

of the most convenient ways to not think about all the other things that are happening in the world because it so easily stands in for the real. It is in this unreal reality, to borrow a formulation from spectacle theorist Guy Debord (1995: 6), that celebrity chefs are superstars, and they are there because of everything that we cannot have and because of everything that we apparently refuse to learn.

The issues I have outlined here relate to broader ones about the role of media, information and entertainment in the twenty-first century. The spectacle of food is in many ways a useful analogy for how we consume generally, but it is also more than just a metaphor. The phenomenon of superstar chefs is important because it reflects some very real shifts in how we think about and represent food and its consumption, in how we frame questions of choice, agency and authority and how we negotiate the responsibilities we have to ourselves and to others. Like the fictional Betty Crocker, celebrity chefs are humanized brands. But unlike Crocker, or Ronald McDonald, or any other figure who has had an impact on how and what we eat, celebrity chefs are real people, and their personal involvement in our welfare also tells us something of the shifting boundaries between public and private in a globalized world, where it has become fairly normal to add other people's lives to the range of products we consume on a regular basis and to allow them to influence more and more of our own choices.

But the point here is not to suggest that needing or accepting guidance is uniformly bad. In advocating a life more autonomous than mediated, this book does not align itself with an economic or political Right that rejects intervention in all its forms (the food version of which is well summarized by the 2009 documentary *Fat Head*), nor is its message to switch off the television or cancel that subscription to *Bon Appétit*. It is, rather, a call for more critical awareness of media—including media figures—we consume, just as much of that media counsels us to be more aware of what we put in our bodies. The data abundance we live in is indeed a marvel, but there may be a useful lesson in the now-familiar story about how the poor health of the populations of many countries today is due, at least in part, to an indiscreet celebration of fast, cheap and convenient foods. In the same way as the solution to obesity cannot be to stop eating, we cannot opt out of an attention economy. We can, however, develop more discriminating tastes, one route to which is to recognize that not everything is worthy of our attention. And for the media that we do choose to consume, and which also promise better health and well-being in return for our attention, we can make an effort to evaluate their claims to authority and expertise. We should welcome guidance and intervention when we cannot do better for ourselves, but at the same time we should not forget to do the work of questioning whether we do need it and whether it might be interfering with our ability to help ourselves.

PART I

FOOD MEDIA: A FANTASY INDUSTRY

The New Study of Food

CHEF MARIO BATALI, ON THE SUBJECT OF COOKING

In 2006 an ancient manuscript called *Apicii—De Re Coquinaria* underwent the most recent of several restorations to ensure its survival for the next millennium. Bearing the name of Roman epicure Marcus Apicius, the text dates to the fifth century, making it the oldest surviving cookbook. The press release announcing the completion of the project explained the manuscript's importance: 'The work has proved invaluable to classical and medieval scholars and culinary historians and is still used extensively by top chefs around the world, including Mario Batali who kept a copy of the published work in his back pocket during a tour of Italy' (Young 2006). The existence and preservation of *De Re Coquinaria*—Latin for 'on the subject of cooking'—is a good reminder of a curiosity about food that potentially dates to the beginnings of language and communication. By telling us something of the way that some fifth-century Romans ate, the manuscript gives us a glimpse into a previous way of life, a way of eating and, most important, a way of representing that life and that food. Centuries after its compilation, *De Re Coquinaria* is clearly a work of great historical value.

The story of that work in Mario Batali's back pocket is intriguing because it gestures jointly to a history of food, a history of the representation of food and, perhaps most interestingly, a representation of that history. Armed with recipes from the Roman Empire, Batali, like the title of his 2005 cookbook (and accompanying Food Network show from 1997 to 2007), is *Molto Italiano*: very Italian. This story, then, is also about making history appetizing to the average consumer. Incongruous as it may seem, Batali's back pocket makes history sexy.

There is a good reason for this. He may be no David Beckham to behold, but Batali is a celebrity in all senses of the word. He is an award-winning chef and restaurateur, author of cookbooks (including one for NASCAR fans), food television personality and *Iron Chef* contestant, not to mention an (in)famous wearer and brand ambassador of bright orange Crocs (now manufactured as the Bistro Mario Batali Edition). This proved the right 'combination of earnings and sizzle' for chef Batali to make it onto *Forbes* magazine's Celebrity 100 list in 2006, to be named in 2007 as one of the ten most influential chefs

in America and in 2008 as one of the ten top-earning celebrity chefs. In April 2007 *Playboy Brazil* ran a day-in-the-life-of feature on Batali—perhaps an obvious nod to the idea of food porn, though just as likely an affirmation of the fame of a man who regularly hangs out with the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow (also co-presenter on his 2008 PBS show, *Spain . . . On the Road Again*), Michael Stipe and Bono.

