Male hosts have dominated television for decades. From late night talk shows to morning news programs, males have always been the central figures of these shows. But when a network is created that is associated more closely with the feminine-connoted domain of the kitchen, are males still the most visible of the sexes? Amazingly, men have come to dominate the Food Network as of the past decade. Today, on an average night, the Food Network’s Primetime programming will have shows all hosted by men. But how can men be so visible in a feminized field such as cooking and still maintain their masculinity? I will argue that the Food Network, and other networks that focus on food, have created shows that allow men to take over food programming while still performing in roles that are considered culturally safe and masculine.

The emergence of the current masculine image on the Food Network is the result of a major shift in the Food Network’s programming. When the Food Network debuted in 1993, it followed a very traditional and domestic format (Ketchum 8). More than half of the shows on the Food Network were hosted by women. The majority of these followed the traditional format of a female guiding viewers through a dish. Pauline Adema explains, “in this format, the chef plays the role of the nurturing teacher” (Adema 119). The network struggled in its early years because it lacked mass appeal. All of this changed with the emergence of Emeril Lagasse. Emeril is an entertaining, loud-mouthed, working class chef. He gained mass appeal due not only to his
ability to connect with all types of people, but to his success breaking free from the traditional style of food programming by injecting a new atmosphere of loud talking and direct interaction with the audience.

Cheri Ketchum explains in her paper “Gender, Charisma and the American Television Food Network,” that, due to Emeril’s immediate success, executives at the Food Network decided to build upon this development. She states, “to become viable, the new goals were to build an audience with a mix of genders, ‘foodies’…and non-cooks…[T]hey began to create new food genres that were much more entertainment-oriented” (9). Ketchum adds, “since 1998, this shift in focus has led to [the Food Network’s] prime-time programming being dominated by masculine hosts who shout in excitement about food (Emeril Lagasse), travel around the world in search of ‘extreme’ cuisine (Anthony Bourdain), or flirt with female studio audience members (Wolfgang Puck) or viewers at home (Jamie Oliver)” (3).

Creating a safe space for men in the kitchen has been occurring for decades in America. Thomas Adler explains “in media images, the male role in the family food preparations is usually limited to a few carefully bounded skills. Dad can certainly mix drinks for a cocktail party, or carve the roast or Thanksgiving turkey, but he only takes complete charge of cooking operations when they are outdoors: on the campground or at the backyard barbecue” (46). But Adler also points out, men can be stereotyped in the opposing fashion as the professional cook. Adler explains, “Professionalism puts the male in a different light, his capabilities are assumed to be great, especially if he works under the name ‘chef’” (Adler 46). This argument emphasizes that while men can be cooks and still maintain their masculinity, it must be within a certain scale. Either they can remain in the realm of solely festive cooking for the family, or they must become
the complete opposite – a head chef with skill. Alice Julier and Laura Lindenfeld argue in their work “Mapping Men onto the Menu” that, “unless they’re chefs, straight guys, especially single straight guys, can’t cook” (Lindenfeld 2). They are arguing the point that cooking for men is a skill that can bring into question their sexuality. The heterosexual male is not supposed to cook unless it is for himself. Usually when he is cooking for himself it is very simple. This is reinforced by shows such as Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, as the straight men are portrayed as having no knowledge at all of how to put together a nice meal. When men are confined to the kitchen, Julier explains that they must “exercise a certain amount of social power in redefining the labor to remove it from its stigmatized feminine status” (Lindenfeld 10).

These boundaries of food and domesticity are deeply embedded in our culture. Boys are taught that cooking is not their job, but rather a casual hobby they can enjoy (Ketchum 19). Daily media images constantly reinforce the roles that men and women are supposed to fill when it comes to food. Women are supposed to prepare the meals for men and their families; their job is to serve. The realm of cooking must be de-feminized in order for the male to comfortably participate. Adler explains that “men can always make cookery into an acceptably masculine practice by emphasizing any one or more of the elements in this complex of features. For example, by engaging in what H. Allen Smith has called ‘hot pepper machismo,’ a man can lay claim to a realm of cooking that is all his own simply because his wife and family cannot take the heat, and he can” (Adler 47).

Creating “Safe” Roles for Men on the Food Network
While men have become more visible on channels such as the Food Network, they are still confined to certain parameters that dictate how they should act and the format of the show. I will argue that there are certain themes and trends that Food Network shows follow when men host them and that they exist to maintain the masculinity of the host while bringing in both male and female audiences.

