**The Impact of Celebrity Chefs on Domestic Food Habits**

**Abstract**

The growing interest in food and cooking in the past few decades has increased dramatically, driven in part by television, cookbooks and other printed and multi-media forms of communication. The research sought to investigate what influence the celebrity chef phenomenon exercises on domestic food habits.

The mundane nature of cooking takes place within a social and cultural context and continues to reflect clear gender roles. There is a suggestion that cooking skills are getting lost in today’s time poor society with people relying more and more on convenience food. Evidence suggests that powerful changes are occurring in today’s society, driven by changing family structures, increased female employment and other structural modifications to society within which the celebrity chef is a contributing element.

The qualitative research for this study was carried out on a cross section of employees of a West London university. The employees were chosen to reflect a scope of social attributes. Four men and eight women from a range of backgrounds were interviewed using semi-structured interviews that were recorded and analysed using Nvivo software. The findings suggest that cooking remains a significant part of people’s lives and that celebrity chefs have had some influence on food habits. However, most of the respondents view these chefs as entertainment rather than as being educational. The conclusions of the study are that whilst people are certainly aware of celebrity chefs, mainly through television and cookbooks, their influence on domestic food habits remains peripheral. Further research extending the sample size is suggested in order to supplement the findings to inform additional subjects that revolve around domestic food habits and the celebrity chef phenomenon.

**Key words:**

celebrity chef

cooking

domestic food habits

## Introduction

Food is central to humans both as a physiological necessity (Maslow 1954) as well as in a social and cultural context (Germov and Williams 2004). Since the Second World War, numerous changes have taken place in the culinary landscape in the United Kingdom (UK), including the arrival of migrants of various nationalities, exposing the British public to new tastes (Warde 2009), although the UK was not positioned on the international culinary map until the 1990’s. Since then, gastronomic interest has grown vastly, driven by an increase in travel abroad and a general renewed interest in food as well as growing affluence and access to food supply (Gatley et al. 2014).

Food has until recently figured irregularly in sociological, anthropological and cultural studies (Visser 1999). Age, gender and social class for example, play a major role in one’s knowledge and engagement with food in everyday life. Food also plays a part in differentiating basic consumption from food pleasure, derived through eating certain food such as chocolate for example. Some foods carry powerful symbolism that further widens the gap between taste and hedonism. (Wright et al. 2001, Beardsworth and Keil 1997, Warde 1997).

Mintel (2002) describes the UK celebrity chef as: ‘*those who are well known among the general public for their appearances on British television’.* Some famous names include Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay and Delia Smith. The phenomenon of the celebrity chef was born from the social and economic modifications of the last 40 years that have led to profound changes in eating and drinking habits (Henderson 2011), initially in the United States. Today celebrity chefs are popular across the planet and their reputation extends from the USA, to Europe, Asia and Australia.

This paper aims to understand the influence of the celebrity chef on domestic food habits. It begins by a review of the literature focusing on the role of the celebrity chef within the domestic arena. The methodology discusses the qualitative research undertaken within the context of a west London university. The findings revolve around three main areas: everyday cooking, engaging with celebrity chefs and the influence of celebrity chefs on cooking habits. Finally the conclusion addresses the limitations to the research and possible suggestions for further studies. This study may perhaps contribute to a broader understanding of the influence of the celebrity chef on domestic food habits.

### Everyday cooking, gender roles and cooking skills

Since the Second World War, UK lifestyle has undergone significant change. This change has been accelerated in the past 20 years by profound modifications in the way people live, work and the time spent on leisure pursuits manifested by a fragmentation of work and family life. Less time is spent on cooking than before (Connor and Armitage 2008), combined with a shift in the traditional family structure (Mintel 2002, Mintel 2009b) partly driven by changes in gender roles, work patterns and economic impacts (Bowyer et al. 2009, Short 2003b). The effect that this has had on the UK culinary culture is profound. The quest for ease, particularly displayed through the increase in convenience food as well as through the use of technology in the kitchen (microwaves, freezers and kitchen gadgets for example), has changed British eating habits (Mintel 2002, Mintel 2008b). Yet despite these trends, over half of Britons say that they enjoy cooking (Mintel 2009b) showing that there is still the opportunity for growth of the foodie culture and that eating in is the new eating out in some circles (Mintel 2008b).