In short, this is a man whom people know, and judging from his expanding empire, this is a man whose food people want to eat and watch; whose books, cookware and wine they want to buy—despite his reported claim that ‘No one chases me down the street. I’m not the Beatles. I’m a fucking cook’ (Heilemann 2008). This is also a man whom people trust, and he does not disappoint. As a *Chicago Tribune* writer put it in an article called ‘Keeping It Real’, the most important thing for fans waiting to have their copies of Batali’s then-latest cookbook signed was ‘that he was genuine’ (Jenkins 2007). Who better, then, to signal to the public the appeal of a historical text like *De Re Coquinaria* and to forge a link between past and present? Sure enough, as his website used to proclaim, ‘Through his restaurants, cookbooks, products and television shows, Mario Batali breathes the spirit of the Old World into modern day America and shows us how to revel in the inherent joys of daily life.’¹

The theme of the old in the new is not confined to food celebrities like Batali, whom we will leave for now with *De Re* in his back pocket. History is what animates many of our reflections on food: we enjoy talking about, eating or recreating food with stories. Sometimes those stories involve grandparents, or a recipe handed down through several generations. Sometimes they revolve around a special occasion or an accident with a delicious result. Sometimes the stories are political or sociologically revealing, like the histories of particular foodstuffs—the potato or bread or sugar—which helped to cultivate both popular and academic interest in food in the twentieth century (here Sidney Mintz’s iconic 1985 *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* is exemplary). With food studies a recent but established (and fast-growing) field,² there are by now numerous scholarly works which examine the role that food plays in wider socio-economic contexts, but the culinary monograph also continues as a popular bookshop genre, from Elizabeth David’s *English Bread and Yeast Cookery* (1977) to Mark Kurlansky’s *The Big Oyster, History on the Half Shell* (2006) to Ken Albala’s *Beans: A History* (2007), to name just a few.

As for the food industry itself, the Second World War was a watershed for many of the developments in food media. While recipes and nutritional advice have been in circulation for as long as the written word, it is fair to say that in the decades since the war, food’s media presence has grown concurrently with media advances themselves—as the hundreds of magazines, television shows and (thousands of) websites dedicated to food which have flourished

in the last six decades amply demonstrate. These advances were helped by two things: interest and technology. Although magazines had been printing recipes for housewives for many years already, it is not surprising that people should have a heightened interest in food during and after the war, given its relative scarcity during those years. This was also the case during the First World War when magazines like the American *Good Housekeeping* cautioned that ‘Extravagant and wasteful use of food is reprehensible at any time; with the nation at war and the food-supply scarcely adequate, it is little short of treasonable’ (*‘Tested and Approved Recipes’* 1917).

But the years following the Second World War were particularly significant for food media because they launched a new, more concentrated phase of consumerism which was a combined result of the end of rationing and rapid post-war advances in trade, agriculture and food production. Industrial developments in the latter part of the twentieth century progressively made more food available to increasing numbers of people. Similarly, developments in media technology combined to make more information about food available to more people. Paradoxically, these developments would also be instrumental in making food media about much more, and much less, than food. These were the beginnings of a consumer base of foodies whose interests in food lay beyond the mere eating of it.

ENTER THE FOODIE

Three examples summarize this shift, each in turn anticipating the occasion, decades later, when foodies would officially be christened as such by Ann Barr and Paul Levy’s *The Official Foodie Handbook* in 1984.³ The first is *Gourmet* magazine (1941–2009). Although launched on the eve of war, so to speak, the magazine’s longevity speaks to the success of a then-budding market for ‘good living’ centred around, but not confined to, food: ‘There was almost nothing that the editors considered outside the magazine’s purview’, writes Ruth Reichl (2002: ix) in her introduction to *Endless Feasts*, a collection of writings from sixty years of *Gourmet*. *Gourmet* represented a popular version of one of the elements that early food studies texts recognized: that food, more than simply sustenance, is a way of life. But in contrast to sociological, anthropological and historical analyses of the role food plays in broader social contexts, *Gourmet* dished up food largely as a distraction from life (as we also saw in the Introduction).

The example of *Gourmet*—both as a long-standing publication and as a prototype for the massive food magazine industry—underlines an important ideological pivot of food media: the political and economic luxury of indulgence. If food studies recognizes food as essential, food media capitalize on

food as an essential distraction. Roland Barthes, in his 1975 introduction to 'kitchen philosopher' Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste* (first published in 1825), explains the primacy of this luxury, or non-essential, consumption to Brillat-Savarin (here B.-S.)'s paradigm:

In the schema of food, B.-S. always marked the distinction between need and desire: 'The pleasure of eating requires, if not hunger, at least appetite; the pleasure of the table is generally independent of both.' At a period when the bourgeoisie knew no social culpability, B.-S. sets up a cynical opposition: on one side, *natural appetite*, which is of the order of need; and on the other, *appetite for luxury*, which is of the order of desire. Everything is here, of course: the species needs to procreate in order to survive, the individual needs to eat in order to subsist; yet the satisfaction of these two needs does not suffice man: he must bring on stage, so to speak, the *luxury* of desire, erotic or gastronomic: an enigmatic, useless supplement, the desired food—the kind that B.-S. describes—is an unconditional waste or loss, a kind of ethnographic ceremony by which man celebrates his power, his freedom to consume his energy 'for nothing'. (Barthes 1986: 251)⁴

Brillat-Savarin is of course best known for the aphorism 'Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are' and, for that reason, is something of a foodie hero. Yet the dichotomy between needs and desire that Barthes describes here is a more useful reminder of what it actually means to be what you eat—in other words, the privilege that is attached to being able to celebrate that declaration to the exclusion of other concerns.

