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| **CELEBRITY CHEFS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TASTE: FROM ÜBER MACHO TO CULINARY CRUSADER** |
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**ABSTRACT**

Food is an essential part of our lives and is clearly more than simply a physiological requirement As such, the study of food is a useful means to help us understand important social and cultural factors that influence the way we live our lives. Taste is intrinsically linked to food, both from a gustatory aspect as well as from an aesthetic perspective. Aesthetically, taste can serve as a social discriminator because it implies notions of choice. Within this arena, the celebrity chef has become an important part of contemporary British society as an arbiter in transmitting concepts of taste and distinction through television and other media. The celebrity chef is now a modern cultural figure that embodies notions of contemporary shifts in attitudes towards cooking, ethics, consumption, culinary taste, gender and cultural capital. This work in progress will seek to determine links between the construction of taste and celebrity chefs. The proposed methodology is qualitative content analysis through the scrutiny of chosen television shows and cookbooks. The conclusions may suggest that the chefs have some influence in conveying messages of public health, lifestyle and food choices through their television shows, cookbooks and internet presence and therefore may be players within a wider sociological phenomenon.

Keywords: food

taste

celebrity chef

television

media

lifestyle

**INTRODUCTION**

Food is essential to our survival and it is said that ‘food indicates who we are, where we came from and what we want to be’ (Belasco 2002: 2 ). Counihan and Van Esterik (2008: 2) further suggest that ‘food links body and soul, self and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic’. As such, the study of food choices and practices offers a unique lens with which to explore the significance of food in the changing structure of social life (Johnson and Baumann 2015). Furthermore it has been said that food choices reflect social and cultural belonging and therefore act as important markers of social differentiation (Naccarato and LeBesco 2012).

Within this context, the concept of taste is fundamental as it is linked to the formation of identity, choices and consumption (Bourdieu 1984, Harvey et al. 2011). Whilst taste has both physiological and gustatory aspects, it also has an aesthetic quality and has become an all-encompassing term which implies that taste acts as a classifier as well as a marker of identity and difference and implies discrimination (Bourdieu 1984, Finkelstein 2014, Hyman 2008, Mennell 1996, Milne 2013, Short 2006, Strong 2011). Other theories posit that taste exists as a way to relate to food as well as a system of reflecting preferences that are socially constructed (Albon 2005, Arsel and Bean 2012, Ashley et al. 2004). Taste is therefore used as both a measure to judge others as well as a way to position people within sociocultural contexts (Finkelstein 2014, Wright et al. 2000). The sociological treatment of food has debated the role of social class in the construction of taste (Bourdieu 1984) and Atkins and Bowler (2001: 5) conclude that ‘taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled’.

This aim of this research project is to examine the role of today’s celebrity chefs and then explore their significance to the construction of taste within contemporary British society. As such it is first necessary to consider definitions of celebrity chefs. For the purpose of this study, the following definition best captures the essence of celebrity chefs (Henderson 2011: 617)

Someone with a professional background who enjoys a certain element of recognition - domestically and possibly globally, unconfined to the world of professional restaurants. They exercise popular appeal in a market that comprises diners, television viewers, book readers, internet users and consumers of food and food related products.

However, it should be noted that in this study, the chef is both one who has run a professional kitchen as well as the ‘domestic cook’, such as Delia Smith and Nigella Lawson, as both groups are referred to as ‘celebrity chefs’ in the general public’s perception.

The phenomenon of the celebrity chef has flourished in the United Kingdom (UK) in the past 20 years, partly due to the growing popularity and increase of interest in food in the media, both on and off-line, as well as increasing anxieties in relation to what food should best be consumed (Rousseau 2012). In order to link celebrity chefs to taste, the role that they play in contemporary society must be understood (Ashley et al 2004, Barnes 2014, Bell and Hollows 2010, Hollows 2003, Hollows and Jones 2010a and b, Scholes 2011). It appears that from the three star Michelin chef to the popular television (TV) chef, and, from the ber macho to the culinary crusader (Scholes 2011), these celebrities have now become household names and their first names often suffice to place them within our ‘food’ reality (Barnes 2004). It has also been suggested that celebrity chefs are no longer simple media ‘stars’, distributing various messages and campaigns through their shows but that they have placed themselves as arbiters of taste (Hansen 2008). Research suggests that there appears to be a growing effect of such media personalities on the attitudes of UK consumers towards food, with celebrity chefs stated as having an important role as judges of ‘good’ taste (Euromonitor 2012).

