical gender expectations. Although Deen and De Laurentiis have defied stereotypes by achieving immense success in the male dominated food industry, this success is due in large part to their strategic portrayals of the “culinary feminine”—a term invented by scholar Jenny Lawson (Food Legacies). It is ironic that adherence to gender norms made it possible for both Deen and De Laurentiis to accomplish occupational feats that subvert stereotypes of women in the kitchen. This paper will explore the paradox surrounding Deen and De Laurentiis, whose successes were built on both defying and subscribing to outdated gender roles.
Deen and De Laurentiis gained fame from their televised cooking shows on the Food Network—a television channel established in 1993 that focuses on food-based programming. Since its inception, the Food Network has established distinct roles for male and female chefs on the network, forming imagined dichotomies that classify women as cooks and men as chefs. This is evident in Food Network programs that show female chefs catering to family inside the home while male chefs venture across the globe to find new and exotic cuisines. Television shows on the Food Network even show kitchens customized to read particularly male or female based on conventional gender constructs. Scholars Rebecca Swanson, Sherrie Inness, Cheri Ketchum, and Jenny Lawson discuss the gender divide on the Food Network, which provides a compelling context through which to analyze Deen and De Laurentiis’ roles as women in the kitchen on television. Examining Deen and De Laurentiis through the lens of gender helps us better understand the relationship between their success and their performances of the culinary feminine. Analyzing the Christmas specials hosted by these two women especially highlight the traditional tropes of female behavior perpetuated in the modern-day kitchen. The episodes “Deen Family Christmas” and “Giada’s Family Christmas” are vital in examining the role of femininity on the Food Network.

**The Gender Divide on the Food Network**

Currently celebrating its twentieth anniversary, the Food Network is now a staple of cable television. The network reaches 113 million people each month and in 2012, it attracted its largest audience on record (AdWeek, “Food Network and Cooking Channel: It All Begins with Food”). Throughout its tenure, the Food Network has become a beacon of culinary expertise for American households, transforming everything from tailgates to the Thanksgiving table with new foods and cooking strategies. However, the Food Network has arguably not transformed –
but in fact reinforced–traditional gender roles that shape the domestic kitchen. Historically, homemaking programs targeted women to advertise products related to cooking. For this reason, the demographic of the Food Network was decidedly female. But the network started focusing on gaining a young, male audience since the mid-1990s in order to expand its brand and please its advertisers (Collins 212). By pumping up its primetime schedule with “action-packed” competition and travel shows hosted largely by male chefs, the Food Network has effectively closed the gender gap in its viewership by appealing to both sexes (Collins 213).

Still, there is a noticeable divide in the Food Network’s daytime and nighttime programming. Operating from the idea that only female chefs’ are suited for work in a domestic environment, the Food Network relegates all of its female-hosted shows to daytime timeslots, while male hosts dominate ratings-worthy primetime slots (Ketchum 20). Utilizing this programming model, the Food Network pigeonholes its daytime viewing audience to strictly female homemakers. Thus, the channel’s female talent is forced to perform in a way that reflects their presumed audience—domestic cooks with no professional training whose primary responsibility is feeding their family. The weekly daytime lineup on the Food Network beginning at noon includes *The Pioneer Woman* with Ree Drummond; the *Barefoot Contessa* with Ina Garten; *Semi-Homemade Meals with Sandra Lee*; *Ten Dollar Dinners* with Melissa D’Arabian; *Secrets of a Restaurant Chef* with Anne Burrell; *30 Minute Meals* with Rachael Ray; and *Giada at Home*. All of the shows in this lineup are hosted by women and take place in a home. Even Anne Burrell, who is a professionally trained executive chef, does not conduct her show from the restaurant kitchen but a domestic kitchen (Inness, *Secrets of a Restaurant Chef*). In this regard, the Food Network reinforces the societal expectation that women’s professional work lies in the home and not in
the public sphere. Although the Food Network’s attempt to attract a broader male audience may have intended to level the culinary playing field, it has only succeeded in drudging up antiquated stereotypes.