The second example is Elizabeth David's *A Book of Mediterranean Food*, first published in London in 1950. The result of years of travelling that kept David abroad for most of the war years, the recipes in *Mediterranean Food* called for ingredients like olive oil, lemons and almonds, which were—to the consternation of some of her readers—nowhere to be found in post-war, still-rationed Britain. Only later, as she put it in a subsequent essay, did she 'realize that in the England of 1947 those were dirty words I was putting down' (cit. Chaney 1998: 217). The book nevertheless proved a great success, and David was soon ushered into the national culinary imagination. *Mediterranean Food* helped to create an appetite for the kind of food fantasy we now describe as culinary tourism. In the words of 'Fat Lady' Clarissa Dickson Wright:⁵

It is this vision of a land that existed solely in Elizabeth David's imagination which has shaped our food, our dreams, and our thinking over the past fifty years. Those who rush to buy holiday homes in France or Chiantishire (as Tuscany has now been renamed) or those endless books that have only to mention purple lavender fields or baskets of lemons to make the best-seller lists, all are searching for a place that isn't there except in the heart of this great food writer. (Dickson Wright 2002: iii)

But it was not all daydreaming. This fantasy also unleashed a very real consumer demand. As David noted less than ten years after the original publication of *Mediterranean Food*:

So startlingly different is the food situation now as compared with only two years ago that I think there is scarcely a single ingredient, however exotic, mentioned in this book which cannot be obtained somewhere in this country. . . . Those who make an occasional marketing expedition to Soho or the region of Tottenham Court Road can buy Greek cheese and Calamata olives, Tahina paste from the Middle East, little birds preserved in oil from Cyprus, stuffed vine leaves from Turkey . . . , Italian salame and rice, even occasionally Neapolitan Mozzarella cheese. . . . These are details which complete the flavour of a Mediterranean meal, but the ingredients which make this cookery so essentially different from our own are available to all; they are the olive oil, wine, lemons, garlic, onions, tomatoes, and the aromatic herbs and spices which go to make up what is so often lacking in English cooking: variety of flavour and colour, and the warm, stimulating smells of genuine food. (David 1958: 12–13)

Here David's remark that the main ingredients of a Mediterranean meal are 'available to all' is an early indication of the diversity of foods and food habits that now characterize one version of globalization. It points to the genesis of a modern multiculturalism that has come about from the movement of people and products in the second half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, not unlike *Gourmet* magazine, David's claim also rests on a classist assumption that the availability of ingredients corresponds to a global, or equal, level of disposable income. Olive oil, wine, lemons and garlic, even more so now than then, are certainly available for purchase almost anywhere, and at any time of the year. But they are not, and were not then, 'available to all': available does not mean universally accessible. David's text in this way prefigures the ideological tensions that underpin one of the central debates around food and globalization today, where a celebration of variety is often pitted against the so-called McDonaldization⁶ of the world. Both of these scenarios are based on an assumption of access.

The question of pluralism and diversity is also linked to that other discursive bedfellow of globalization: democracy. The apparent democratization of food is evident not only in the countless cultural or 'ethnic' food experiences available to us now in supermarkets and restaurants, but also in the multitude of cookbooks, television shows and blogs that promise to make 'available to all' what was previously the domain of professional chefs. Much like debates over whether globalization represents pluralism or threatens the imposition of a monoculture (typically the vaguely named 'American' culture), this new democracy is likewise not without anxieties. Some of these are played out in the food world, for example in media disputes about the copyrightability of

'signature' recipes (Buccafusco 2006), calling into question whether chefs have earned, or even have the right to earn, the status of artists. These antagonisms betray a central paradox of globalization, namely that the apparent blurring of traditional boundaries—between countries, professions, classes—often leads to heightened competitiveness and insecurities that result in ever stronger impulses to safeguard precisely these categories. Historically, *Mediterranean Food* is situated before these conflicts emerged to any significant degree. But David's non-inclusive 'all' importantly anticipates the highly selective interpretation of globalization so familiar today, whether from the perspective of those who celebrate it or that of those who despise it.