When asked, most people say they learned to cook from their mothers (Caraher et al. 1999, Halkier 2009). Cooking skills are passed from generation to generation or learned at school (Keynote 2012). However, with social changes, less time is spent transmitting these skills. Other methods used to learn to cook include TV, cookbooks, the internet and magazines. On one hand, cooking skills can be identified as ‘*cooking from scratch*’ (Short 2006:22) or the more traditional approach which is taking raw food and turning it into complete dishes (Lang and Caraher 2001). However Stead et al. (2004) argue that this definition has become redundant in today’s time poor society and other dimensions need to be incorporated into the ‘skill’ discussion.

Nevertheless, conflicting views exist with some saying that cooking skills are in decline (Lyon et al. 2003) while others talk of change rather than decline (Short 2003a). Lyon et al. refer to ‘*deskilling’*. Cooking skills are changing and are linked to a more complicated picture of social change which brings income, social class and age into the equation (Lang et al. 1999, Mintel 2002, Lyon et al*.*, Stead et al. 2004, Bowyer et al. 2009).

It has been suggested that today’s society seems to have a schizophrenic attitude towards cooking as we are cooking less and buying more pre-prepared foods (Pollan 2013). Short (2006) acknowledges that the cooking skills of the contemporary domestic cook include the use of pre-prepared foods but that this does not necessarily lead to a loss of cooking skills but rather to a change of the skills that are used. A wider discussion also links the loss of cooking skills to societal changes such as: modifications to family behaviour, sharing mealtimes and some busy mothers relying more and more on convenience foods to fit into their time poor lifestyle (Bahr Bugge and Almas 2006, Chenall 2010 a and b, Mintel 2009c, Simmons and Chapman 2012).

It could be that changes in cooking habits are more linked to modern lifestyle factors than purely to the notion of cooking skills with the influence of celebrity chefs unsure in this debate (Lyon et al*.* 2003*,* Stead et al. 2004*).* More profound social and cultural changes are affecting domestic food habits, with celebrity chefs as one of the agents of these changes (Mintel 2009a). Although there is some evidence that celebrity chefs have had an impact on the domestic food habits of the middle class, many still only view the chefs as entertainment and continue to use convenience and pre-prepared foods possibly driven by the time poor society in which we live (Mintel 2002, Mintel 2008a).

### Engaging with Celebrity Chefs through the media

There is evidence that television cooking programs are having short terms effects on cooking habits regarding an increase in the consumption of fruit and vegetables and cooking from scratch. (Simmons and Chapman 2012, Chenall 2010a, Wrieden et al. 2006, Jaffe and Gertler 2006, Stead et al. 2004). There appears to be a growing effect of media and social media on the attitude of the UK consumers towards food with celebrity chefs stated as important influences on food tastes (Euromonitor 2012, Rousseau 2012). Interestingly, there is a contradiction between the increasing convenience based food culture and the number of food shows on TV (Mintel 2002, Mintel 2009c). Caraher et al. (2000) suggest that people do learn from the television cookery programmes and that they are not passive consumers of the information. Learning from the TV shows and cook books is supplemented by exposure to new trends, ideas, products and exotic foods (Caraher et al., Mintel 2002) and this seems to be especially predominant in the higher social circles (Keynote 2012). Pollan (2013) suggests that although less and less time is actually spent on cooking, more time is being spent watching and talking about food, turning what once was a chore into a spectator sport and changing lifestyles.

