

For the next few days, food media were unsurprisingly full of tributes to Floyd from a host of famous personalities who credited him for their own successes in the kitchen and on the screen—but who had notably been quiet about his supposed influence for the many years that he was still alive but off the celebrity radar. It is perhaps for the same reason that this book acknowledges Floyd only in passing. He was undoubtedly one of the first great television cooks, and he was undoubtedly a great inspiration to many people because of that. But in the same way that comparisons between Child and Ray cannot hold because of the fundamental incomparability of their historical contexts (including the competence and expectations of their fans), so Floyd as celebrity chef was a very different creature from any of his contemporary successors. His main responsibility was to himself, and his premature death may be interpreted by naysayers as evidence that he was not very good at looking after himself. But on the evidence of the life that he did live—at least the parts of that life that his viewers were privy to—he put enjoying himself above all else, and he never let fear get in the way of pleasure when it came to food. Most important of all, he never publicly condescended to his viewers by suggesting that they should be fearful or incompetent in the kitchen. That is a lesson worth taking away from someone who I certainly hope is not the last of his kind.

Introduction: Do You Remember When Chefs Just Cooked?

'Do you remember when chefs just cooked?' asked a journalist in *The Guardian* on the last day of 2010. Referring to recent tabloid episodes featuring two celebrity chefs, and very little food or cooking, the author shared his feeling that 'the whole celebrity chef era has, finally, reached a kind of psychic crisis' (Naylor 2010). This is a bold note of finality with which to describe an industry that may be home to a number of personal crises but which on the whole shows very few signs of decline, if that is what a psychic crisis augurs. Quite the opposite: on the evidence of the enormous economic, political and cultural support generated by its millions of fans, the celebrity chef business is more robust than ever.

There have been famous chefs for centuries. There have also been famous painters, artists and musicians for centuries, but chefs are different because they are connected with something that we may get aesthetic pleasure out of and even call art—Marie-Antoine Carême was as famous in his day for elaborate confectionary as Ferran Adrià is today for his apple caviar, or Heston Blumenthal for his 'meat fruit'—but that appeals to us in a different way than music or a painting for the simple reason that we need food to survive. As the *Guardian* journalist rightly points out, today's celebrity chefs do more—and in some cases less—than their predecessors, who were generally behind closed kitchen doors, cooking. It was for their work in the kitchen that chefs historically became famous, which indicates at least one major shift whereby people who were formerly servants—as in one who is publicly or privately employed to perform a service—have stepped onto the main stage.

There are a number of factors behind this development, among them media advances that have taken cameras behind closed kitchen doors and a long-existing celebrity culture which has been useful for helping people to ignore the basic anomaly of a chef behaving like a rock star—or, more prosaically, recording a cooking performance which will later be broadcast to a viewership of millions. In both cases, spectators are key, because behaving like a rock star will never work unless someone also treats you like one; celebrities have to be celebrated by someone, and this is where consumers—we, in some cases—have played, and continue to play, a decisive role in sustaining a whole new

industry. We ourselves have paved the way for chefs to become stars, because if it has taught us anything, more than a century of media intervention into how we cook and eat has taught us to think that we need someone to tell us how to cook and eat. This is the crux of one fairly simple argument that I want to put forward in this book: the more food media we consume, the less incentive we have to think for ourselves about how we eat.

If we remove food from the equation, this is not an original idea: media sceptics have been making similar claims since the early days of mass communication, notably Frankfurt School theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who in 1944 delivered their infamously scathing critique of the American ‘culture industry’ and the audience it apparently dupes and pacifies.¹ Yet, whether or not that analysis was true to its time, the line of that particular argument cannot hold today, because media make up a much more complex beast that cannot be described as inherently good or bad, nor as easily polarized against a sea of so-called vulnerable consumers. Economic and technological landscapes have shifted dramatically enough over the last five decades or so to scramble what were previously clear distinctions between screens and audiences, and between producers and consumers. There is no single culture industry, there is no homogeneous audience, and there is no media-literate consumer with access to the technology of blogs, Twitter or Facebook who cannot also be a media producer.