In 1966 the Marxist critic Pierre Macherey argued that meaning emerges as much from what is made explicit as from what remains silent, and this Machereyan silence is useful for understanding some of the discrepancies between 'democratic' stories of globalization—such as David's celebration of availability—and the experience of those who, like some modern chefs, perceive the elimination of historical boundaries as a threat. Macherey (1981: 194–5) writes: 'The order which it [a narrative structure] professes is merely an imagined order, projected onto disorder, the fictive resolution of ideological conflicts, a resolution so precarious that it is obvious in the very letter of the text where incoherence and incompleteness burst forth'. Seen from this perspective, *Mediterranean Food* marks a paradigm shift not only because it describes and helps to set in motion the traffic in culinary information and products that characterizes much of the developed world today, but also because it ignores certain things: on publication, the non-availability of 'Mediterranean' ingredients generally; after publication, the non-availability of these 'basics' to a number of people.

Exacerbated by an attention economy which makes available more information than most people can effectively filter and process, this dynamic of silence—of leaving certain things unsaid and of representing order and consensus where there is none—is enduring in food media, particularly when it comes to the controversial topic of obesity. But for now we can also see it in how the success of *Mediterranean Food* anticipates the fashion for a so-called Mediterranean diet, rich in olive oil, wine, pasta and so on. That this eating pattern is 'healthier' has been supported by statistics indicating lower rates of heart disease and obesity in Mediterranean countries. But that eating lots of pasta and olive oil does not miraculously lead to good health and weight loss points to one of the major strands, if not the dominant strand, of food marketing and consumption today—one that ignores history and context in favour of fashion and corporate concerns. The popular version of the Mediterranean diet, while a gold mine for the olive oil, wine and pasta industries, remains silent on the historical explanation for the food patterns of people in the Mediterranean: a Mediterranean climate and physical labour (Nestle

2002), as well as poverty and questionable social policies (Helstosky 2004). David's book was the product of the author's personal experience, and in the words of Marguerite Patten (of whom more shortly), *Mediterranean Food* helped to bring 'sunlight . . . into Britain' (cit. Tober 2004). Yet as a commodity, which cookbooks also are, it ironically stands as a forerunner of a depersonalized, decontextualized relationship to food variously described as a reductionist approach (Nestle 2002) or as the ideology of nutritionism: 'the widely shared but unexamined assumption . . . that the key to understanding food is . . . the nutrient' (Pollan 2007).

The role of the nutrient brings us to the third and final major development for food media after the war: the rise of food television and, with it, the modern celebrity chef. Televised cooking was first broadcast in the United Kingdom, and it was Marguerite Patten who featured on the BBC's inaugural magazine show, *Designed for Women*, on the air from 1947 to the early 1960s. Patten had been employed as a home economist by the UK Ministry of Food since 1942, and during the war was active in teaching people how to prepare nutritious meals using rationed food: 'Our campaign was to find people, wherever they might be, and make them aware of the importance of keeping their families well fed on the rations available', including by visiting schools 'to assess the food value and vitamin content of school dinners' (Patten 2004b: 7–8). Patten's media presence during the war was boosted by her contribution of recipes to the ministry's radio programme *The Kitchen Front*, launched in 1940 with an appeal from Lord Woolton, the recently appointed Minister of Food:

It is to you, the housewives of Britain, that I want to talk tonight. We have a job to do, together, you and I, an immensely important war job. No uniforms, no parades, no drills, but a job wanting a lot of thinking, and a lot of knowledge too. We are the army that guards the kitchen front. (Woolton 1940)

Compared to *Good Housekeeping*'s earlier strategy of reminding its American readers that 'extravagant and wasteful use of food is . . . little short of treasonable', the tone of Woolton's petition is remarkably friendly. This may account, in part, for the success of the ministry's wartime campaigns, not least convincing people to make good use of Dr Carrot, Potato Pete, and the Minister's signature Woolton Pie (a baked vegetable dish topped with potatoes and cheese and served with gravy).

The examples of *Good Housekeeping* and *The Kitchen Front* as wartime efforts are good indicators of the early role of popular media in people's food choices. Patten's career took this to a new level with the introduction of television, where, building on radio and personal appearances, she continued to provide people with ideas for how to cook with limited foods until the

end of rationing in the United Kingdom in 1954. Although Patten was not the first British television cook, she was the first whose television appearances helped to build and sustain a prolific career, including authorship of more than 150 cookbooks, an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) for 'Services to the Art of Cookery' and citations as the original celebrity chef (Hansen 2008c).

TELEVISION: THE MAGIC SCREEN

The genre of food-related programming grew alongside the television industry itself: after the BBC's first broadcast in 1936, television was introduced in the United States in 1939, so the audience that watched the first televised cooking also belonged to the first generation of television viewers. Patten's television career thus coincided with the broader effects of this new leisure activity, like the introduction of TV dinners. In her words,

During the war years the radio had given news, information and entertainment but how much greater was the impact of television! As more and more homes had a television set, there was a noticeable effect upon the way evening meals were served and one heard a lot about TV meals served on trays so no time need be spent away from watching the magic screens. Television gradually prevented people from going to the cinema or to other outside entertainments as regularly as they once had done. (Patten 2004a: 9)

Post-war television, in other words, marks the starting point of the narrative that is a love affair with the 'magic screen' which, among other things, teaches you how to cook but keeps you away from the stove. It is a story that in its twenty-first-century chapter has become so engaging that the term 'TV dinner' equally describes what is on the screen as it does that frozen, microwaveable meal first popularized in the 1950s.