The daytime-primetime split is not the only way in which the Food Network treats male and female talent differently. Most noticeably is “the absence of discussion by male hosts of cooking as everyday, family-centered labor” on the network (Swenson, “Cooking Class”). In order for the concepts of masculinity and femininity to remain intact, they must remain at odds, scholar Rebecca Swenson explains (“Domestic Divo?” 40). Within cooking shows, this dichotomy is maintained as female hosts are portrayed solely as providers—women who cook for family and friends within a domestic realm—while men are portrayed as professional chefs who cook for leisure and entertainment (“Domestic Divo?” 41). Accordingly, male chefs lead instructional programs on the Food Network and cook as a hobby instead of a domestic chore because they ostensibly possess a natural talent for it. Their expertise, in this sense, is a service to the audience rather than an obligation to their family. The difference in appearance and attitude of both male and female chefs on the Food Network strengthens this dichotomy, which Rebecca Swenson points out in her article “Domestic Divo?” The women’s casual clothing and rare discussion of professional experience in restaurants emphasize their domestic roles, while male hosts cook in professional white chef uniforms and have no shame in plugging their restaurants or professional training and triumphs (Swenson, “Cooking Class,” 42). Their tone of voice and conversation are presented in such a way as to educate the audience in the manner of a teacher or mentor. Female hosts, on the other hand, treat the audience as a friend or as someone who may not share the same level of expertise as the viewer. Whether intentional or not, Food Network
programs rely on established gender stereotypes, and they recruit the perfect talent to execute them.

Talent is arguably the most crucial element of the Food Network’s formula. After all, “food television is not about eating; it is about watching food and being entertained by the personality” (Adema 116). Charisma, in fact, is what turns a chef into a Food Network Star. In “Gender, Charisma, and the Food Network,” Cheri Ketchum argues that the Food Network favors masculine displays of charisma over feminine ones, leading them to feature male hosts in exciting environments or in front of live studio audiences. Female talent, on the contrary, generally stays isolated on a kitchen set (20). Male chefs are encouraged to be boisterous, energetic, and rebellious—exuding authority instead of subservience—while female talent is expected to exude motherliness and a maternal nostalgia that draws in viewers. This depiction of male authority is what drives Food Network’s primetime lineup. Currently, all but one chef on Iron Chef America (a show adapted from a Japanese format in which professional chefs engage in an intensive cooking battle revolving around one secret ingredient) are male. The host of Diner, Drive-ins, and Dives is also male, Guy Fieri, who is paid to travel the country and gorge himself on the nation’s culinary treasures. Another primetime staple, Restaurant: Impossible, is hosted by British chef Robert Irvine, a premiere restaurateur with the ability to fix failing restaurants. The only sole female host of a competition show is Anne Burrell on Chef Wanted with Anne Burrell, which is a competition show for aspiring chefs to become an executive chef of a restaurant. Burrell is shown in her chef’s whites giving sound advice to contestants like other male hosts. But when Burrell raises her voice like male chefs on other Food Network shows, it comes off as shrill and irritating rather than as a sign of authority. “She screams like a
banshee, belittles the contestants, and doesn’t really do anything to try to help or encourage them,” blogger NJChicaa explains. The Food Network makes it apparent that female charisma is simply not suited for primetime television between the hours of 8:00pm and 11:00pm.

Femininity on the Food Network is a multifaceted performance that also involves portrayals of motherhood. Not only do female chefs bear the responsibility of entertaining family friends and giving advice on how to make the quickest and most cost-efficient meals, women hosts also have to be maternal and exhibit self-control in the face of culinary indulgence and excess. Exercising self-control is the trademark of the maternal female cook who prioritizes the well being of her family and allows her family to eat first (Inness, Secret Ingredients, 172). Nostalgia is a key aspect to the performances of female hosts on the Food Network. Adema contends that Food-Network viewers “crave a home cooked meal, but don’t want to cook it. We are a nation hungry for the comfort of the family kitchen and quality time with loved ones” (118). Playing the culinary feminine for Food Network stars is about projecting the classic woman-in-the-kitchen archetype, thereby comforting viewers rather than challenging them. It serves as the “other” against the culinary masculine, maintaining the separate spheres of the past with a modern flair. The culinary feminine has provided a framework through which female Food Network stars can find success and empowerment. Consequently, the domestic kitchen on the Food Network “remains fundamentally a feminine sphere and the association between kitchen and women remains intact” (Adema 118-119).

