

Padma Lakshmi Finds a New Voice, Amplifying the Voices of Others; Critic's Notebook

The New York Times

June 24, 2020 Wednesday 00:37 EST

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Section: DINING

Length: 1091 words

Byline: Tejal Rao

Highlight: “Taste the Nation” is her new series on Hulu, with 10 episodes that collectively expand and redefine the meaning of American food.

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“Am I stepping on anything?” Padma Lakshmi asks on her new show, “Taste the Nation,” as the farmer Scott Chang-Fleeman guides her through rows of dirt. “Please, tell me! I don’t want to be a rude guest!”

At Shao Shan Farm in Bolinas, Calif., Mr. Chang-Fleeman tends to hakurei turnips, Chinese cauliflower, Taiwanese cabbage, an edible chrysanthemum called tong ho, and more beautiful greens. He tells Ms. Lakshmi how growing these building blocks for the regional Chinese-American cuisines of California has been a way of embracing his own biracial identity.

Throughout the show, which began streaming on Hulu on Thursday, Ms. Lakshmi shows curiosity, insight and an easy charisma. This will come as no surprise to viewers who know her best from her long-running role as a host and executive producer on “Top Chef.”

But the show also reflects her work as an activist, and an American Civil Liberties Union ambassador for immigration and women’s rights, celebrating the food cultures of Indigenous people, immigrant communities and the descendants of enslaved people.

And as Ms. Lakshmi enters farms, homes and community centers across the country, she seems acutely aware that she is a guest, more so than the white, male food and travel hosts who preceded her.

Ms. Lakshmi — who moved to New York from India as a child — is an immigrant herself. Each episode begins with her reminding the audience of this, holding out a photograph of her 4-year-old self.

The show, which was shot in the summer and fall of 2019, slips into a fluent, fast-paced, off-the-cuff visual style, and sure, there are moments when you’ll desperately want to eat what Ms. Lakshmi is eating — hot gumbo thickened with okra, kebabs turned over the fire, beef simmered in a coconut-rich curry, puffy flour tortillas wrapped around beans and scrambled eggs.

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But the show doesn't stop at deliciousness, and doesn't waste time fetishizing these dishes. What makes "Taste the Nation" brilliant is that it refuses to be another shiny, happy, escapist series about food bringing everyone together. Despite the name of the show — a play on the long-running CBS News program "Face the Nation" — it isn't about taste at all.

"This is my rebuttal to the fear-mongering from Washington," Ms. Lakshmi said in a phone interview.

The camera lingers on the people who grow, make and serve the food, using familiar dishes as a way to dig into history and understand specific communities as they live now. And Ms. Lakshmi doesn't turn away from the violence and injustice that have often shaped American foodways.

An episode about San Francisco's Chinatown considers how the Chinese Exclusion Act shaped restaurant culture. And in Los Angeles, Ms. Lakshmi stops in front of a shuttered Iranian travel agency, noting how the travel ban threw people's lives into disarray. As she eats fry bread in Phoenix, her companion clarifies its origins, from the genocide of Indigenous peoples to their displacement in reservations.

One episode focuses on the Gullah Geechee community of the coastal Carolinas, whose enslaved ancestors from West Africa cultivated the rice fields of the South, and whose forced labor built the region's economy. Their food culture — deeply influential on the American South and beyond — was hard-won. And though it's now threatened by climate change, it still thrives. (Hulu is currently streaming this episode on YouTube for those without a subscription.)

But it's the first episode, in El Paso, that sets up the show's nuanced, truth-seeking point of view, opening to the sounds of helicopters flying overhead — the sounds of a community on the Mexican border, constantly under surveillance.

In El Paso, Ms. Lakshmi investigates the history of the burrito, trying it at various places, and finally landing at a diner called H & H Car Wash and Coffee Shop, where many of the employees commute daily from Juárez, just across the border.

Maynard Haddad, the son of a Syrian immigrant and an owner of the diner, tells Ms. Lakshmi that he's conservative, that he likes President Trump, and that he plans to vote for him in the next election. In the same breath, he wonders why his workers, who are Mexican, are being harassed.

How is this kind of dissonance possible? Ms. Lakshmi doesn't ask the question directly. Instead, she uses food to lead her audience right up to it, and lets them reckon with it themselves. There's no answer. It's ugly, it's infuriating, it's unfair. And it's American.

The show's weaker moments come when Ms. Lakshmi spotlights fellow celebrities. It is almost never interesting when two celebrities walk, talk and eat in the presence of a camera (see David Chang's star-filled, aimless series "Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner").

But Ms. Lakshmi does this infrequently. As a host, she is generous, inviting people to tell their own stories, in their own words, recognizing that American communities aren't monoliths, though they've often been simplified and presented that way on food television.

"The whole point was to give the microphone to the people responsible for the most exciting food in the country," Ms. Lakshmi said. This includes the historian and author Michael W. Twitty, the Charleston, S.C., chef B.J. Dennis, and the Apache leader Twila Cassadore, among so many others.

Though the format has its limits, each episode contains a full and often unexpected arc, with its own set of complications and contradictions. In the end, Ms. Lakshmi isn't just the star of her own show. She's chosen a far more powerful role: introducing her vast audience to a diverse constellation of voices.

The result is delicious, and makes for genuinely good television — producers greenlighting vapid, celebrity-filled food shows should take note.

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PHOTOS: In one “Taste the Nation” episode, Padma Lakshmi dives into Japan’s lasting cultural influence on Hawaii. (PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIE HOBRO/HULU) (D1); Above, Padma Lakshmi cooking with Emiliano Marentes in El Paso. Far left, some of the creations in that border city. Left, Ms. Lakshmi visited a sugar plantation in Honolulu to hack sugar cane with the chef Chris Kajioka, whose father and grandfather worked on sugar plantations. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOMINIC VALENTE/HULU; ANTHONY JACKSON; MARIE HOBRO/HULU) (D4)

Load-Date: July 14, 2020

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