This semantic shift summarizes one influence of television over the last seven decades—a shift best described as progressive detachment. As Patten noted so early on, one of television's strongest manifestations in society has been, and continues to be, as a substitute, not only for cinema and other 'entertainments', but for conversation, socializing and other activities of leisure and learning, including cooking. While there can be no doubting the enormous informative and educational value of a medium that reaches millions of viewers worldwide every day, the story of food television is revealing of the paradoxes that come with an unsurpassed wealth of information, when global obesity levels continue to rise along with an abundance of data about how to potentially prevent it.

That Jamie Oliver should echo Patten's efforts and take up a campaign to improve school food in 2005 is just one example of this paradox. Oliver's first *School Dinners* manifesto describes what he thinks 'needs to happen': 'Commit to a ten-year strategic plan and fund a long-term public campaign to get people back on to a proper diet and empower/persuade (and possibly scare, if needed) the public to make better choices. With obesity costing the NHS more than smoking, it seems logical that a similar campaign should be appropriate' (Oliver 2006b).⁷ The ethical implications of scare tactics aside for the moment, the key word in this manifesto is *back*. When exactly were people on a 'proper diet'? Strange as it may seem (and here we have some evidence of how our grandparents may have fared better than some of us), it was during the Second World War, when food in the United Kingdom was scarcest and David's Mediterranean ingredients were confined to the Mediterranean. As then-director of the Imperial War Museum Dr Alan Borg commented in his foreword to Patten's wartime cookbook, *We'll Eat Again*, 'The health of the nation was surprisingly good during the war years, despite the physical and emotional stresses so many had to endure' (Patten 2004b: 6).

This underlines a noteworthy transformation that has taken place during the last half century or so with regard to the role of the media in general, and food media specifically. Very briefly, this transformation can be described as a move from the educational and informative to the entertaining and vicarious: as food journalist Mark Bittman (2010) wrote of the United States, where 'people are cooking less than ever before', 'Americans watch 35 hours of television a week. . . . Increasing amounts of that time are spent watching other people cook.' Consider the correlation between media information and consumer behaviour, then and now: the efforts of Patten and the Ministry of Food during the war led to improved overall national health not because foods like Spam, dried bananas and egg powder necessarily make for more wholesome (and certainly not more delicious) eating,⁸ but because people presumably took good advantage of information about how to make the most of these foods. Six decades later, Oliver's manifesto in response to a 'need'—in this case, general poor health and rising levels of obesity—signals some of what has been lost between the Second World War and 2005, a period which has otherwise seen unprecedented growth in virtually all sectors, notably in access to information, primarily through television and the Internet, and to a variety of food products. What has been lost, *Jamie's School Dinners* suggests, is a tangible connection between knowledge (what people know to be 'good' for them) and behaviour (how they eat). (Environmental geographers usefully describe the difference between attitudes and behaviour when it comes to sustainable development as the 'value-action gap').

This is not to claim that television is the cause of obesity, an argument that most commonly blames the proverbial box for breeding couch potatoes

and for luring consumers with junk food advertisements. More interesting is the media phenomenon that is *Jamie's School Dinners*, firstly because Oliver's campaign directly echoes that of Patten and the wartime Ministry of Food. When Oliver's show was first broadcast, however, this piece of history was conspicuously absent, in the way of the powerful collective amnesia that all too often characterizes modern society, where 'new' is the most reliable product to sell. (Only in 2008 did the chef pay direct homage to Patten with his very own *Ministry of Food* series—more on this in Chapter 3.) That is not to say that Oliver has been basking in uncontested glory; his detractors have been numerous, ranging from cultural critics who accuse him of fomenting food hysteria (Lyons 2006b; O'Neill 2006a) to mothers—dubbed the 'sinner ladies' (Perrie 2006)—who actively protested the banning of junk food in schools by selling it to children through school fences. We should also not forget the 'unexpected black market in junk food among children who are refusing to change their eating habits' (O'Neill 2006b). These controversies point to two basics that most of us have in abundance but which were arguably in shorter supply during the war years: choice and responsibility.