**Paula Deen and Home Cooking**

In the past two decades, two stars from the Food Network’s “Ladies of Daytime” have emerged as household names: Paula Deen and Giada De Laurentiis. From cookbooks to television
programs to magazines, these women have built empires around their culinary talents. Despite their success in this male-dominated arena, both Deen and De Laurentiis subscribe to conventional ideas about the culinary feminine that plays a large role in their appeal. Even though these two women come from diverse backgrounds, both chefs show similar attitudes towards the home and family, demarcating it as a woman’s space and obligation. Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco, authors of "Television Cooking Shows: Gender, Class, and the Illusory Promise of Transformation," would agree that “while these two women and the shows they host are quite different, what they share in common is a very traditional emphasis on women’s identification with home and family” (43). So while it may seem that Deen and De Laurentiis are contradictory personalities on the Food Network—who differ in appearance, accent, and cooking expertise—they both conform to age-old gender norms on the Food Network.

“Only in America can this happen to a sixty-year-old, overweight, gray-headed woman,” Deen said of her fame to a reporter in 2007 (Collins 182). Deen often relays her rags-to-riches story when describing her success in the culinary world. She retells this story in her memoir, *It Ain’t All About the Cookin’*, revealing personal details about her agoraphobia, parents’ deaths, a shattered first marriage, a ten-year affair with a married man, struggles as a single parent, and her relationship with God. Throughout it all, Deen uses language to make a personal connection with her fans, addressing them directly as “you” or “ya’ll.” She immerses her readers in this journey, allowing them to experience all of her heartache and triumph firsthand. Her deeply personal confessions are peppered with recipes used generation after generation within her family. Deen closes each chapter with a recipe that pertains to the events she has just described.
These recipes are typically comfort foods intended to treat all of life’s burdens and blessings. Deen’s rags-to-riches story is essential to her appeal (Knepp 26-30). From her troubled past and financial hardships, Deen triumphed as a self-made caterer, restaurateur, cookbook author, magazine publisher, and television host.

“Despite an impressive business background that includes restaurants, catering, and her own magazine, *Cooking with Paula Deen* portrays [the chef] as a bawdy but home-spun grandmotherly figure” (Swenson, “Domestic Divo?” 43). With her Southern drawl and butter-laden comfort food, Deen situates herself as the epitome of Southern hospitality in shows such as *Paula’s Home Cooking* and *Paula’s Best Dishes*. She treats the audience as a close friend, inviting them not only into her kitchen, but into her personal life. “To further establish Deen’s identity as a “family woman,” the Food Network invited her fans to share in her recent marriage, and her husband, Michael, who has become an integral part of the show…” (Naccarato and LeBesco 53). Deen’s sons also make frequent appearances on her programs, letting the viewer know that Deen’s family comes first in her life. In an effort to express humility and create a deeper sense of intimacy with fans, Deen refuses to call herself a chef. She says, “Let’s understand that from the get-go, I am not a chef. I am a graduate of Irene Paul’s cooking school; and Irene was my grandmother, and I was the star pupil—I think I was the only pupil, but I learned in my grandma’s kitchen” (“Paula Deen Chefography”). By attributing her culinary skills to the teachings of her grandmother, she reinforces the idea that cooking is a familial tradition assigned to women. By denouncing the title of “chef,” Deen also places her cooking authority in the domestic sphere, perpetuating the conventional idea that the most appropriate
place for a woman is in the home-kitchen. The Food Network, in turn, markets this caricatured image of Deen to its viewing public (Naccarato and LeBesco 55).^1

**DE LAURENTIIS AND THE “EVERYDAY” COOK**

While Deen’s story begins in the American South, De Laurentiis’ story begins in Rome, where she was born to a family of producers and actors. (Her grandfather is producer Dino De Laurentiis and her grandmother is the late actress Silvana Mangano.) Fame, it seems, runs in her blood. However, De Laurentiis does not credit her family’s fame or her upbringing in Los Angeles for her path to television. Rather, she credits the kitchen. “In my family, as in many Italian families, food plays a major role…As far back as I can remember, I’ve had fun in the kitchen, relishing the preparation of a meal as much as I love sitting down to eat it” (De Laurentiis 8). De Laurentiis always knew that food would play a major role in her future career, and feels as though she is carrying on a family tradition (De Laurentiis 8-9). After graduating with a degree in Anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles, De Laurentiis jetted off to Paris to attend Le Cordon Bleu. Her professional training led her to positions at the Ritz Carlton Fine Dining Room and Wolfgang Puck’s Spago before she decided to begin her own catering company, GDL Foods (Naccarato and LeBesco 54). De Laurentiis began on the Food Network in 2002 with her show, *Everyday Italian*, which focused on De Laurentiis’ youth and ability to update her family’s traditional recipes. Not simply portraying a woman who cooks for her family, De Laurentiis exemplified a modern woman whose domestic skills are a service to her own life and taste. After her marriage to husband Todd and the birth of her daughter Jade, De Laurentiis began *Giada at Home*, which focuses more deeply on her life as a new wife and