**Methodology**

Research in the field of social science offers numerous possibilities. The main purpose of this research was to investigate the impact that celebrity chefs have on the attitudes and behaviours of people’s domestic food habits and their approaches towards cooking and food. The research sought to get people to describe their feelings, emotions and experiences with regards to their domestic food habits and their interaction with celebrity chefs in their own words. Qualitative research was therefore chosen as the purpose was to discover rather than to verify. It allowed the researcher to examine mundane everyday behaviour. The epistemology was interpretivist and was chosen to support qualitative research as the nature of qualitative research lies in what is said or observed rather than in the number of people who say it and that the truth is not absolute.

The data collected for the study was from a sample of staff of a West London university. This sample was chosen as it allowed the researcher to access a population that represented a group of people that demonstrated a range of attributes such as various age, gender, occupations and family status. The gender distribution was eight women and four men. More women than men were selected in order to reflect the findings from the secondary research which indicated that women continued to be more involved with domestic issues than men. The data was collected from a total of 12 interviews. 11 interviews were conducted within the university staff in April and May 2013 and one was conducted on an interviewee external to the university. Further biographical details of the interviewees are below:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Gender | Age | Family Status | Occupation |
| Sam | Male | 40-45 | Single | Academic |
| Anthony | Male | 45-50 | Married two children | Administration managerial |
| Richard | Male | 35-40 | Single lives with parents | Administration clerical |
| Chris | Male | 30-35 | Married one child | Academic |
| Arpita | Female | 45-50 | Married two children | Academic |
| Susan | Female | 40-45 | Married no children | Academic |
| Janet | Female | 45-50 | Married no children | Academic |
| Isabella | Female | 25-30 | Single lives with parents | Administration clerical |
| Maria | Female | 25-30 | Married one child | Administration clerical |
| Jane | Female | 55-60 | Single two children | Administration clerical |
| Emma | Female | 45-50 | Married two children | Manual |
| Abby | Female | 55-60 | Single | Manual |

The interviews were carried out in a neutral environment within the university. All respondents signed consent forms prior to the interviews. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data was entered into NVIVO computer software to assist in sorting, comparing, linking and coding the information in order to ensure in depth qualitative analysis. Confidentiality was ensured as the respondents were coded.

The questions were based on the review of literature and revolved around several subjects from cooking and eating habits to the degree to which the interviewee interacted with celebrity chefs. The first two questions sought to establish the relationship of the interviewee with food and cooking as well as explore cooking habits. The third question was aimed at understanding cooking skills and the assessments of these skills. The fourth question covered the subject of convenience foods. Finally, the fifth and sixth questions delved into the impact of the celebrity chef on the interviewees domestic food habits.

**Discussion of the findings**

The key findings from the twelve interviews revolve around three main areas: everyday cooking, engaging with celebrity chefs and the influence of celebrity chefs on cooking habits. The following section summarises the data collected.

## Everyday cooking, gender roles and cooking skills

When asked about cooking, the respondents agreed that they all had some form of involvement with cooking in their household whether on a daily basis or on more formal occasions such as entertaining friends and family. In relation to everyday cooking, one woman academic commented: ‘*when I’m at work and have a late shift he’ll do the cooking..* *so it depends who’s at home.’*

Meanwhile,Jane explained that: ‘[*… ]we try to have one meal together which is the evening meal[… ] and it’s prepared probably after we’ve all got home from work so about 7 o’clock’*

In relation to everyday cooking, Arpita, a working mother, stated: ‘*A lot of the time it can be like convenience food because of the hours that I work[….] sometimes it’s fresh plus convenience foods*.’

Sam, a single respondent said that everyday cooking was: ‘*Take away or a combination of take away and a lot of boiling and a lot of steaming[…] most of it pre-packed and pre-prepared.*’

With regards to cooking responsibility, it appears that for some respondents, cooking is shared amongst the household members (husbands, wives, siblings, parents and children), mainly driven by the time available to the various members of the household. Several female interviewees indicated that their partners worked from home or were retired and therefore took over the daily cooking. Two of the younger respondents, one man and one woman, were single and lived with their parents and it was their mother that did most of the cooking.