TO YOUR HEALTH

It is a symptom of modern media and consumerism that the term 'healthy' is one of the most semantically unstable words in the English language. It is a word which has particularly suffered from the liberties of a relativism that disregards its simple etymology: to be healthy is to be whole, uninjured and free of disease. Yet depending on the decade, publication and political or corporate agenda, to name just a few contexts, the term 'healthy' is used to define anything from low-fat, to low-carb, to thin, to vegetarian, to organic, to not caring about what you eat, to eating in a way that Michael Pollan (2007) describes as 'more like the French. Or the Japanese. Or the Italians. Or the Greeks'. Interpretation is only the first of our choices. Every version of healthy is complemented by a range of products on supermarket shelves (or entire outlets that brand themselves as 'health food' stores) or at local farmers' markets, to complete a healthy eating plan, along with a healthy eating mind. We also have the option to be blatantly *un*-healthy, for example by ordering one of the bigger burgers that fast-food eateries compete to produce in a trend that is not, apparently, 'about size or value. It's about thumbing your nose at the food police.' As one satisfied customer at Hardee's, home of the (1,420-calorie) Monster Thickburger, emailed the restaurant: 'While other restaurants were a bunch of Nancy-boys and became low-carb cowards in the face of moronic "they made me fat" lawsuits, you did the AMERICAN thing by

spitting in the face of lawyers, nutritionists and food-nazi types and offering a monument to Americanism' (cit. Tamaki 2005).⁹

The 'made-me-fat' lawsuits raise the question of responsibility and bring us back to the controversy surrounding *Jamie's School Dinners*. One of the first effects of Oliver's campaign, as the new underground in junk food tells us, was that many children refused to eat the new 'healthy' school food. This resulted in a rise in packed lunches, which, according to Oliver, 'are the biggest evil. Even the best packed lunch is a shit packed lunch' (cit. Lyons 2006a). Naturally this caused an outcry because of impressions that the chef was condescending to parents for the quality of meals they give their children. Not to be outdone, in the second season of the television series, *Return to Jamie's Dinners* (2006), Oliver is less circumspect: 'I've spent two years of [sic] being PC [politically correct] about parents. It's kind of time now to say, you know, if you're giving, you know, very young kids bottles and bottles of fizzy drink you're a fucking arsehole, you're a tosser. If you give them bags of fucking shitty sweets at a very young age you're an idiot.'

While Oliver's candour may offend, the authority he assumes here is perfectly in line with the multitude of messages that are broadcast worldwide, and daily, about what, and what not, to eat. So much so, that anything is potentially 'wrong': 'When I go grocery shopping', claims one writer in the *Washington Post*, 'I'm paralyzed with indecision. Everything, it seems, is either ethically, nutritionally or environmentally incorrect. Guilt is ruining my appetite' (Sagon 2006). This is the familiar paradox of plenty where too much choice coupled with too much information results, if not in guilt, at least in a profound sense of insecurity. Echoing Herbert Simon's description of docility, what this insecurity calls into question is authority; who to listen to, who and what to believe and, by extension, who to make responsible for the choices we make. This ambiguity extends beyond just food choices to the definition of human conditions, like obesity: the authors of *Diet Nation* (2006), for example, argue that declaring obesity an epidemic is less in the service of public health than a means to 'enormous commercial, financial and power-maximising opportunities for . . . the medical profession, academic researchers, the public health community, the government health bureaucracy, the pharmaceutical industry, the fitness industry and the weight-loss industry' (Luik, Basham and Gori 2006). Branding in the form of clinical diagnosis further empowers obesity 'sufferers' to receive medical treatment and also goes some way to removing personal accountability and social stigma (Chapter 7 provides a more thorough treatment of obesity as a media phenomenon).¹⁰

Underlying the conflicting information about food is a tension between choice and responsibility that challenges one of the most effective marketing tools of modern economies: the power of the consumer. While the range of

products and information suggests this power in the form of choice, the variance in what we are told we *should* be consuming more often puts the responsibility for that choice elsewhere. Even where giving up that responsibility is rejected, such as by mothers who refuse to let Jamie Oliver decide what their children should eat, it is a testament to the authority of the media that they are demonized as ‘sinner ladies’. But the greatest authority here is celebrity. Faced with his dissenters, Oliver may claim, as he did on one episode, that ‘This is not the Jamie Oliver show, this is not a fucking pantomime . . . I’m here because I truly care’. But it was a Jamie Oliver show: it was the double BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) award-winning *Jamie’s School Dinners*, now available for purchase from Amazon.

There can be no questioning the various concrete results of Oliver’s campaign, including revised government legislation around school food, the earmarking of the topic for concern in countries around the world, and the chef being voted Channel 4’s ‘Most Inspiring Political Figure’ in 2006. This was a reality show in the sense of making real changes. But neither can there be any doubt that Oliver’s already-established fame was a driving force behind the campaign’s impact, including its controversies (of which there have been many, including a public accusation of—and subsequent apology to—Oliver for ‘lecturing’ people about what to eat by then-newly appointed Health Secretary Andrew Lansley in 2010). A new global awareness around school food confirms the influential role not only of the media, but also of celebrity and the cachet of what Joseph Epstein (2006) calls celebrity philanthropy ('It isn't enough to be everywhere known,' writes Epstein, 'one must also be known to be good'). Consider the case of Jeanette Orrey, who for several years before *Jamie’s School Dinners* had been campaigning for much the same at a school in Nottingham in the United Kingdom. Although Orrey did much in her local context to raise awareness about children’s nutrition, her wider recognition primarily came about with the publication in 2005 of a cookbook, *The Dinner Lady*, with a foreword by Oliver.