The first of these themes is what I will term “guy-food shows.” As you can guess, the general theme of these shows is the most masculine of all foods, meat. “Guy-food shows” typically focus on the types of foods that many men cook: burgers, steaks, hot dogs, fried foods, and of course barbeque. But in contrast to programming hosted by women such as Rachel Ray or Martha Stewart, these shows rarely teach how to prepare these foods. Rather the program revolves around the host visiting other cooks and trying their food for the audience to watch.

Many shows fall into this category. These include: BBQ with Bobby Flay, Boy Meets Grill, Feasting on Asphalt, Guy’s Big Bite, Feasty Boys and Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives. All of these shows are hosted by men and have a common theme in the type of foods they prepare and/or eat. As Adler explains, “even when cooking for the family, men may more readily attempt preparation of those foods and beverages which stereotypically are thought to be preferred by men: meat and potatoes, pie, coffee, and alcoholic beverages, and to some extent, breads made with corn, rye, or whole wheat” (Adler 46). Typically the foods featured on the show have three common traits: big, fatty, and greasy. These are the types of foods that society deems acceptable for men to indulge in, while women can watch and fantasize.

The epitome of the “guy-food show” is Diners, Drive-ins and Dives with host Guy Fieri.
(Yes, his name really is Guy). Fieri is your typical guy’s guy. He is a slightly overweight, with spiked blond hair and a goatee, tattoos up and down his arm, earrings, a bowling shirt and a pair of shades to top off his accessories. *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives* focuses on Guy going all over the United States in search of great food places that the average person might not notice.

Episodes consist of him traveling to about three different locations, talking with the cooks and customers, and of course trying all the food they offer. To add to the emphasis of Fieri’s masculinity, he pulls up to each location in a classic Ford Mustang with his sunglasses on.

During the course of his show he talks about food in a style that any guy can relate to, using words such as “awesome,” “killer,” or “out of bounds.”

The show typically consists of foods that one can eat with his hands, usually burgers of sorts or some type of fried food. No matter what the type of food, it is always plentiful. Each episode will usually consist of Fieri attempting to shove some enormous amount of food into his mouth. For example, in one episode Guy travels to visit Blimpy’s Burgers. Blimpy’s is a college dive that serves original burgers that are made from small balls of ground beef. Customers can ask to have two or more of their meatballs on their burger. Thus, the more “manly” the person is the more meatballs they ask for, and an order can range anywhere from a single to a quint.

Ordering also has this sense of masculinity as there is a specific way to order your burger. This strict rule gives the restaurant a tough guy atmosphere, as it does not have the nice, sweet customer service that you would see at your regular restaurant. Rather, you had better order the right way or you’ll get a tongue lashing from the cook.

As Guy digs into his quadruple burger with bacon, cheese, and salami on top, he can
barely wrap his mouth around it, and, as he finally manages to take a bite, his face is covered in grease and sauce. Like many of the locations Guy visits, there is a type of competition or challenge that takes place. Students try to eat as many of these burgers as possible. One girl tells Guy that she plans to eat twenty-one of the meatball burgers for her 21st birthday, claiming her old record to be ten (“Blimpy’s Burgers”).

While the foods that are eaten on the show are very masculine meals, that does not mean that the audience is limited to men. I would argue that women enjoy watching shows such as this because it is a way to live this fantasy that they cannot really partake in real life. As women are taught not to overindulge, being able to watch someone else overindulge may be very pleasurable to the female viewer. Much like pornography would, shows such as these are ways for women to enjoy “sinful” delights without the possible cultural ramification of overindulging in the manner that Fieri does.

Guy is the epitome of Susan Bordo’s argument that “men are supposed to have hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is the mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively” (Bordo 108). Because this view of men is in complete contradiction to the expectations of women’s self-control when it comes to food, Diners, Dive-Ins, and Dives becomes a show that only a man could host. Can you imagine a petite female traveling around the United States finding the biggest and fattiest meals? Would the show still have the same appeal and what would be the perceptions of the female host?

The second category of shows that males are often restricted to is the realm of the exotic. These are shows that, while centered on food, rarely focus on cooking itself. Rather, these shows focus on finding and trying exotic foods in strange and new locations that the viewer would not
typically get to experience. These shows include Anthony Bourdain’s No Reservations and Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern. Both Zimmern and Bourdain are world-class chefs, but neither hosts a show that has anything to do with cooking itself. Rather they have adapted their shows to emphasis travel and adventure rather than cooking.