This book is not a condemnation of food media nor of their consumers. It narrates the rise of the celebrity chef in the second half of the twentieth century and, through that story, gives a critical account of some of the ways that media have come to determine how we think and behave when it comes to nourishing ourselves. The story that transforms chefs into superstars is compelling because it is about food, which we all have an interest in, but also because it is about much more than food. It is about how we negotiate a whole range of personal, cultural and political choices based not on experience or desire, or on the instincts of our natural appetites, but on popular trends, or on fear of the ‘risks’ of modern life. More worrying still is how food media allow and indeed encourage us *not to engage* with those choices by detaching us from our social responsibilities. One of the strangest consequences of the enormous success of the food media industry is that the more access we have to information about food and nourishment—which is what food media are and which is epitomized in the figure of the celebrity chef—the less we apparently know what to do with it. The most striking result of the explosion in images and representations of food and those who prepare it over the last decades—in cookbooks, magazines, on television, on the Internet—has been an explosion in the consumption of images and representations of food and those who prepare it.

This is important, firstly because more media does not equal better media, which means that the quality of the information we consume is, at best, inconsistent. Were entertainment the only point of food media, this would not be a problem; the only attribute entertainment requires is to be diverting, which watching a food show on television or flipping through a foodie magazine certainly can be. As we will see in Chapter 5, a sizeable portion of the food media industry continues to strive to do nothing more than provide entertainment and to capitalize on the vicarious enjoyment of food. But diversion also takes us away from something, and the explosion in our consumption of images of and information about food does not mean we are necessarily engaging with that information in a meaningful way—learning from it or using it to our benefit. While many (myself included) can claim that they *do learn*, there exists a notable gulf between, on the one hand, the quantity of media that celebrate feeding yourself as easy, accessible, desirable and delicious and, on the other hand, the steady stream of statistics that continue to inform us that we are getting it all wrong, notably the numbers and stories that describe the spread of an obesity ‘epidemic’.

It may be one of the great ironies of our time that with so much knowledge and so many resources at our fingertips, the world is apparently so sick. A 2009 report from the National Health Services (NHS) in the United Kingdom, for example, details that despite predictions of obesity spikes ‘flattening out’ and evidence of people being generally more aware of the health benefits of fruits, vegetables and regular exercise, the number of patients (children and adults) admitted in hospitals with a ‘primary diagnosis of obesity’ in 2007/8 was 30 per cent higher than the year before, and 700 per cent higher than a decade ago. Prescription drugs dispensed for the treatment of obesity similarly rose by 16 per cent in just one year between 2006 and 2007 (NHS 2009a). The report was released with a spreadsheet of ‘Household Food and Drink Purchases’ over some three decades, from 1974 to 2007, with triumphant nods to a 30 per cent rise in purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables, a more than 50 per cent decline in the purchase of white bread (with brown bread doubling up) and a general decline in red meat purchases. Less triumphant is the approximate 500 per cent rise, during the same time, of purchases of ‘ready meals and convenience meat products’, a 70 per cent rise in ‘cereal convenience foods’, steady purchases of soft drinks (both full-sugar and ‘low-calorie’) and confectionery and, to cope with it all, a slow but steady rise in alcohol purchases (NHS 2009b).

What does this tell us, and what does it have to do with celebrity chefs? The statistics tell us something of how people spend their money, but next to nothing about what they actually consume; for that, surveys of how much fruit and vegetables are rotting in garbage cans would be more revealing

(David Kessler did in fact delve into restaurant dumpsters while researching his 2009 book, *The End of Overeating*). Yet the report on alarming obesity rates is one example among many that contribute—in consequence, if not by design—to creating and sustaining a sense of fear and anxiety when it comes to food. Celebrity chefs entertain us with information of a different kind. They promise to make us better: better cooks, better carers for our families, better shoppers, better entertainers. All of which adds up, in our present climate, to better people and better citizens of the world. If only we could be like them.

This is one problem that this book addresses. It is the darker side of the tale of how people who know something about food and who are not camera-shy have joined the ranks of the fabulously wealthy, fantastically enviable and famously infamous. Because they deal in food, celebrity chefs rise automatically above ‘normal’ superstars who peddle less obviously necessary cultural commodities like football, fashion or movies; by being authorities on food, celebrity chefs have become authorities on life. But their success depends on the rest of us not having that authority. It depends on us needing them and on our fantasy of being like them remaining a fantasy, just as Dumbo the elephant thinks he needs a magic feather in order to fly, as philosopher Daniel Dennett (2003) usefully explains the function of religion. Chefs have become celebrities because the rest of us do not know how to feed ourselves properly.