From one perspective, this goes without saying: celebrities naturally have a vantage point from which to reach a wider audience. Celebrities can be effective philanthropists because the world pays attention to them. Yet the example of Oliver and his school dinners is instructive because, in contrast to Patten, whose celebrity status grew as a result of public trust—working with the ‘people’—and in tandem with media advances, the results of Oliver’s campaign were largely possible due to his established celebrity and considerable media presence. Finally, the polarized reactions to Oliver situate his voice as one among many in the media cacophony that prescribe ‘healthy’ eating, and the fact of such mixed reactions highlights the confusion and anxiety—in some cases, veritable hysteria—that conflicting information breeds. Here it is the voice of the celebrity chef that emerges as the loudest, silencing even

mothers. He is heard not (only) because he swears, nor because he is a qualified authority on children’s health (he is not), but because he is a television star. And whether teaching or preaching, Oliver does what television stars do best: he entertains.

LET ME ENTERTAIN YOU

The fact that food television stars carry as much, and in several cases more, cultural and monetary wealth than traditional celebrities like film or football stars is one clear indicator of the importance of food television to contemporary leisure industries. Although televised cooking originated in the United Kingdom, the US cable channel Food Network, launched in 1993, was the first television channel dedicated entirely to food, and was described in 2006 as ‘one of the most watched television networks in the nation’ (Shamion 2006). Statistics for that year report that the channel—available in 155 countries worldwide—reached 89 million homes across the United States, and that its website received 6 million unique visitors per month. With these numbers, food channels have become the perfect platforms for manufacturing celebrity chefs and for turning food into a spectator sport.

In 1946, one year before Patten’s debut on British screens, James Beard appeared in the United States in a segment on NBC’s *For You and Yours*. Beard had some experience with both acting and cooking, including running a food shop, Hors D’Oeuvres, Inc., and publishing an appetizer cookbook, *Hors D’Oeuvres and Canapés* (1940). Beard’s personality was central to his soon-to-be iconic status, one that endures today in the James Beard Foundation, a non-profit organization that yearly recognizes excellence in the culinary world (James Beard Awards are some of the most prestigious tributes in American gastronomy). Beard’s declaration that ‘food is very much theatre’ (cit. Jones 1990: 105) summarizes the centrality of performance to modern food television. It is a key feature in the obvious and historical sense of demonstration: the difference between reading a recipe in a book or magazine and watching it being cooked on television is that someone else is performing. But it is also worth remembering the difference between performance as education—arguably the original point of televised cooking, as the example of Patten suggests—and performance as entertainment.

When the US Food Network changed its focus in 2000 from ‘how-to’ cooking to include more lifestyle, game and reality food shows, then-president Judy Girard explained: ‘The more that we can convince people that we’re not a cooking channel, the better. It’s become a great experience for viewers. It’s not a passive viewing experience’ (cit. Umstead 2001). Presumably the change had to do with ratings, which may have suggested that people are more interested

in watching food on television—or simply watching television—than actually cooking. So the subtext that television values are more important than education is clear, but there is an intriguing irony in this description of food television as non-food and non-passive. While Girard does not explain exactly how the experience is not passive (if it is not a cooking channel, we can safely assume she did not mean that viewers would leave the couch to get cooking), it is probably this irony that has led more than one journalist to explore the ‘great experience’ of food television by subjecting themselves to a speculating binge. ‘Call it a sudden hunger to learn something new, or maybe just call it a stunt: Could I, a kitchen neophyte, learn anything about cooking in a week spent in the warm, comforting glow of my television?’ asked John Maynard (2006) in the *Washington Post*. ‘Short answer: not really.’ Even more the stuntman, Bill Buford watched seventy-two hours of continuous food programming and reached a more depressing conclusion:

Never in our history as a species have we been so ignorant about our food. And it is revealing about our culture that, in the face of such widespread ignorance about a human being’s most essential function—the ability to feed itself—there is now a network broadcasting into ninety million American homes, entertaining people with shows about making coleslaw. (Buford 2006b)

Clearly these experiments have entertainment value in themselves, as does reading about them. This, perhaps, is the active viewing experience, if being entertained constitutes activity. Yet Buford’s comments also evoke the potent strain between information and ignorance that defines media-saturated cultures, where, all too often, non-passivity manifests in the activity of *not* using available information. Ignorance, in this scheme, does not suggest unawareness. It is rather a case of ignoring information, or simply choosing not to use it.

Buford’s words echo those of Siegfried Kracauer, a German writer and film theorist, in a seminal essay on photography, first published in 1927:

Never before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense . . . Never before has a period known so little about itself. In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding. (Kracauer 1993: 432)

It is a short step to apply these words to the twenty-first century, where endless representations of food—written, visual and spoken—compete with the ignorance that Buford describes. Kracauer’s analysis is fascinating in retrospect because of the historical continuity it highlights between the growth of popular media and intellectual non-activity. In our present day, it is an

acknowledgement of performance as acting—essentially an *unreality*—that one of the recurring themes of food television and its personas is ‘keeping it real’. Jamie Oliver swears that his is not a pantomime. Mario Batali, likewise, is genuine.