Anthony Bourdain may be the best example of an emphasis on the masculine by a food program host. In his show No Reservations, Bourdain travels the globe, visiting exotic cultures, going on strange adventures, and trying the local cuisine. Bourdain prides himself on trying the most local of dishes, the food that tourists would not try or even know about. He states in his show that he enjoys finding “the strange, the exotic and the unrecognizable” (“Korea”). Bourdain’s masculinity does not stop at the food he eats, but is much more apparent through his general demeanor. He is a sarcastic, middle-aged man that loves cigarettes, alcohol, and swearing. The average show consists of beer, shots, cigarettes, and some exotic meal that the average viewer has never even seen let alone eaten. Because of Bourdain’s somewhat crude attitude and his occasional risqué adventures, the show has a parental disclaimer at the beginning.

Krishnendu Ray states in her piece “Domesticating Cuisine: Food and Aesthetics on American Television,” Bourdain is “a mirror image of the somber masculinity of the ‘professional chef’ played with swagger and sardonic irony. His act is as much a caricature of masculinity as is Emeril’s. Bourdain’s conceit is a modernist celebration of the bad boy, a rock star mocking himself” (Ray 60). This creates a sense of masculinity and separates him from the domestic sphere of food. As Ray explains, “with Bourdain we see the other face of TV cooking,
the gesture of denial against domesticity and upwardly mobile gentlemen-boys tied to the apron strings of well-bred women, which is the world Julia (Child) came to occupy” (Ray 61).

What Bourdain does is create a tough guy image for food. Bourdain is a world class chef and has worked in many kitchens. Instead of having a show in which he creates dishes, he instead is implying that he is bored by the norm in terms of food. Classic French dishes or Italian cuisine no longer appeal to his desire to find the new and exotic. Thus, he leaves the kitchen and heads off into the world in search of foods that few have tried. In a sense, Bourdain tries to rebel against the programming of the Food Network. He is not like their other hosts, as he has a much tougher persona. Instead of being full of energy and joy, Bourdain is often crude and self-deprecating. He also rejects traditional, popular dishes in favor of those that viewers of traditional shows would gag at. Bourdain becomes the antithesis to the Food Network host, and thus emphasizes his masculine image as a rebel.

Another popular show that plays on the masculine concept of the exotic is the show Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern. This program takes Bourdain’s idea of eating strange to the next level. In the show’s introduction, Zimmern states that he is “all about diving into the local cuisine no matter how strange or where you find it. I tend to stray far from the culinary path, eating foods that might seem a little bizarre to the average set of taste buds” (“Philippines”). Zimmern does not come off as the tough guy that Bourdain does, but his show still presents this masculine façade. It’s hard to really understand the appeal of these types of shows. But, just like with the “guy-food shows,” these type of shows only seem to work when males host. While there are many shows in which women do travel around the world, most if not all focus on traditional foods and not the extreme ones. Once again, I would argue that
audiences would be uncomfortable in seeing a female host indulge in the foods that we see on programs of this sort.

The final trend that is apparent in male-hosted cooking shows is the depiction of cooking as a sport. This has become most popularized by Iron Chef, which originated in Japan and now has come to America in Iron Chef: America. This takes domesticity out of cooking and instead makes it a masterful skill that most cannot obtain. In Iron Chef, cooking is presented as if two heavyweight boxers are about to fight, or as Ketchum puts it, as “a gladiator competition between two top chefs. Here, chefs rise dramatically from the floor as if they have been in the castle’s dungeon waiting for their ‘battle’” (Ketchum 18). It is almost satirical how intense the show tries to make the competition. The entire show is hosted in the Iron Chef arena, which is like a stadium. The Iron Chefs, who are supposed to be the best at preparing their specific style of food, are portrayed as gladiators or even gods of cooking. An unknown competitor enters the ring and must do battle in order to be the victor. The show also has color commentators to track each chef’s progress. Of course, all of the Iron Chefs are men, reemphasizing the masculinity of the professional chef. Only men are portrayed as being able to compete in such a high-pressure situation as an Iron Chef match.

Another example of this competition-type cooking show is Bobby Flay’s Throw Down. In this show, professional chef Bobby Flay challenges local food legends to perfect their signature dishes. The show is played in a “mission impossible” style. It begins with Bobby Flay accepting a “mission” to compete in an ultimate showdown. The introduction to the show implies that Bobby Flay is a secret agent or spy of sorts, given an impossible challenge that only
he can accomplish. The promotion is designed to give the idea that Bobby Flay has been genetically engineered for this, as if he were the “Terminator of Cooking.”