At least that is what the steady and increasing supply of food media reflects. Here the word ‘reflects’ is important, because it does not mean that we really do not know how to feed ourselves or that most of us do not get by very adequately most of the time. The ambiguity is purposefully chosen: if we are to believe the evidence of the supply, then all the information out there about how to cook and what to eat seems to do very little but confuse matters more, because the apparent demand for more of the same continues to grow, as do waistlines and body mass indexes (BMIs) (not to mention the industries that profit from providing possible remedies for these, like weight-loss programs and prescription drugs). This is perhaps not surprising for anyone versed in modern economics who knows that supply does not always cater to demand; often enough, in combination with clever marketing and gullible consumers, it creates it. But if any of this was implicit in the early days of food media, it certainly is not that subtle any more: much of what we see and hear about food now comes across as explicit social intervention, with the underlying assumption that we need help.

We have seemingly needed help for a long time, because this, too, is not new: nutritional guidance, if not in the form of direct intervention (or interference), has been a feature of many Western societies for over a century already. Indeed, food historians will note that many of the present-day phenomena this book discusses—anxieties about fatness, obsessions with thinness, food as medicine, food as distraction and what sociologist Claude

Fischler terms the ‘dietary cacophony’ (cit. Levenstein 2003: 212) that delivers conflicting information about what to eat and how much of it—are not new at all. What is relatively new is the presence of celebrity chefs as a contributing chorus in the cacophony, and here is a crucial paradigm shift in the kinds of authorities that prevail. Government fact sheets are no longer our principal source of nutritional advice. To be sure, it is hard to identify the main source of any cacophony, and it is also hard to identify any other historical period in which our reactions to all the noise—from distress, to excitement, to throwing our hands in the air—have been so well represented in the fray, because new media allow us all to join in.

Jamie Oliver continues to entertain (and annoy) a good number of people, but he also succeeded in getting the British government to pledge hundreds of millions of pounds towards improving meals served in schools and sparked a global conversation on that topic. His 2009 *Ministry of Food* series aimed for a full-scale food revolution by teaching an entire town how to cook, with the hope that all the towns in Britain would follow suit—as did his later American version, more obviously titled *Jamie’s Food Revolution*. In the United States, Rachael Ray joined forces with former president Bill Clinton to tackle obesity and world hunger. Ray is also among a number of celebrity chefs who have joined Michelle Obama’s anti-obesity ‘Chefs Move to Schools’ campaign. In 2009 Ray appeared on CNN to give tips on how to survive in a failing economy. The multimillionaire assured the nation that clipping coupons and getting more for your buck is ‘cool’ and suggested that people should go back to the ‘way our grandparents prepared food’.

The issue of how our grandparents cooked and ate and, more important, of how it is represented as better is a provocative one, and one I will return to, but for now these examples are useful reminders that the food media industry is about much more than entertainment and the vicarious enjoyment of food. It is also about much more than education, if we choose to look at it from a purely informational perspective. These fairly large political, economic and social undertakings on the part of celebrity chefs also remind us of how much our enjoyment of food has become fraught with all the things we are continually told we should be thinking about, like health and carbon footprints and guilt at some of that enjoyment. Food media become political once they start informing our sense of responsibility as citizens of the world—or of our countries or towns or families, or of our bodies.

Of course food has always been political. Nations have been colonized for agricultural resources, and hunger remains a global fact because of politico-economic priorities. On a micro-level, food’s media presence has more recently fuelled a whole new cycle of demand and supply in terms of eating ‘ethically’ and ‘sustainably’, not to mention a dynamic virtual world of blogs and other media premised on sharing experience and expertise on food,

including important critiques of food systems and the suggestion that we can make a difference in the world by ‘voting with our shopping carts’. These developments are for the most part positive and represent the most constructive aspects of media advances generally, and food media specifically. But in the face of the massive industry that is food media, they are marginal and too often marked by elitism: as our bargain-hunting ally Rachael Ray will surely agree (and help us to feel better about), we simply cannot all afford to shop at local farmers’ markets or to fill our carts with certified organic or fair trade products. So if voting with our shopping carts is one way we define political activism, it is also a route which is economically unavailable to a large number of people: US Census Bureau statistics for 2009 put the number of people living ‘in poverty’ at 14.3 per cent of the population, or 43.6 million people—the highest poverty rate since 1994 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor and Smith 2010)—while figures from the UK Data Archive estimate the number of people living beneath the ‘low-income’ threshold in 2008/9 as slightly above the EU average, at 22 per cent of the population, or 13.5 million people (Palmer 2010).