The question of authenticity has become central to virtually every aspect of the food industry. We apply it to the behaviour of celebrity chefs, to reality television, to ethnic dining, or to the question whether the ingredients in a jar match the nutritional information on the label, or whether the organic tomato lives up to its claims. More than anything, these questions reveal the extent to which our lives are shadowed by artifice. Not (always) artifice in the sense of fake, but rather in the sense of representation. Authenticity is important because it has become so difficult to prove, both in terms of the media and in terms of the actual food we consume. As the contexts and paradigms for defining the authentic continuously shift—remembering, too, that not all celebrity chefs are actually chefs—keeping it ‘real’ becomes both increasingly urgent and increasingly vacuous.

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In her anthology *Food: What We Eat and How We Eat*, Dickson Wright cites a French baker who once asked her ‘why it is that the English produce more and more food television, and cook less and less’ (1999: 7). She does not explain how she replied, or if she did at all, but it is an important question because it highlights how fairly large ideological and behavioural shifts can be both brought about and perpetuated by media, and also how the lack of questions along the way leads to a new state of ‘natural’ in which it becomes more and more difficult to understand how we got to where we are. Understanding the present through the past matters not just for the sake of academic interest, but also for practical reasons, particularly when something needs to change, as we are so often told in the context of obesity. If we do not recognize a historical trajectory, how can we possibly be held accountable, or indeed hope to reverse it?

The story of food media in this and the last century is one of progressive detachment—from history, from politics, from experience—that relates directly to industrial advances in media and technology. On a literal level, the industrialization of food, although well underway before the war (see Goody 1982), has been effective in decontextualizing food to the extent that it is possible to enjoy a diet sourced directly from supermarket shelves and thereby to avoid any active engagement with the production of the foods that we consume, be it on the farm or in the factory. Although the multitude of food trends today include some that try to remedy this situation, such as the organic and Slow Food movements, their effectiveness as remedies is severely restricted

by the economic luxury required not to resort to convenience foods. In the end, these movements represent little more than exclusive minorities and yet another set of voices in the clamour to define 'healthy'.

But the overarching narrative here is one of the commodification of politics and history through food. This includes how we define ourselves in the present and also how we represent and claim our histories (as we have already seen with Pollan and how 'our grandparents ate'). Batali was born and raised in Seattle. The 'two villages' in the subtitle of his 1998 cookbook, *Simple Italian Foods: Recipes from My Two Villages*, refer to the Tuscan village where he apprenticed—Borgo Capanne—and to New York's Greenwich Village. So celebrity chef Batali's predecessor is no more Apicius the Roman epicure than it is James Beard, pioneer of American food television. But where memory is in constant competition with the 'new', it is not history that informs us as much as the other way around; we (re)claim history. Simply put, carrying *De Re Coquinaria* in his back pocket does not give Batali the stamp of the Roman Empire. Rather, it is that empire which now bears the imprint of a bright orange Croc.

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Foodie Books and Fantasies

COMMUNICATION: 'THE OBJECT THUS MADE COMMON'

When Elizabeth David published *Mediterranean Food* in post-war Britain in 1950, she 'brought warmth, light and colour to a world blighted by shortage and rationing', goes one description (Catterall 1999: 32). 'To the innocent reader', goes another, her recipes are

already redolent with the smell and taste of the wildly beautiful mountains of Crete. Knowing more of their provenance, one almost begins to believe that, like so many others in the book, these short and to-the-point recipes have such a weight of experience and history behind them that part of the spell they work upon us is at the level of the subliminal. (Chaney 1998: 153)

David 'stood above her contemporaries', writes the same author (a biographer), because 'without in any way relinquishing her personality she transcended the personal. As a result her recipes are authentic, authoritative cameos of Truth' (p. 294).

Reading recipes as vignettes of truth with a capital T—indeed reading recipes as anything beyond a set of cooking instructions—is a remarkable gauge of how mass communications not only make more information available to more people, but can also change the way we perceive that information, particularly the kind of information that we come to have in abundance. From the Latin word *recipe*, meaning 'take' (indicating their prescriptive tone, as in 'take one cup of flour' or, as it continues in the abbreviated Rx of pharmaceutical prescriptions, 'take two pills with food'), recipes were not always the fantasy-inducing commodities they now commonly function as. They were typically practical, like the recommendation in *De Re Coquinaria* for doctoring spoiled honey: 'How bad honey may be turned into a saleable article is to mix one part of the spoiled honey with two parts of good honey' (Grocock and Grainger 2006: 139). Clearly this kind of advice was not meant for everyone—certainly not the customers some merchant was hoping to dupe with a jar of merely 'saleable' honey. Practical yet specialized (it was not unusual for early recipes to merely list ingredients, with no quantities or even instruction, meaning they relied on previous training),