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^1 On June 21, 2013, Paula Deen was dropped from the Food Network due to racist remarks made in a 2012 deposition. Deen’s Southern-ness became a detriment when she used it as a scapegoat to excuse blatantly racist behavior. Deen’s casual racism as attributed to her Southern identity is a topic outside the limits of this paper, but that deserves more scholarly attention (Moskin, “Food Network Drops Paula Deen”.)
mother (Naccarato and LeBesco 55). By positioning herself as a housewife instead of a professional chef, De Laurentiis formulates the persona of a domestic goddess whose commitment to family usurps all other commitments.

De Laurentiis’ long-term appeal stems from her “girl-next door” politeness and quirky enthusiasm in the kitchen. But it is her appearance that also draws in viewers. De Laurentiis, after all, is a busty woman with a slender figure that comprises many male fantasies. Her slender figure, however, is not a realistic consequence of the meals she prepares on her programs, which are caloric and high in fat. Much of De Laurentiis’ charm also lies in the increasingly sexual way she works with food. As if her cleavage was not distracting enough, the faces and noises she makes while taking the first bite of her creation may make the viewer forget he or she is watching the Food Network. The visible gratification De Laurentiis experiences when eating on the show embraces the “food porn” phenomenon so prevalent in female hosted cooking shows (Schonberger, “The Female Foodgasm”). “Food porn” is the enhanced visual representation of food, which is mostly achieved through food photography. These images arouse desire to eat said food and subliminally compare the pleasure of food to that of sex. On the Food Network, “food porn” manifests itself through the chef’s relationship to the food. De Laurentiis undoubtedly shows a sensual relationship to the food she cooks, both handling and tasting food in an overtly sexual nature. In these varied ways, De Laurentiis blends conventional ideas about femininity and sexuality into her television persona.

COMPARING THE TWO CULINARY QUEENS AT CHRISTMAS

Scholars can yield even greater insight into the gendered performances of Deen and De Laurentiis through an analysis of their annual holiday television episodes. Each holiday season,
the Food Network premieres new holiday episodes of its main programs, including “Giada’s Family Christmas” that premiered on December 4, 2010 and “Deen Family Christmas” that premiered on December 3, 2011. The episode of “Giada’s Family Christmas” follows De Laurentiis and her family from her home in California to her Aunt Raffy and Uncle Buzz’s house in Aspen. The episode of the “Deen Family Christmas,” in contrast, shows Deen preparing Christmas dinner for her family at her home in Savannah, Georgia, where her family makes appearances in the form of “ghosts” as Christmas past, present, and future. Deen makes traditional southern foods such as Shrimp Stuffed Potatoes, Beef Roast with a Creamy Herb Sauce, and an Ooey Gooey Butter Layer Cake. In contrast, De Laurentiis prepares Italian inspired meals including Panettone French Toast, Minestrone Soup, Stracotto with Porcini Mushrooms and Cheesy Polenta, Vegetable Parmesan, and Struffoli for dessert. As expected, both women make their signature cuisine for the holidays.

Although the foods they prepare are vastly different, the most glaring difference between the two chefs in these holiday episodes is their socioeconomic class as depicted in each special. De Laurentiis makes no mention of the economic fortune of her aunt and uncle, but their palatial log cabin in Aspen signals that her family is wealthy. On the contrary, in Savannah, Deen discusses her meager upbringing in a story she retells to her husband Michael, who surprises her in an Elvis costume as the ghost of Christmas Past. While the two are cooking Shrimp Stuffed Potatoes, Deen recalls when she went to see Elvis in concert in 1973 and had to make her own outfit from scratch because she “couldn’t afford to buy anything.” Then when she arrived at the concert, she found out “they were in the nosebleed seats” and were extremely upset. Later, in a personal interview, Deen also refers to the social class of her husband Michael, describing him as
a single father who worked 120 hours a week and then came home to cook and care for his children. It is clear that Deen’s identification with the lower class is so strong that even after she became wealthy and famous as a Food Network star, she wanted to settle down with someone who understood her past financial struggles.