More worrying still is the gap that continues to exist between the success of food media as an industry and the statistics that call into question the informational and educational value of that industry, even as it takes on ever greater social and political responsibilities. This is not confined to obesity statistics like the NHS report, but is also reflected in the amount of cookbooks, for example, that people own without ever using. A 2006 survey, for instance, found that ‘Britons own a total of 171 million cookbooks, but 61 million will never be opened, with almost two-thirds of people admitting that they keep them for show rather than practicality’ (Phillips 2006). Even if it were true that a majority of these books were received as gifts which people might not have wanted in the first place—and particularly as e-cookbooks, mobile apps and Internet searches provide much faster ways to find recipes, if people are indeed cooking despite not opening their cookbooks²—these numbers still count as good evidence of the cultural cachet, rather than usefulness, of cookbooks and the enormous amount of money wasted in service of this appeal. The stronger this vicarious engagement with food (which, happily for cookbook publishers and food television producers, encourages the production of more of the same), the more plausible the—hopefully false—subtext that more and more people really are clueless about how to feed themselves, and the more, therefore, food exists as fetish rather than as nourishment. Like a framing device, fetishism concentrates our attention on a specific object, to the necessary exclusion of what lies beyond: it diverts attention away from other concerns, including wider, and critical, political engagement. It is in our role as food fetishists that we have anointed chefs the new superstars, and it is in that disordered universe that their celebrity status makes perfect sense.

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I expect a number of objections to my claim that as food fetishists we engage poorly with real-world politics and that food media help to sustain that detachment by commodifying our appetites (because food-gazing is not far from navel-gazing). One of the objections I anticipate is that my argument rests on a narrative of decline, or on the assumption of some mythical past when everything was better, from which we have fallen into this state of not being able to feed ourselves. This is a good place to return to media representations of how ‘our grandparents’ cooked and ate.

On that point, I summon the unlikely help of Nigella Lawson, whose first cookbook, *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* (2000), was condemned by feminists for what they understood as a regression to what they had been fighting for decades to get rid of. Other critics objected to Lawson’s suggestion that baking cupcakes is one way to reclaim a ‘lost Eden’. Against those who condemned her for false nostalgia, or what historian Rachel Laudan (1999) calls ‘culinary luddism’, one critic, at least, pointed out that what Lawson actually wrote was that ‘baking stands as a useful metaphor for the familial warmth of the kitchen we fondly imagine used to exist’ (my emphasis). She concluded that Lawson’s Eden was always intended as a ‘mythical place, . . . rather than a literal past, positive or negative’, and that her version of a domestic goddess is instead a deliberate fantasy that ‘responds to the contradictions of the present’ (Hollows 2003a: 190).

I have not summoned the domestic goddess to defend the idea of a mythical past; there is enough of a real past to deal with, and this book concentrates on just a small segment of it. Rather, Lawson’s Eden prompts us to recast the narrative of decline as one of growth: despite a long history of dietary interventions, and also of food media in service of both education and entertainment, our ever more mediated existence ensures that we have not fallen as much as grown into a greater state of uncertainty and liability when it comes to food—at least according to regular media reports describing this condition (for example Sagon 2006; BBC 2007; Davis 2009; Lam 2010). This is one product of the past that spawned the food media industry, and this product is seemingly so unnerving that, rather than remember the actual historical processes that led to where we are today, we manufacture others in their place. Fantasy, or that which helps us not to know, is and always has been the single biggest-selling commodity in consumer economies.

A point of illustration: since the publication of his best-selling *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* in 2006, Michael Pollan has become something of a figure-head for political awareness and activism around food. His ‘rules’ for eating (with clear echoes of what others like Michael Jacobson have been advocating

in the United States for decades, and also Marion Nestle for several years prior to Pollan) are famously defiant of food science and technology: eat food, not food products; eat less; avoid anything with health claims; eat mostly plants; and so on (Pollan 2006). In short, Pollan champions a life unmediated by industrial food systems and imagines one guided, instead, by instinct, desire and experience. In March 2009, he made a public appeal in the health section of the *New York Times* for help with his next project (published in December of that year as *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*):

I'd like your help gathering some rules for eating well. My premise is that culture has a lot to teach us about how to choose, prepare and eat food, and that this wisdom is worth collecting and preserving before it disappears. In recent years, we've deferred to the voices of science and industry when it comes to eating, yet often their advice has served us poorly, or has merely confirmed the wisdom of our grandmother after the fact . . . Will you send me a food rule you try to live by? Something perhaps passed down by your parents or grandparents? Or something you've come up with to tell your children—or yourself? (cit. Parker-Pope 2009)

Like Ray's advice to return to our grandparents for guidance, Pollan presumably anticipated a host of rules that would reinforce his own, but with the difference that by tapping into 'culture' we will be *remembering* how to eat, rather than learning from him. Pollan's own voice is, after all, another that has recently been in competition with the voices of science and industry he claims we have been deferring to.

