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Jamie Oliver: taste, monks and nonnas

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Food is crucial: it is basic and essential to our survival. 'Food indicates who we are, where we came from and what we want to be' (Belasco 2002: 2). It has been suggested that food choices reflect taste as well as social and cultural belonging and therefore act as important markers of differentiation (Naccarato and LeBesco 2012). The fascination for food has led to a growing interest in celebrity chefs who have entered our households through their TV shows and cookbooks and embody aspects of our formation of taste in a sociological sense. This paper first discusses the concepts of the construction of taste. It then focuses on the findings from the analysis of Jamie Oliver's cookbook and the associated television (TV) show. It will seek to identify key themes extracted from the sustained and repeated reading and viewing of the book and TV series to establish the impact that Oliver may have on taste and his wider role in contemporary British society.

So far, no focused attention has been paid to the link between celebrity chefs and the construction of cultural taste. As such, the study is noteworthy as it will specifically seek to explore this link and will strive to offer a new interpretation of role of the celebrity chefs through the analysis of their TV shows and cookbooks. This paper discusses one of four chefs that will be studied as part of a larger PhD research project. In addition, the proposed methodology has not previously been used to link the chefs and taste. The research will aim to assess how the celebrity chefs may impact upon taste in the aesthetic and cultural sense of the word. This will lead to considering the role of the chefs as a wider sociological phenomenon in contemporary British society. Although it will not claim to be an exhaustive

approach to the study of the food, class and taste, this small-scale study may represent one aspect that is relevant to the link between celebrity chefs and taste; a link which may manifest modern expressions of belonging from a social and cultural perspective.

The notion of taste appears as varied and ambiguous. It has both a gustatory connotation as well as a more complex link to society, choices and lifestyle. It is connected to the formation of identity and consumption (Bourdieu (1984); Chiaro (2008); Harvey et al. (2011); Deeming (2014); Kennedy et al. (2019). Taste can be used as both a measure to judge others as well as a way for people to position themselves within socio-cultural contexts (Bourdieu (1984); Wright et al. (2000); Finkelstein (2014). The sociological treatment of food has particularly debated the role of social class in the construction of taste (Bourdieu). Atkins and Bowler (2001) and Mennell (1996) suggest that 'taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled'.

Any study on taste must include the research of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that taste is socially conditioned, learned through education and intrinsically linked to social class. Bourdieu discusses the implications that different forms of capital, which he coins as social, economic, symbolic and cultural capital, have on the construction of taste. He argues that taste is an expression of social differences and that clearly identified rules regulate how taste is viewed and shared. These rules then determine patterns of behaviour which he refers to as the 'habitus. The habitus is the embodiment of cultural capital and is expressed through learned behaviour and well as entrenched perceptions of taste in food, music or clothing. His structuralist approach contends that taste functions to maintain strict social classes. Thus, taste is socially rather than individually constructed.

However, Bourdieu's theories should be nuanced when applied to a more modern interpretation of taste which revolves around the individual as well as the importance of external forces, as opposed to social class, as a post-modern expression of choice. Rather than taste being socially driven, the individual plays the crucial role in determining taste. It could be suggested that taste no longer reflects strict social structures and is in a state of flux as consumers have increasingly become 'cultural omnivores' (Arsel and Bean (2012); Holt (1998); Warde et al. (2008); Warde and Gayo-Cal (2009); Wright et al. (2000). Contemporary Western food cultures are characterised by an increase in novelty and choice that have brought about an erosion in the relationship between class and taste (Ashley et al. (2004); Holt (1998); Mennell (1996); Warde (1997). Vogler (2020) describes how certain foods go in and out of fashion and become markers of sophistication in one age and a shortcoming in another. In a very Bourdieusian sense, when a certain food becomes accessible to the masses, the elite must move on to another in order to continue to mark their superiority. This can be linked to the role that the chefs play in bringing foods in and out of fashion as seen, for example, with Delia Smith and cranberries. The emergence of 'foodie cultures' and 'foodies' helps to reenforce this individualistic interpretation of taste (Naccarato and Lebesco 2012) where individuals are offered status according to the amount of 'culinary capital' that they possess, share and display. In this arena, the celebrity chef may also have an impact upon these manifestations of taste.

The term celebrity chef is associated with chefs and cooks that have become well-known through television and cookbooks. The phenomenon of the celebrity chef has flourished in the UK in the past 20 years, partly due to the growing popularity and myriad of food programming content in the media, both on and off-line (Rousseau 2012). Celebrity chefs

appear to have acquired a form of cultural power that can be seen through their commercial activities as well as their involvement in food governance, ethics, food politics, health, entertainment and consumption (Barnes (2014); Hollows (2003); Hollows and Jones (2010 a and b); Lewis (2014); Stringfellow et al. (2013). It is this cultural power that gives chefs such as Oliver legitimacy as arbiters of taste through the manner in which they influence readers and viewers in their eating habits and other foodie related activities (Smith 2020). In her discussion about celebrity chef websites and more specifically the texts preceding the recipes, Cesiri (2019) notes that these convey the chefs' approach and attitude to food which can then be used as a measure of their popularity.