Two single respondents (one man and one woman) indicated that they did very little, if any cooking. This may indicate that there is a link between cooking and family status. Another theme was gender distribution. The other women interviewed still remained the main providers of cooking as advocated by the secondary data which may suggest that women continue to bear the brunt in terms of daily cooking, shopping and preparation (Murcott 2000, Bahr Bugge and Almas 2003, Lake et al. 2006).

Interestingly, although less time is spent cooking, more attention is paid to celebrity chefs. Respondents said that they watched, talked and were very aware of the chefs although perhaps not on a daily basis. The very activities that many women (and their mothers) considered as drudgery has been elevated to a popular spectator sport (Pollan 2013, Rousseau 2012). Cooking remains an integral part of everyday life for those interviewed.

Lack of time and busy lifestyles has not eroded the interest in food and cooking although the respondents, both men and women, contended that they spent more time cooking on the weekend and during holidays rather than during the week.

The primary data, however, does not suggest that there is as strong a movement towards deskilling as advocated by Lyon et al. (2003). There does not seem to be as deep a change in cooking skills as suggested by Short (2006) and Keynote (2012). Despite modern lifestyles, skills continue to be passed from generation to generation (Keynote 2012, Gatley et al. 2014). Most respondents agreed that cooking was an essential skill in today’s world and several mothers said that passing on those skills to their children was crucial. The advent of convenience food does not seem to have led to a long-lasting decline in cooking skills. Some respondents suggested that their cooking skills, both technical such as chopping, as well as theoretical, had improved through engaging with the celebrity chefs. The data suggests that rather than declining, cooking skills are adapting to modern lifestyles (Stead et al. 2004, Short 2006).

Engaging with celebrity chefs

Respondents were asked how they engaged with celebrity chefs whether through the TV shows, the cookbooks or buying celebrity chef endorsed products and kitchen appliances. The answers varied greatly but all the interviewees agreed they did engage in one way or another. TV and cookbooks were the main methods of engagement whilst celebrity chef endorsed products (cookware etc…) received little interest. Interestingly Keynote (2012) also found that more than a quarter of the UK population say that television or cookbooks have an effect on their cooking and eating habits.

The majority of the respondents watched the TV shows with Masterchef, Rick Stein, Jamie Oliver and Saturday Morning Kitchen being the most popular. Women were most likely to watch the shows agreeing with the secondary data that indicates that cookery shows are predominantly viewed by women aged between 25 and 34 and from middle class backgrounds (Mintel 2004). With regards to the TV shows, opinions varied as to whether they were entertainment or educational, with most saying they were a mix of both (Mintel 2002).

Six of the interviewees had cook books at home and used the recipes to varying degrees. The majority of the interviewees contended that the celebrity chef recipes were mainly used for special occasions. None said that they used the books or recipes on a daily basis. This may be indicative of the fact that some of the celebrity chef recipes portray unattainable levels of perfection unachievable for the home cook (Short 2006, Hollows and Jones 2010).However, Mintel (2010) suggests that celebrity cookbooks and shows have gone some way in motivating and improving cooking skills.