His request produced some very interesting results from members of the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS)—an international group of professionals, scholars, academics and best-selling authors who as a group represent and produce some of the strongest work in the field of food studies and who as private people very likely eat in a way that Pollan would approve of. Here are some of the 'rules' they grew up with (the first is my personal favourite):

- ✓ Cigarettes and martinis are the best first course.
- ✓ Eat nothing green or fresh.
- ✓ Eat what you can. Then finish it.
- ✓ Never eat anything bigger than your head . . . with the exception of pizza and turkey.
- ✓ They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat.
- ✓ If it's green, it's trouble. If it's fried, get double.³

Clearly these are not the kinds of rules that Pollan was hoping for, and not the kind that most of these people live by any more, yet they are important

reminders of a wilful disassociation from a real past. These submissions naturally did not make it onto Pollan's list of 'culture', and in that way his endeavour is not so different from Lawson's Eden, though his remains that much more disturbing because, once published, his selection appears complete and without the rider of being a culture that we fondly *imagine* used to exist. But we do not know what we do not see, and so it is that another fantasy is generated, this time at the hands of a 'real-food' messiah. (Pollan's heuristic of avoiding 'food products that contain more than five ingredients, or ingredients you can't pronounce', deserves mention for its absurdity in suggesting that anything remotely complex—quiche, curry, home-made bread—is 'bad', as is the second injunction, which would prohibit illiterate people from eating anything at all.)⁴

Pollan is a good writer and an astute thinker: the awareness that he has raised through his books and the dialogues he provokes are for the most part extremely positive, if for no other reason than to get people thinking about the politics of our food systems. But when food heroes, be they journalists or celebrity chefs, openly assume political and social roles, our position as listeners changes, and it is our responsibility to acknowledge that. That is when we need to become critical consumers. The moment Jamie Oliver moves from showing us how to make a 'pukka' pasta to delivering pronouncements about how the government is managing budgets around public health, it is our role to start thinking carefully about what he is saying and to remain sceptical of his truth claims until we have enough evidence to verify them. Unfortunately, this is unlikely, partly because celebrity culture is not a rational one.⁵ Once we have identified someone to like, to follow and to trust—and that ranges from the foodie literati who read and recommend Pollan's books to the thousands of fans who comment on Oliver's online recipes to say little else than 'you are lush and so is your food'⁶—very little short of the outrageous is going to cause us to doubt them.

As a principal guiding framework for this book, Herbert Simon's theory of attention economics is useful for understanding some of the behavioural mechanisms at work in environments characterized by an abundance of information—and here the term 'information' refers broadly to anything capable of capturing or distracting people's attention, entertainment included. The principle behind attention economics is that as information proliferates, attention becomes the scarcer commodity. Simon, a 1978 Nobel laureate for his 'pioneering research into the decision-making process within economic organizations', became known in the 1950s for debunking the myth of classical economics that 'economic man' is a purely 'rational man' (Simon 1955); in other words, that when money is at stake, money is all that matters. What complicates our instincts to maximize our individual economic interests,

Simon argued, is a more complex psychological process he called ‘bounded rationality’:

we do what we do because we have learned from those who surround us, not from our own experience, what is good for us and what is not. Behaving in this fashion contributes heavily to our fitness because (a) social influences will generally give us advice that is ‘for our own good’ and (b) the information on which this advice is based is far better than the information we could gather independently. As a consequence, people exhibit a very large measure of docility.

‘By “docility”, he explains, ‘I mean the tendency to depend on suggestions, recommendations, persuasion, and information obtained through social channels as a major basis for choice’ (Simon 1993: 156, emphasis in the original).

⁴ Bounded rationality—and being what Simon calls docile as a consequence of that—already suggests a narrowing of scope. Faced with an abundance of information competing for our already-restricted attention, this docility is naturally intensified. We can pay attention to, and absorb, only so much information, and we disregard the rest: these are the economics of attention. It is important to note that Simon’s theory shares nothing with the Frankfurt School’s characterization of the masses being duped by the ‘culture industry’, or being numbed from sensory overload, as Walter Benjamin (1999a,b) famously described modern man as being in a state of nervous exhaustion from too many external stimuli. As his explanation of docility stresses, Simon is not making claims about passivity: people do make decisions and do engage with information, but they engage with a limited pool of information in a limited way.