The role of the celebrity chef as a professional and as an expert is key to maintaining their status as tastemakers. To be able to influence readers and viewers, celebrity chefs must maintain their position of legitimacy and be seen as the ultimate proprietors of culinary capital and as arbiters of taste (Stringfellow et al. (2012); Tominc (2014). As expressed by Bourdieu (1984), the holders of capital are the ones who set the conventions and make the rules about taste. Mentini suggests that:

Generally speaking, chefs, both as figures of authority and experts, are discussed in terms of their importance for shaping and expressing the tastes, desires and fantasies of the middle classes, alongside acting as gatekeepers to high social status and symbolic ascension through their promotion of the consumption of particular food and food-related commodities' (2017,p.128).

Oliver's, *Jamie's Italy* (2005a), and its associated television show, *Jamie's Great Italian Escape* (2005b) were used as the data sources for this research. The TV programme falls under the tried and tested 'tour-educative' genre where the celebrity chef travels to a location, meets and cooks with the locals and goes back home with lessons learned (Phillipov 2017). This is then rendered into the associated cookbook. Oliver meets nonnas (grandmas), monks and farmers as he travels through Italy in his campervan. Both cookbooks and TV shows have been used as cultural artefacts which give valuable insight into contemporary expressions of taste and choice (Appardurai (1988); Bagelman et al. (2017); Clafin (2016); De Solier (2005); Johnston et al. (2014). In their study on cookbooks, Johnston et al. (2014) link the personas and language of the chefs and their cookbooks to Bourdieu's tastes of necessity and tastes of distinction.

Data was collected by the sustained and repeated viewing and reading of the TV show and cookbook. Qualitative thematic analysis was applied to the data in order to extract key words which were then categorised into broader themes. These themes were then linked to the topics highlighted in the review of literature. Interpretation was made of the way in which celebrity chefs may impact upon the construction of taste where taste itself is an interpretable concept.

The findings show that there are a number of 'markers of taste' such as authenticity, tradition and culture that are recognised in the literature and appear in both the book and the TV series. For example, these markers are expressed in Oliver's discourse. Oliver plays on his well-established image both as an 'Essex lad' but also as a professional looking for the 'real

thing'. By conveying these concepts, he bestows legitimacy and becomes an authority of how Italian food should be cooked and in turn transmits this to his audience. This is shown in the cookbook when Oliver shares his thoughts on ribollita, a Tuscan soup as follows:

There's often confusion as to what ribollita should actually be like. It's not like minestrone, as it isn't brothy and it has no pasta in it. It's actually more like pappa al pomodoro, as it's thick and based on bread. It's very much Italian 'peasant food' and would have been eaten a lot in the days of no central heating and lots of hard manual labour. I think this recipe embraces the heart and soul of what peasant cooking is all about – cheap, tasty power food. (Oliver 2005a: 70)

Oliver comments not only on the food but also on what it represents, imparting his knowledge of Italian culture. By buying into Oliver, both literally and figuratively, the viewers and readers accept him as a purveyor of 'good taste' in all things Italian (2017). Oliver must strike a balance between expertise, instruction and usefulness in order for the reader to follow brand Oliver. He urges the reader to 'try something new' and tell us that 'there's nothing..I don't think you can achieve, so give them all a go' (Oliver 2005a: 177). Stringfellow et al. (2013) suggest that tastes are constructed through the viewers and readers' metaphorical consumption of the 'chefs'.

Although not openly referring to class, Oliver (2005a) does move in the direction of making assumptions of affordability and choice. He recommends a barbecue supplier whose

cheapest product is £755 (2005: 190). This may indicate that he clearly understands the target market that he is pitching to; a decidedly middle/upper class part the population, with the means and the will to purchase such an item. There does, however, seem to be ambivalence in Oliver's pitch. On the one hand, he tries to be everyone's 'mate' while on the other hand he is recommending very expensive items and ingredients. By endorsing his recommendations and his recipes, his public are displaying 'culinary cultural capital' in a Bourdieusian sense and hence displaying their 'good' taste. They are making judgements and justifications on their food choices and habits by 'consuming' his books and TV shows. Oliver may be creating an elitist gap through his recommendations of expensive products and his public's ability and desire to purchase said products. Yet, it should be noted that Oliver's audience will most likely also be on a spectrum in terms of their 'class' belonging and financial means.

From the above findings, it could be suggested that Oliver mediates notions of taste through the way in which he uses authenticity, class and culture as markers of taste and acts as a cultural intermediary and influencer. The limitations of the research will lie in the small sample size, the difficulty in analysing the data as well as the subjective nature of the findings (Altinay et al. 2016). Despite these limitations, the findings may lead to a better understanding of the chefs as agents of social change as well as have wider implications for current government health messages related to food in the UK.

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