Some used the recipes as inspiration and then added their own twist. Nigella and Jamie Oliver were the most quoted cookbooks. Most interesting, however, one respondent, Richard, said he used recipes by: ‘*adding bits and bobs at the end makes it your own doesn’t it[…] it started from there but then it’s moved onto something else.’*

Jane commented on the celebrity chef TV shows:

[*…*]*I’m not sure which program it was about my hygiene thing [...] So definitely leant things from like that and how to store things*[..*.*] *and the different way you prepare things[…] So educational but entertainment as well.”*

Susan contended that celebrity chefs:

[…]*they* *might be able to put people off cooking because they’re raising the standards,* […] *it has to be perfect* […] *if you’re not very confident you must think, no, could never cook for anybody if that’s how it’s gonna be.”*

With regards to using celebrity chef recipes, Isabella said*: I don’t cook it because its celebrity chef. I cook it because I think it sounds nice.*

While Sam suggested that: *maybe subconsciously I have picked up a few things.*

## The influence of celebrity chefs on cooking habits

Respondents were asked whether celebrity chefs had changed their cooking habits. All but two contended that they had to a certain extent. One respondent, Janet, explained that celebrity chefs made her understand cooking techniques whether it be chopping or hygiene:

[…]*sometimes these shows are quite good at showing you just basic technique… But sometimes, you get ideas for recipes, yes[….]*  *I’m sort of more interested in where it comes from now[… ] The idea, you know that everything is more seasonal and stuff.*

Talking specifically about Jamie Oliver, Susan added that:

*you should sort of eat less meat[…] and we are actually doing that whether it’s because of him I’m not sure […] Jamie Oliver I think is also writing about sustainable fish stock and that sort of thing so we are thinking in those term but you know I, I, we might have got it from him, you know from what we read in one of the newspapers or something but* …

Although for some celebrity chefs made their cooking more inspirational, for others it gave them ideas and for others still it changed their buying and cooking habits with the inclusion of previously unused ingredients. Other respondents agreed that celebrity chefs had made them more aware of health issues such as eating less meat as well as thinking about sustainability or the provenance of food although these comments were contained within the academic respondents. It does appear that the influence of the celebrity chefs is also linked to financial considerations as purchasing fresh fruit and vegetables and organic food, as celebrated by the chefs, certainly is more expensive than other alternatives, suggesting that celebrity chefs have the strongest impact on AB social categories (Mintel 2002 and 2008b). Respondents from more traditional backgrounds viewed the celebrity chefs more as entertainment and did not imply that the chefs has a strong impact on their domestic food habits.

**Conclusion and limitations**

This study has shown that celebrity chefs do have some influence on domestic food habits. Warde (1997) suggested that the celebrity chef shows answer the question as to what and how we eat. As cooking skills are changing, celebrity chefs are influencing people to be more adventurous in the kitchen using convenience food during the week and spending more time cooking on the weekend (Mintel 2002, Mintel 2004). Although this is a small exploratory study, it does support certain trends discussed by Gatley et al. (2014) in terms of changes in cooking skills and of the importance of cooking in a time poor society.

The changes to cooking skills are an indicator of the profound social alterations of the past 50 years. It could be argued that the celebrity chef has prospered with the loss of traditional cooking skills along with an increasing use and reliance on convenience foods. It is therefore possible that within this context, celebrity chefs have come to take the place of entertainers and, to a certain extent, of educators, notably through their interaction with the wider public through various media. These factors may indicate a paradox in the way the public interacts with celebrity chefs.

The celebrity chefs seem to influence the respondents to varying degrees. They appear to have an influence on food choice, preparation and understand according to the primary research. For some it is purely entertainment through the TV shows whilst for others the celebrity chefs are a source of inspiration for their cooking (Rousseau 2012). However, overall the influence of the chefs continues to be relatively ad-hoc and peripheral.

Several limitations are inherent to the nature of this qualitative research. This research is only a snapshot of a sample population, at a given time, within one institution. The research does give an insight into the habits of a mainly middle-class sample with in-depth data regarding mundane cooking habits and engagement with celebrity chefs. In order to consider a possible extension of the research, the data collected could be supplemented with further quantitative research to ensure that the findings could be triangulated and extended to a larger population that would be more representative of the wider UK society. Perhaps this research may contribute to developing a continued interest in the celebrity chef phenomenon within a dynamic and changing socio-cultural environment. These are possibly themes that are of interest in the arenas of food culture and food in society.

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