Bobby Flay is a handsome, charming, cocky professional chef. This cockiness is the key to the show, as he believes that he can beat any cook at what they do best. Arrogance and competitiveness are both attributes that are thought to be typical of men. Another aspect of Throw Down is the trash talking that takes place consistently through each episode. Both Bobby and his competitors jeer at each other, another characteristic typical of men. He also has two assistant cooks, who of course are women. Much of the food that is featured on Throw Down often falls into the realm of what is characteristic in “guy-food shows.”

In one episode, Bobby Flay challenges the cooks at A Salt and Battery in New York City to engage in a fish and chips throw down. The episode begins by Bobby receiving a secret message from an unidentified man telling Bobby of his mission for the day. Bobby is dressed in a professional chef’s outfit in a high-class restaurant. With this image, he shows his credentials to the audience as a professional chef rather than someone who prepares food in a domestic kitchen. In order to get a masculine assessment of how good fish and chips should taste, Flay interviews players of the Gotham Knights rugby team. Bobby is associating himself with one of the most masculine of sports. In his questions to the players, he asks what to drink while eating fish and chips, and of course the answer is beer. Not only should beer be drunk with fish and chips, but plenty of it. With this interview, Bobby is establishing the masculinity of fish and chips by equating it with rugby and alcohol. Now it is acceptable for him to prepare this meal.

Bobby continues to maintain his masculine stature through the show. While preparing
the meal with his assistants, he asks one of his female assistant cooks if “size is important,” in reference to the food, but with an obvious sexual connotation to the statement. This is just one example in which Bobby flirts with not only the people on his show but also with the audience. Thus, Bobby Flay has incorporated sports, sex, and alcohol in the first ten minutes of his show (“Throw Down” 2007).

Within all of the styles of shows that have been discussed, all have a few common threads. The first is the location of the shows. None of these take place in a domestic kitchen, which is where many of the original programs of the Food Network took place. I would argue that it is not the act of cooking that is completely feminized, but rather where and how cooking is taking place. When men cook at home, often times they take it outside of the kitchen, which redefines the terms under which they are cooking. Cooking to serve a family in a kitchen creates a sense of femininity, but cooking in a high-pressure atmosphere like a restaurant kitchen or outside on a grill creates a sense of masculinity. When one removes cooking from the kitchen and places it in a unique, high-excitement arena, then it can change gender. When examining Food Network programming, one easily can see that females are consistently relegated to the domestic kitchen on their programs, while men very rarely encompass this space. I would argue, then, what the first step in creating a masculine cooking show is to take it out of the feminized domain of the kitchen.

The second common theme in all of the programs mentioned is their lack of instructional information. The original programming of the Food Network focused on teaching viewers how to prepare meals. Today, many programs still focus on this style, but the majority of these are
hosted by women. Women like Martha Stewart and Rachel Ray have shows that focus on preparing a meal that audiences can learn to make. The shows mentioned above hosted by men are not concerned with how to prepare the meal but rather the meal itself. Viewers are more interested in seeing the meals prepared for entertainment purposes rather than actually learning how to make them. Alexander Cockburn originated the term *food porn* in reference to watching the creation of these perfect dishes that were impossible for the simple viewer at home to create (Ray 56).

**Making the Domestic Kitchen Masculine**

Of course there are many exceptions to these boundaries that I have stated above. Chefs like Emeril and Jamie Oliver have become extremely successful with a traditionally formatted food programs in which they prepare foods for an audience in a traditional kitchen setting. But this does not mean that they are not representations of masculinity as well. While the formats of the show may not necessarily scream masculinity, their personalities do portray masculine qualities. Emeril is a great example of this. Emeril speaks and acts in a way in which he becomes more relatable to the working class viewer, including men. He does not use big cooking words, but rather uses slang to come off as more accesible. His ability to become the everyday American guy has accounted for his audience being 48% male (Adema 116). Ketchum argues that Emeril uses “active words and high volume to mark him as a charismatic male” (14). This is in contrast to the female domestic hosts, who tend to be soft-spoken and ‘polite’ (14). Ketchum also argues:
Emeril frequently uses the term ‘bam,’ a term that has been frequently used in superhero comic books, which have been primarily aimed at a male audience. He (also) utilizes rugged construction metaphors to describe the cooking process. He says that he is ‘laying down the foundation,’ or ‘putting down the first floor’ when making a dish (Ketchum 16).