**Celebrity chefs would seem to have gained a form of cultural power that can be seen through their commercial activities and 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). Arguably celebrity chefs transmit a message of public pedagogy and lifestyle that may be of broader social concern (Brownlie et al. 2005). Much of the academic interest in celebrity chefs has focused on contemporary gender roles in and out of the home, cooking, culinary and ‘cultural capital’, and lifestyle as well as understanding the sociocultural role that they may play (Caraher et al. 2000, Hollows 2003, Hollows and Jones 2010 a and b, Lewis 2008 and 2014, Lewis and Huber 2015, Piper 2012 and 2013, Swenson 2009). However, little attention has been paid to the specific link between celebrity chefs and taste which is the aim of this research.**

**TASTE**

Food studies is a hybrid discipline that spans anthropology, sociology, politics, tourism and geographical studies and as such many theoretical paradigms frame the study of food. For example, a structuralist approach would suggest that taste is socially and culturally constructed, where food serves as a code to structure and reflect the stratification of society (Albon 2005, Barthes 1973, Bourdieu 1984, Douglas 2008, Warde 2016). This approach has been developed by socio-anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss (1963) and more extensively by the sociologist Bourdieu. His seminal text, ‘Distinction’ (1984), whilst set within the context of French society in the late 1970s, is still referred to as the foundation to any study on the construction of taste. As a Marxist he suggests that taste is socially conditioned, learned through education and intrinsically linked to social class. He posits that different social classes behave in conventional and established ways with regards to their choices of music, art, clothes, decoration and food and acquire and replicate cultural capital. He argues that taste is an expression of social differences and contends that taste functions as a way to maintain strict social classes (Warde 2016). Thus he concludes that taste is socially rather than individually constructed and is slow to change partly because it is deeply meaningful to the individual as it reflects a sense of belonging within a system of rigid social boundaries. Nonetheless, Bourdieu’s theories have been criticised, more specifically in the field of class inequalities in education (Goldthorpe 2007) .Goldthorpe (2007) takes objection to Bourdieu’s use of cultural capital in the theory of social reproduction. He further suggests that Bourdieu does not take the theory of socialisation into account in his discussion of habitus and the transmission of cultural capital.

Despite the relevance of Bourdieu’s theory, the notion that the main influence on the construction of taste is social class has come under criticism. The developmental paradigm posits that individuals take responsibility for their choices based on micro and macro-environmental changes rather than relying on institutional organisations and that this has had an effect on issues relating to food (Beadsworth and Keil 2002). Mennell et al. (1992: 6) suggest there was ‘first functionalism, then structuralism and more recently, developmental perspectives’, and that ‘each of these fashions have been associated with research into different substantive aspects of food and eating’. Mennell (1996) and Mintz (2008) consider that attitudes and behaviour around food is now less structurally determined and that the significance of class to taste is waning and instead highlight the importance of economic and political change to the development and acquisition of taste. Such writers prioritise how there have been dynamic changes in consumption patterns over the years and argue that contemporary tastes in food are increasingly shaped by changes to the supply and variety of foods due partly to the growing trade and industrialization of food supply. Mintz (2008) considers how the industrialisation of food production and the increase in food availability and choice had an impact on food consumption through the centuries. People produced less and less of their own food and ate more food produced by others. The types of food eaten have changed as has the availability of food linked to economic and political forces. Certainly, Mintz (2008) clearly argued that taste fluctuates and is influenced by outside events as illustrated in his discussions around sugar. He contended that the increase in the availability of sugar, due to political and economic charges, had a profound effect on altering tastes of the Western working classes. In addition, such theorists prioritise how social changes, including the changing role of women both in the workplace and at home, and changes in family life and structure, have also had a significant impact on patterns of consumption and ‘taste’. (Chiaro 2008). Ritzer (2013) goes so far as to suggest that the standardization within modern society is leading towards a levelling of tastes and, with the emergence of patterns of mass consumption, social class no longer plays a dominant role in the construction of taste.