⁵ In a world of limited attention, it is relatively good news for consumers when a source of entertainment takes on a political twist, because that means we can exercise our sense of social responsibility *through* someone whom we generally enjoy engaging with. When Oliver and Ray look beyond their kitchens to tackle poor health, obesity and poverty, they are not just raising awareness, but also giving their fans a vocabulary to talk about real-world issues. This is a positive result. But it is no good if the spectacle of the celebrity chef who combines entertainment, education and politics becomes our only source of the world, and if our engagement with that world is confined to their interpretation of it. Just as we cannot be them, we cannot count on celebrity chefs to perform our social responsibility for us, and neither should we count on them to deliver a neutral perspective. But it is an understandable mistake, because it is easy to forget that they are primarily in the business of selling themselves and their products (if there is anything we all do actually have in common with celebrity chefs, it is that we all need to make a living). And every time they are recognized by a higher public authority—Ray appearing on CNN, Oliver being knighted by the Queen or shaking hands with the Prime Minister,

or even Alice Waters’s long-standing dream of a White House vegetable garden finally reaching fruition—their pedestals grow ever larger, and our own positions as their fans get a boost. By verifying themselves as worthy of our attention, they verify us.

Is it a little far-fetched to claim that our political engagement is jeopardized by food television and celebrity chefs? In the sense of the overt politicization of food media, maybe. These are relatively early days, and celebrity chef activists like Oliver and Ray are not yet the norm (Waters may have been championing sustainable food politics since she opened her California restaurant Chez Panisse in 1971, but her media presence is minuscule compared to that of Oliver or Ray). But they are not alone. Others already have followed suit, and there is no reason to suppose that politics in the food media world should be any different to politics in any other celebrity arena: consider how Oprah has functioned as an agenda-setter for the thousands of people who regard her as a reliable news source because of the range of her topics, and because she is everybody’s ‘friend’ (and, therefore, how many fell into a million little pieces along with Oprah when she turned out to have been duped by James Frey). How many, similarly, believe that they are being ‘politically correct’ by buying fair trade products because Chris Martin of Coldplay urged them to? Or feel virtuously knowledgeable about Darfur, thanks to George Clooney and Angelina Jolie?⁷

What these examples highlight, together with the many that follow in this book, is just how prevalent Simon’s version of docility—namely ‘the tendency to depend on suggestions, recommendations, persuasion, and information obtained through social channels as a major basis for choice’—has become. It is also worth stressing that fortunately a good part of our docility is benign and can certainly be beneficial: there is nothing innately flawed in a model of decision-making which relies on social channels. Benefits to the retail sector alone from social media ‘word of mouth’ in recent years have been so lucrative as to generate the term socialnomics (Qualman 2009). This is likewise not to suggest that there is anything sinister here on the part of some vaguely threatening industry. Neither is there anything wrong with celebrities or what they do (very generally speaking, that is—the examples of bad science in Chapter 6 are among the situations when relying on dubious authorities can become harmful). What is worrying is how indispensable they are becoming in order for many of us to pay attention at all, and how persuasive the fantasy becomes that we are ‘involved’ simply because they are.⁸

Vicariousness has always been central to food media for the simple reason that it deals in food that is represented—HD (high-definition) TV only makes things *look* more real. We still have to imagine tastes, smells and textures, which is generally enjoyable since we all have to think about what to eat anyway. This is one of its great diversions, and also the main difference between

food television and other reality shows: we consume stories and pictures about food as readily as we do the stuff itself because eating is what keeps us alive, and for that reason it is worth fantasizing about. And here is where food media work most obviously, and most ironically, as a form of detachment from the actual world. Unsurprisingly, this is not a new phenomenon. Witness Laura Shapiro's description of the launch of *Gourmet* magazine in 1941 (the start of an illustrious career in print which lasted until 2009):

