COMPLIMENTS TO THE ONSCREEN CHEF: COOKING AS SOCIAL AND ARTFUL PERFORMANCES

Rebekah Sinewe

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2017

Committee:
Cynthia Baron, Advisor
Lesa Lockford
ABSTRACT

Cynthia Baron, Advisor

From the earliest performances of the act of cooking while gathered around a fire, humans have layered meaning onto the embodiment of cooking. The performance of self and community illustrate ways in which cooking has moved through generations and shaped roles and identities related to cooking. In this thesis, I examine the act of cooking as it expands from social performances to artful performances through the development of cooking in mediated spaces, specifically televised cooking shows ranging from early programs in the 1950s and 1960s to the Netflix series Chef’s Table (2015-2017). Chapter One provides a foundation to the overarching argument by establishing cooking as a social performance as well as a performance of identity and community that spans domestic spaces. This leads into Chapter Two, where I discuss early cooking shows in the 1950s and 1960s and the legitimized identity of “chef” as opposed to the domestic, social performances of the home cook. Chapter Three explores the types of audiences involved in cooking shows and the effect of viewership preferences for the Food Network offerings, which encouraged more competitive and entertainment-based programs. Finally, Chapter Four provides an analysis of artful performances of cooking within Chef’s Table through close readings that illuminate the spectacle, aesthetics, storytelling, innovative techniques, and the cinematic use of the camera. This analysis reveals that the act of cooking can be positioned as both social and artful performance, and suggests opportunities for further study of ways these areas can overlap within contemporary programs and media culture.
For the same page stander
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Cynthia Baron, for embarking on this adventure with enthusiasm and continuing to offer me unwavering support and energy throughout the process. The project would have suffered greatly without her ability to push my writing, challenge my arguments, and embrace the insanity. I also could not have completed this project without Dr. Lesa Lockford’s guidance, patience, and immense knowledge. Her ability to transform every interaction into a teachable moment is unmatched, and I have benefited immeasurably over the past two years from her difficult questions and insightful comments, whether in passing conversation or in the classroom. I must make a special mention to my dear friend and colleague Tessa Vaschel for providing an office away from the office to drink inordinate amounts of coffee while writing together in companionable silence and unraveling as we became increasingly aware of how little we know. Another well deserved thank you is extended to Jesse Adam for surviving many drafts, brainstorming sessions, and overwhelmed texts wrought with insecurity. His ability to offer critical comments with optimism and his perceptiveness to sense when I needed a listening ear is invaluable. My friends and family, especially Marcus and Sarah, have offered endless encouragement and laughter to help me through graduate school with a gracious attitude, a joyful heart, and a sense of humor. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues and the department faculty for their support and excitement over the past two years. My gratitude for this Bowling Green family fills me to the brim and inspires me to continue learning.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Act of Cooking as Performance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentions of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER I. COOKING AS A PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking as a Constitutive Act</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Cooking Rituals: Social Performances of Cooking</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity as Performance</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking as a Performance of Community</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Performances of Cooking as Ritual</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking as a Performance of Legacy</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Cultural Otherness</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Moving Towards “Chef”</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER II. THE PROFESSIONAL CHEF: MOVING THE ACT OF COOKING TO</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commodified Cooking</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Cooking Shows</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Chef” as a Legitimized Identity</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otherness in Televised Cooking Shows</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onscreen Influence</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Chef” as a Masculine Performance ................................................................. 41
“Chef” as Television Personality ................................................................. 43
James Beard ................................................................................................ 47
Dione Lucas ................................................................................................. 48
Julia Child .................................................................................................... 50
The French Chef .......................................................................................... 52
Graham Kerr ............................................................................................... 54
Conclusion: Who Is Watching? .................................................................... 55

CHAPTER III. FEASTING WITH THEIR EYES: THE AUDIENCE’S EFFECT ON
PERFORMANCE .......................................................................................... 56

The Food Network Commodity ................................................................. 57
The Block Schedule .................................................................................... 60
Competitive Cooking Shows ...................................................................... 62
Food Network Audiences .......................................................................... 63
Live, Mediated, and Mixed Audiences ...................................................... 66
Audience Motivations ................................................................................ 70
Conclusion: An Interest in Aesthetic Cooking .......................................... 72

CHAPTER IV. ARTFUL PERFORMANCES OF COOKING ................................. 74

Artful Performances Off-Screen ............................................................... 79
A New Style of Show .................................................................................. 80
Storytelling and Social Performance Roots .......................................... 82
Aesthetics: Visual Style, Ingredients, and Cooking Technique ............. 86
Spectacle: Unconventional Cooking Processes and Innovative Techniques .. 89
INTRODUCTION

A single gesture by the maître d’ launches a clean, linen tablecloth into motion across the table as the camera captures a bird’s eye view of the action. The perspective provides the viewer with an optimum angle to devour the white cloth unrolling across the wood grain and falling over the crisp edges of the table, forming a blank canvas. The pseudo-canvas is left bare for only a moment before two chefs dynamically paint and drizzle sauces onto the table from a carefully selected palette, each component neatly organized in small bowls. From either side of the table, these two chefs mimic one another’s gestures to create a sense of choreographed movement as they balance the dish’s visual composition throughout the process of its creation.