Poststructuralists highlight how cultural change and individual identity increasingly influence patterns of consumption and the construction of taste (Albon 2005, Holt 1998, Lupton 1996, Mennell et al. 1992, Ritzer 2013, Warde 1997, Warde et al. 2008, Wood 2004). A post-Fordist analysis highlights a collapse of normative regulation and a weakening of cultural constraints and identifies a trend of informalisation where taste is increasingly a matter of individual autonomy. For example, Warde (1997) and Fishler (1988) prioritise the importance of distinctive lifestyles and individualised eating habits to personal identity as the era of mass consumption declines. As such, the increase in lifestyle TV programming, including the plethora of celebrity chef shows which appeal to a highly diverse audience, has led some key writers to adopt a more postmodernist approach when considering how notions of taste are currently being constructed (Ashley et al. 2004, Holt 1998). Holt (1998: 1) outlines how post-modernist thinkers argue that:

The massive proliferation of cultural meanings and the fragmentation of unitary decisions…have shattered the straightforward correspondence between social categories and consumption patterns

It appears 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). Indeed it has been suggested that 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 and Warde 1997). It could be suggested that the celebrity chefs of today can be seen to be agents of cultural change (Piper 2013) through their influence on taste.

**CELEBRITY CHEFS, MEDIA AND LIFESTYLE**

Arguably, there are several interpretations of the role of the celebrity chef in the wider sociocultural context. On one hand, the influence of celebrity chefs may have led to the broader public becoming better ‘food citizens’, with people becoming more aware of ethical and health issues (Barnes 2014). It may be suggested that changes in British society have elevated the chefs to the status of media superstars, and, undeniably, the celebrity chefs have entered UK households through TV, cookbooks and other media and may have become an influence on lifestyle choices and notions of taste (Chiaro 2008). Lewis (2014: 135) contends that celebrity chefs are of particular interest as:

…cultural figures today, to the extent that they have come to exemplify and embody a variety of contemporary shifts and tensions around work and leisure; branded, performative modes of selfhood; gendered regimes and hierarchies of cooking; questions of ethics and consumption; and cosmopolitan forms of culinary taste and cultural capital.

An important part of the cookery TV programmes is the ability to entertain as well as to educate (Piper 2012) and whilst it is interesting to note that we seem to be watching, thinking and talking about food more and more, evidence suggests cooking is being engaged with less and less (Euromonitor 2008, Pollan 2013). However, it has been argued that while celebrity chefs may have influenced broader cultural trends, including notions of taste (Caraher et al. 2000, Bell and Hollows 2005) and have become a subject of academic and popular debate (Caraher et al*.*, Gatley et al. 2013, Hansen 2008, Henderson 2011, Hollows and Jones 2010a and b, Lang and Caraher 2001, Parasecoli 2008, Short 2006, Rousseau 2012), they have in fact, little influence on actual culinary behaviour (Caraher et al. 2000, Mintel 2002).

It does appear therefore that celebrity chefs have catalysed a growing and broad interest in food through their involvement with media, at least among their followers (Bonner 2005, Hansen 2008). As our culinary experience has become highly mediated, cooking shows and celebrity chef shows continue to proliferate (Jackson 2013). Undoubtedly, food television has gained in popularity in recent years with more and more networks dedicating numerous hours to different sub-genres of cookery programmes which service different types of lifestyles (De Solier 2005). An example of the popularity of cookery shows is illustrated by the Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB) which reports that ‘Eat Well for Less’ appeared in the top 20 viewings on BBC1 in the week ending 1 February 2015 amongst a plethora of popular soaps and news programmes (BARB 2015).