War and want were far away, and the editors were certain their readers would welcome a recipe for Pheasant à la Bohemienne. ('Pluck and clean a young pheasant . . . , rub it with lemon juice inside and out, then salt and pepper to taste. Sew. Truss. Melt 3 tablespoons of butter or, still better, use the butter in which a fresh goose liver, larded through and through with small sticks of raw black truffle, has been poached and then cooled'). As MacAusland announced in the debut issue, 'Never has there been a time more fitting for a magazine like *Gourmet*.' Oddly enough, he was right. In fact, there's never been a time that wasn't fitting for *Gourmet*, even when real life seemed to race in the opposite direction. (Shapiro 2004)

Now consider a review of the Food Network channel in March 2009, soon after the inauguration of President Barack Obama:

It required the late election race to make the appeal of the Food Network clear, at least for me—though, as its steadily enlarging audience shows, its charms have worked their effect on others for a good bit longer. That effect has been, for many, a kind traditionally ascribed to charms—powers that can protect, soothe and beguile. Nothing on television in that rancorous, long and hysterical election season, fascinating as it was, offered anything equal to the beguilement of those Food Network shows, daytime and prime time, weekdays and weekends. And nothing on now offers as much insulation from nonstop tides of disaster reporting. On the Food Network, which launched in 1993, you'll hear no grimness, no details of the stimulus package—the only pork mentioned is the kind being fried, baked, charbroiled before your eyes. Nothing about the fantastic budget, the unmistakable emissions of class war now emanating from Washington, nothing about the newly worsening stock-market plunge and job-loss levels. Not for nothing is it enjoying its highest ratings ever. (Rabinowitz 2009)

This gives some credibility to food critic Mimi Sheraton's conviction that 'there are more people interested in knowing where to buy the best bagel than about the latest act of political or corporate corruption, primarily because they personally can do something about the bagel but feel powerless against the Enrons of the world' (cit. Kamp 2006: 213).⁹ Food media, in other words, have been diverting us (and quite possibly some of our grandparents) for a very long time. For all the informational potential they have, you would think we would all be fantastic cooks by now, and if media actually reflected the world,

then we would be cooking in fantastic kitchens, with wonderful (fresh and locally sourced) ingredients.

Fortunately, a good number of us are. But in the wider world, some people are morbidly obese while others starve or purge themselves, and plenty are fighting to survive while others fight for less noble reasons. Even as tips about how to shop and eat sensibly in a 'credit crunch' have made their way into daily broadsheets and, more recently, television shows, all the frying, baking and charbroiling continues to provide a compelling escape from these issues. There is nothing wrong with this if, to reiterate my earlier point, food media were there just for our entertainment. But there is plainly more to it than that, because the broadsheets and television shows waste no opportunity to guide us, to remind us what is healthy and what is not and to make us feel guilty about all the cooking we ought to be doing ('see how easy it is?'). If knowledge and truth were straightforward things, this would not be a problem either, but in an attention economy, how do we filter information? If we are going to let ourselves be guided, how do make sure we are being guided by the right sort of knowledge?

If we think about obesity and its media representation—increasingly, now, through celebrity chefs—we can identify a classic case of what sociologist Ulrich Beck calls 'organized irresponsibility' (Beck 1992; Giddens 1999). Beck describes modern life as informed by a series of manufactured, rather than natural, risks, and organized irresponsibility is the unproductive result of shifting responsibility—or blame—around the most convenient sites. Importantly, the most convenient place for responsibility is elsewhere, which is why organized irresponsibility is a useful way to describe the anxiety that paradoxically results from too much agency (or 'choice' from a neoliberal perspective): we spend an enormous amount of energy defending, indicting or simply trusting the various 'experts' out there, be it Oliver or Pollan, or whoever makes us feel better or worse about how we live, but very little relying on our own critical or experiential faculties to guide us. This was well illustrated in a 2009 media debate on the issue of fat, and whether celebrity chefs' use of calorific ingredients like cream and butter is irresponsible in the face of a nation's widening girth. One journalist trumpeted her grandmother's daily regime of cornflakes with cream but sensibly stressed that 'old-fashioned lard eaters take plenty of exercise and have no truck with processed food. Their meals are much the same as those of their ancestors: modest portions, plenty of veg, everything freshly made with real ingredients. It is *simple, intuitive eating*—the kind you don't need a nutritionist for' (Lewis 2009, my emphasis).