Despite this difference in economic class, both women throughout their holiday specials emphasize the importance of family and tradition. This tradition, not surprisingly, involves women doing the majority of the holiday cooking. On her first day in Aspen, for instance, De Laurentiis wakes up before everyone else to cook breakfast for the family. Her uncle later comments during the meal, “What time did you get up to do all of this?” Later in the day, when the entire family is sledding and playing in the snow, De Laurentiis leaves the festivities early to go back to the house to make soup for everyone so that they have something warm to eat when they return home. The whole episode demonstrates De Laurentiis’ commitment to cooking for family at the expense of her own quality time with the family. Meanwhile, during the “Deen Family Christmas,” Deen sees the ghost of Christmas present in the form of her sons, Bobby and Jamie. The boys are both chefs and assist their mother in the kitchen while she cooks the beef and layer cake. They also show a blooper reel of Deen’s various blunders over the years, reinforcing Deen’s goofiness and intimacy with her audience. (Earlier in the episode, compilation videos of Deen’s past Christmases were also shown, including Michael’s proposal and their trip to Paris). Through their performances, Deen and De Laurentiis reinforce that their family’s needs and happiness come before their own, a reminder to audiences how proper wives and mothers should behave.
Many of these examples point to a common trait between Deen and De Laurentiis: an insatiable desire to please their families. When it comes to traditional food, Deen says, “you don’t mess with Christmas. They [family] know what they want, they know what to expect, and they know they’re going to get it.” In De Laurentiis’ case, she goes out of her way to make special amendments to her recipes for the satisfaction of her husband Todd. In addition to adding pancetta into the Minestrone Soup for Todd, she also makes a Vegetable Parmesan dish for him, to which her Aunt Raffy asks, “Why are we making a Neapolitan summer dish on Christmas day?” De Laurentiis, in turn, asks Aunt Raffy if she ever considers incorporating the holiday preferences and traditions of Uncle Buzz’s family into their routine. Aunt Raffy replies no, because Buzz “likes what I make for him.” Within both episodes, Deen and De Laurentiis reinforce the traditional American idea that cooking is labor and a gift to loved ones.

Cooking is certainly laborious for De Laurentiis and Deen who make Struffoli and Ooey Gooey Butter Layer Cake that are extremely time-consuming recipes. But the viewers watching these shows might not have the financial access to these ingredients or the infinite time required to prepare these recipes. These shows, as a result, alienate viewers of a lower socio-economic class. But even De Laurentiis cannot do all this work on her own; she enlists her aunt and cousin to help roll tiny dough balls for the Struffoli, which Aunt Raffy groans about how it “is going to take them all day.” Likewise, Deen’s sons assist her in baking the Ooey Gooey Cake and preparing the filling, though her son Bobby bemoans the extensive time it takes to make each component of the cake. Once the Ooey Gooey Butter Layer Cake is complete, Deen ices it while the entire family sits at the table and watches. She then sets the cake on the table and tastes it first to “see if it is good enough for her loved ones.” Finally, Deen and De Laurentiis are
the last to take their seats at the table (in De Laurentiis’ case, she was also the last of the women to get ready for dinner because she was cooking), proving that their families are the main priority.

**CONCLUSION**

In sum, it is clear that both Deen and De Laurentiis feel a sense of belonging and empowerment in the kitchen. To them, food is a profound way to express love to their families, and the kitchen is a gift that has granted them good fortune in life. Although on the surface, their relationship towards food differs, these two women, at the core, fulfill not only the gender expectations set out for them by the Food Network but also the gender roles and values steeped in American culture for decades. They show the age-old belief that the kitchen is a domestic sphere inherently intertwined with the meaning of womanhood. Even though both women are successful entrepreneurs, their cooking is depicted as only useful in a household setting, in which they are expected to prepare meals for family and friends. Culturally accepted forms of femininity are constantly changing and evolving, but Deen and De Laurentiis’ deliberate performance of the culinary feminine suggests that traditional feminine gender expectations remain the ideal in the modern era. The Food Network, in particular, conditions their stars to play to these romanticized archetypes in order to attract viewers. By camouflaging conventional representations of women under a contemporary aesthetic, the Food Network successfully gains loyal viewers and disguises its underlying traditional values. Therefore, at the heart of Deen and De Laurentiis’ shows, the message remains clear: a woman’s place is in the kitchen.
WORKS CITED