Within the genre of food television, it has also been suggested that celebrity chefs exercise an influence with regards to lifestyle (Ashley et al. 2004, Lewis 2014). Scholes (2011) suggests that by watching TV shows and buying cook books, people are buying into the lifestyles of the likes of Jamie and Nigella. It can also be argued that celebrity chefs represent an unattainable ideal and portray an idealised view of domesticity (Scholes 2011) and simultaneously appear to have broken the link between cooking and labour (Euromonitor 2008, Hansen 2008).

In order to remain relevant to the mundane task of everyday food preparation and public interest in food more broadly, celebrity chefs need to retain the link between traditional domestic cooking and the institutional (Scholes 2011) and connect with their audience. Celebrity chefs must therefore develop a style of communication that their audiences can relate to (Sloan 2004a and b). Food programmes must remain entertaining as well as maintain the professionalism of the chef (Ashley et al. 2004). In her discussion of Jamie Oliver’s School Dinner show, Talbot (2007: 110) describes it as: ‘a combination of docu-soap, celebrity biopic and makeover.’ She goes on to comment that it is essential for Oliver to put forward his persona as a ‘celebrity chef’ to ensure credibility. Hence, celebrity chefs enter public consciousness not only as ‘keepers of culinary culture, but also as charismatic and compelling leaders in terms of changing lifestyles’ (Brownlie et al. 2005: 14).

There is evidence in the literature to suggest that the popular food media may also have changed attitudes towards civic and environmental responsibilities as well as developed a possible relationship between media, culture and governmental concerns (Talbot 2007, Lewis 2008) and that, as such, lifestyle TV may link models of citizenship with wider public concerns (Lewis 2008). Indeed celebrity chefs appear increasingly involved in various moral, political and environmental debates around food. This has been principally illustrated by Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall in TV shows such as *Jamie’s Ministry of Food, School Dinners and River Cottage* (Hollows 2003, Hollows and Jones 2010a, Bell and Hollows 2010, Scholes 2011). On the Jamie Oliver Food Foundation website (2014), the chef is quoted as saying:

My charity aims to inspire people to reconnect with food. It's all about raising awareness and individual responsibility, resuscitating dying food culture around the world and, ultimately, keeping cooking skills alive.

In addition to television, the study of cookbooks is an associated medium that may give insight into the influence of celebrity chefs on lifestyle and taste (Bell and Hollows 2005). Brownlie et al. (2005: 8) suggest that studying culinary culture through texts, and more specifically through ‘good’ cookbooks, shows how ‘we create ourselves as an industrial society, our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices.’ They notably quote Tobias (1998) as saying that ‘cookbooks contain hidden clues and cultural assumptions about class, race, gender and ethnicity.’ Furthermore, Humble (2005) notes that cookbooks offer a valuable insight into tastes and aspirations, whilst Warde (1997) posits that recipes are messengers of taste and an unobtrusive means by which to study people and concerns.

**PROPOSED METHODOLOGY**

Because celebrity chefs exist largely through media, it is appropriate to adopt a methodological approach that investigates the way in which the chefs portray themselves through two interrelated media: TV and cookbooks. Bell and Hollows (2005) give weight to the analysis of both these media as they transmit notions of taste, lifestyle and cultural identity. It is through narrative and images that meanings come to be understood and interpreted (Tonner 2008). The proposed methodology for this research is principally qualitative content analysis (Hseih and Shannon 2005, Arsel and Bean 2012, Johnston and Baumann 2007, Bryman 2016, McQuail 2010). Qualitative content analysis is concerned with describing and interpreting meaning in context. In media studies, the term discourse analysis has become preferred to ‘qualitative content analysis’ (McQuail 2010). It is associated with how beliefs and social structures are communicated through words and images (McQuail 2010, Hodkinson 2011).