Emeril’s success lies not in his cooking ability, but rather in the aggressive approach he takes. Paula Adema says, “he is not showing viewers how to cook so much as he is leading a cooking pep-rally” (Adema 116). Emeril’s current show Emeril Live is more like a late night talk show than a traditional cooking program. He has a live studio audience with live music. Adema explains, “his display kitchen is the set on which a certain kind of masculinity is performed, almost as a caricature, precisely because the turf is recognizably feminine, in terms of both the kitchen and the cooking show” (Ray 55).

Another program that is important to note is Guy’s Big Bite, which like Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives is hosted by Guy Fieri. This show is much more of a traditional-style cooking show, as Guy prepares a meal for the viewing audience. Much like his personal appearance, Guy makes sure to create a masculine appearance to his kitchen. To do this, Guy adds a pool table and drum set in the background of the set. While obviously these are never going to be used on the show, their presence signals while Guy might enjoy cooking in the kitchen, he still maintains his masculinity by associating himself with other hobbies. In addition to these accessories, Guy has painted his fridge like a racecar. Only Guy Fieri can make a refrigerator look so tough. In the show’s description on the Food Network website, it states, “this Food Network show suggests food is gender-specific, and Sonoma County, California, restaurateur Guy Fieri sets out to test
the theory with some protein-driven recipes. Such decidedly masculine dishes featured on the show include Mojito Chicken, Pepperoni Lasagna, Jambalaya Sandwich and more fast, fun, fiery foods to please the toughest, bold taste-seeking palates” (“Guy’s Big Bite”). Guy and Emeril are able to transcend the barrier of the domestic kitchen because their shows emphasize their own masculinity and connecting them to male viewers.

Conclusion

Studying these programs has showed that there are certain show formats that have been created by food networks that are designed for men to host. For instance, shows such as Diners, Drive Ins and Dives and No Reservations work so well because Fieri and Bourdain represent specific aspects of masculine American culture. No female could host Fieri’s show and still get the same appeal; she would not come off as lovable as Fieri does. A woman that shoveled giant portions of food into her mouth each episode and who appeared to have no self-control or care about her body would have a very different effect on viewers. The same goes for Bourdain’s show. His crass, sarcastic approach comes off as charming to the audience, but a female who swore, drank, and smoked like Bourdain does would be seen as a train wreck. Thus, while men are often blocked from entering the realm of the domestic kitchen, it appears that women are constrained within it. The majority of food networking programs that feature female hosts follow the traditional format of instructional cooking. Ironically, it appears that women are the ones who are being pigeonholed in the end. As men attempt to cross the gendered boundaries that society sets, women have not been able to cross at all. Many of the most popular female shows such as Rachel Ray’s 30 Minute Meal or Martha Stewart’s shows are all confined to the kitchen.
Thus women are teaching women how to prepare a meal for their families, while many of the roles men play involve eating the foods that others have prepared.

By fulfilling gender roles through cooking programs, the Food Network is reinforcing Bordo’s argument that women’s role within a contemporary American cultural context is to serve men’s appetites (Bordo 117). Many of the female-hosted shows come on during the day or during the time in which women would be cooking. Thus, women are being prepared to cook the meal. During primetime we are inundated with programs that feature males consuming a variety of foods, but few of them actually preparing them. In Katherine Parkin’s book *Food Is Love*, she explains that society has created a male authority when it comes to food. She argues that according to society when a male says a dish is good, then it must be good (Parkin 126). While Parkin claims that this has occurred in most food advertising since the early 20th century, I would add that this has more recently translated into food programming as well. Males typically host many of the shows that involve any sort of judging of food. Even in the shows in which a competition is being held, there are always at least one or two males, with maybe a lone female.

The gender roles that men and women play in our society are only magnified on television. Food programming has made major shifts that have allowed the emergence of male celebrity chefs to play a large role in the shows seen on the Food Network. But despite increased male participation, the kitchen still remains within the feminine sphere and men still largely outnumber women as professional chefs in commercial kitchens (Adema 119). Adema argues “this is part of food television’s ambiguity: it sends mixed messages, blurring gender and spatial boundaries while simultaneously reinforcing traditional roles and expectations” (Adema 119). While men have come to play an active role in a once female-controlled arena, both men and
women are still forced into roles that maintain society’s expectations of them.

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