This is so obvious, yet in a world that has come to rely on external guidance, so incredibly scarce. Mass communication has made huge advances in terms of information distribution, social networking, access to free markets, and so on, the best elements of which combine to make most of us citizens

of the world. But this has also come at a striking cost, which is our increasing inability, or unwillingness, to take responsibility for ourselves. As we are constantly reminded, the 'fat' question is not just an issue of a few journalists bickering amongst themselves. It is, according to some, the single biggest health threat we face as a planet. It is an economic predicament, not because it is a so-called poverty problem, but because national treatment budgets do and will affect all taxpayers. Last but in no ways least, the stigma attached to obesity has put it on the table for consideration as a human rights issue. So how are we to make sense of this? Whose fault is it anyway?

Since its official designation as an epidemic in 1999 (Levenstein 2003: 259), the distribution of blame for obesity has been remarkably diverse: fingers have been pointed at industrial food producers, socio-economic status, laziness, lack of self-control, parents, fat friends. As Chapter 7 details, the next generation also has the option of blaming the recession, which drove them to eat cheap, nasty food to forget their economic woes. These competing discourses tell us two important things about media in general and about food media particularly. First, the attention economics of media makes us very good at forgetting. Not only does every new blame option cancel out the previous ones; it also cancels out a much longer history. Concerns about the effects of too much of particular kinds of food on the body have prevailed since nutritional science broke down foods into proteins, fats and carbohydrates in the late nineteenth century, and media dedicated to spreading these concerns have been present more or less from the beginning, with variously vested interests.

As it often is with science, some of the most revealing discoveries follow the processes of trial and error. In his *Paradox of Plenty* (2003), Harvey Levenstein begins with the Great Depression of 1930 and details some of the early 'victories' of modern food processing that followed, such as vitamin fortification. Although some of the outlandish claims of early food scientists were soon debunked (for instance that adding large amounts of vitamin B to foods could, as Vice-President Henry Wallace put it in 1941, 'make life seem enormously worth living'; p. 22), Levenstein draws attention to one result of these developments which remains key to this day: 'that one could look well fed and actually be starving' (p. 23).

The official acknowledgement behind this is now well known: industrial processing can rob foods of essential nutrients (this also explains the possible relationship between obesity and 'food insecurity', or poverty-induced hunger).¹⁰ More important, and this is the second issue that the example of obesity does well to underline, it is an index of how disassociated many of us have become from our natural appetites. Not confined to the clinically obese, nor to the diagnosed anorexic or bulimic, looking well fed but actually starving aptly summarizes the modern food disorder that the food media have helped to perpetuate. Levenstein's volume charts the growth of major food

corporations and their role in entrenching what was then a burgeoning appreciation of industrially produced food, including an understandable enthusiasm for brand-new convenience products. In that way he delineates an era when, if we are to talk about blame and misleading truth claims, the food science industry was a fairly reasonable target.¹¹

This book, by contrast, concentrates on the effects of almost a century of media interventions into how we think about what we put in our bodies, which is how we sustain ourselves and which is, in the end, how we live. To be clear, I am not interested in constructing a false polarity between 'the media' and its consumers but rather want to underline that we could do ourselves a favour, this far down the line, by becoming more critical, and therefore more cautious, about the kind of information that we take on board and allow to contribute to our docility. It is by no means a lost cause but instead a fairly simple task of recognizing that the more we submit to a band of supposed experts to tell us what to do and how to eat, the less we submit to ourselves and the more we come to depend on external validation for our choices.

This does not mean ignoring media, food or otherwise; doing so would be a waste of a valuable resource (let me add that much of the food on my own kitchen table has been inspired by television, magazines or the Internet—and often by Mr Oliver). It means paying less attention to a media construction of the world of food and eating as a risk-infused experience—especially if that world of risk becomes our only experience of the world—and learning instead, like Dumbo, to trust ourselves. Perhaps the most useful thing we can learn from our mythical grandparents is how to live a life less mediated and more experienced. (How much we need to mythologize our grandparents naturally depends on where we are in the world. In countries where media have been far-reaching for more than a century, 'our grandparents' lived in the golden age of mass communication, yet places do still exist where such technologies remain novel, if not unheard of.)

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'Food porn' has become a popular catchphrase for food media, particularly with all the close-up shots of glistening steaks, or more obviously in the form of Nigella Lawson licking a spoon in that teasing way of hers. As I argue in Chapter 4, food media are indeed pornographic, but not in the celebratory way that most people use the term. Whether in describing what we should not have or in having what we should not want, pornography remains the most useful critical term to describe the profoundly ambiguous relationship to food generated by the roller coasters of plenty and want over the last century or so. Our disordered relationship to food manifests as an addiction to its representation: we simply cannot seem to get enough of it, and it provides one

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