Piper (2012) posits that there is an interest in analysing the cultural significance of celebrity chefs through content analysis of their media. Other examples of the use of media to examine the social implications of shaping taste and influencing food choices and lifestyle can be seen in the work of Wright and Sandlin (2009) who use the term ‘bricolage’ to describe the methodology used in their work which seeks to consider the forces behind television cooking shows and their associated cookbooks. In their analysis of American gourmet magazines, Johnston and Baumann (2007) adopt discourse analysis in order to discuss democracy and distinction in food writing whilst Ketchum (2005) viewed television shows to understand their influence on aesthetics and consumer culture. Swenson (2009) also used textual analysis of food network programmes in her analysis of cooking television shows.

Data will be collected through the sustained and multiple viewing of chosen television shows and reading of the associated cookbooks. The research may also include the analysis of social media such as food blogs and websites which may be indicative of the public’s interaction with the celebrity chefs. In order to sample these media, the chefs and their shows have been provisionally classified into typologies based on the initial findings from the literature (Table 1) however this may still be further developed as the study progresses. The proposed typology illustrates the personas and images that the chefs have portrayed through their TV shows and associated cookbooks. These personas demonstrate certain character traits and attitudes that, although they may be exaggerated, show how the chefs may be understood by the viewing public (Bell and Hollows 2010, Scholes 2011, Piper 2012). Of course, any such typologies are not fixed, as the chefs appear to migrate across the categories which can be seen by the changes in the themes and focus of their shows and books over the past 10 years. Therefore, any classification will need to be fluid and may evolve over time. Alternative scenarios could include a focus on female chefs who are underrepresented in the world of professional chefs. It is expected that the sample will include chefs that have both a market prominence as well as commercial success, as they will have the most influence over viewers and readers of their cookbooks. Selection criteria may include the popularity of the shows as well as the years in which the shows have been produced. Initial research will seek to extract themes from the material and build a coding frame to analyse the data. In addition a quantitative approach may also bring further breadth to the research by producing findings that are numerically verifiable (Hodkinson 2011).

Table 1: Proposed Typology

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| Moral entrepreneur (Bell and Hollows 2010)  Culinary Crusader (Scholes 2011)  Food Revolutions (Scholes)  Public Pedagogue (Piper 2012) | Jamie Oliver (*Jamie’s Ministry of Food*) |
| Instructional Matriarch (Scholes) | Delia Smith (*Delia through the decades*) and Nigella Lawson (*Nigellisima*) |
| Vocational expert (Bell and Hollows)  Uber-Macho (Scholes) | Gordon Ramsey (*The F Word*) |
| Aspirational Wizardry (Scholes) | Heston Blumenthal (*Heston’s Fantastical Food*) |
| Adventurer (Scholes) | Jamie Oliver (*Jamie’s Italy*)  Rick Stein (*Mediterranean Escapes*) |
| Real Food (Scholes) | Hugh Fearnley- Whittingstall (*River Cottage*) |

**CONCLUSION**

This research is concerned with understanding the role that the celebrity chefs play in contemporary British society, specifically with regards to the way in which they mediate taste. The celebrity chef has gained recognition and superstar status as an arbiter in the construction of taste. Three broad paradigms can be used to frame the approach to the construction of taste. The first is the structuralist paradigm which emphasises the importance of class in the construction of taste and suggests that taste is socially and culturally constructed. The materialist approach proposes that taste is connected to external influences such as economic and political changes. Finally, postmodernist thinking gives weight to the individual in the acquisition of taste. The initial exploration of the literature has shown that there is evidence to suggest that celebrity chefs may play a part in influencing taste and lifestyle choices in contemporary British society. The chefs seem to have created one, or serval personas, that display certain behaviour and beliefs. It could be proposed that the wider public then identify with these personas whilst projecting an image of themselves and their culinary know-how. Although the studies of celebrity chefs appear to attract more and more academic attention, the specific link between the celebrity chef and the construction of taste remains under explored as does the use of qualitative content analysis in this context. The findings of the research may lead to a better understanding of the chefs as agents of social change and could perhaps have wider implications for current government health messages related to food.

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