This is the world of Chef’s Table, a Netflix documentary series premiering in 2015 with a fourth season scheduled to be released in the spring of 2017. Each season contains six episodes that are dedicated to exploring the work of world-renowned chefs by delving into their careers and often their personal lives. In the opening sequence of every Chef’s Table episode, the series of shots displays the theatrical nature of table preparation, and a “backstage” perspective of chefs working in the kitchen; slow pans illustrate the aesthetic nature of the dishes and capture the artful quality of the series. These cinematic camera movements are paired with Antonio Vivaldi’s classical string composition Winter, The Four Seasons (Concerto No. 4 in F minor, Op. 8, RV 297). This highly artistic combination invites the viewer into the unfamiliar territory of professional cooking as artful performance and immerses the audience into a new, high-class world of cooking onscreen. Through the artfully presented opening theme, Chef’s Table immediately introduces its intention as a program functioning beyond the act of cooking for nourishment or pleasing flavors. As the episodes consistently demonstrate, the series is dedicated
to an exploration of the beauty and art within the act of cooking, and it encourages an ongoing interest in viewing the act of cooking onscreen.

In Season 2, Episode 1 of Chef’s Table, Grant Achatz, an avant-garde chef in Chicago, plays with traditional table settings by choosing to take inspiration from large abstract paintings to literally paint his plating onto the table surfaces for patrons. Achatz’s episode begins with a wide shot behind his silhouette as he stands in front of a large abstract painting in a minimal, white gallery space while the camera slowly pans his environment as he thoughtfully gazes. Just as the explosive color on the canvases disrupts the white gallery, Achatz expressively paints his own edible composition onto a white tablecloth. Here, in Achatz’s episode, the camera captures the dish’s creation in more detail than the brief moments from the opening sequence: the careful pooling of sauces from a color palette of white, yellow, and brown, the finesse within each brushstroke onto the tablecloth, and the frigid vapor from liquid nitrogen curling around ingredients as they are placed on the table. Through a desire to surprise his guests with mystery and spectacle, Achatz seeks to create an experience beyond food: an artful performance. As a gentle shower of powdered sugar falls onto his work in slow motion and his powerful gestures are choreographed together with the second chef at the other end of the table, we hear Grant Achatz reciting his story over the artistic, explosively creative shots:

Early on at Alinea [his restaurant], we had this realization that there’s other disciplines that we can draw on for inspiration. We would go to art galleries, and you would see this giant scale pieces of art, and I would always say, “Why can’t we plate on that?” It frustrated me that as chefs we were limited to scale that was determined by plate manufacturers. Why not a tablecloth that we can eat off of? Why do you have to eat with a fork or a spoon and why does it have to be served
on of a plate or in a bowl? Why can’t we come up with something new?

…Rules…Psh…There are no rules. Do whatever you want. (Chef’s Table, S2:E1, 00:00:00-00:01:14)

Achatz’s voices fades, bringing me to a memory of my own. My mother’s familiar words are sparked by the unfamiliar, yet spectacular, images of Achatz’s unconventional table setting.

“Sweetie, remember. Fork on the left. Knife and spoon on the right.” My mom patiently swooped in from the kitchen to correct my mistake, switching the utensils. “Fork on the left. Knife and spoon on the right.” The thought would scroll through my mind as I slowly paced a methodical circle around the dining room table. I’d cringe and clench my jaw as the silverware scraped against one another in my little, seven-year-old hands. With each piece I placed on the table, there would be one less in my hand to inflict torture on my ears. Not surprisingly, setting the table was my least favorite daily chore, probably because I never really excelled at the task. It certainly didn’t help when my sister teased me mercilessly when the fork ended up on the right. “Fork on the left. Fork on the left.” Like most families, setting the table was a daily ritual that was necessary before we all sat down together to eat my mother’s cooking.

There is a sense of childhood authenticity that comes with the memories of rushed table settings with my parents’ old stoneware, placemats, and folded napkins set quickly in front of each chair by my small hands. In the interest of sitting down to eat more quickly, I developed a routine that was driven by efficiency rather than aesthetic. In my performance, the most important element was timing, as it was done in tandem with my mother’s performance of cooking in the kitchen. Our performances were done simultaneously, yet in different bodies and spaces as we worked together. There was no presence of an artful mindset or actions performed
for aesthetic purposes, rather my table setting ritual served as a signal that the meal was almost ready for consumption and the act of cooking was completed.

With only these childhood memories to serve as my table setting expectations, one can imagine my surprise and wonder when I began Grant Achatz’s episode of *Chef’s Table* and my eyes were immediately graced with a beautifully shot and creatively explored table setting. For many, like my seven year old self, setting the table is a nightly chore, but for professional chefs, the table setting process is an extension of cooking that provides a stage for thoroughly communicating the art of cooking. From the popularization of the cooking show in the 1950s, the chef has had a role in shaping how cooking is performed and viewed in professional and domestic spaces. In the example of Grant Achatz, and the other chefs profiled in *Chef’s Table*, the act of cooking becomes an artful, professional performance rather than an embodied, social performance in a domestic space. However, as we will see, there can be instances when artful performance highlights the reality that cooking is integral to what makes us human.

**The Act of Cooking as Performance**

Artful performances within cooking shows are a valuable study that reflects and explains contemporary movements within the cooking industry. Looking back to the radio chefs of the 1930s and 1940s and the early cooking program hosts, the act of cooking has grown into an art form that transcends the embodied, social performances of cooking in domestic spaces. Artful performances of cooking have become more popular in mainstream America through Food Network competition shows and entertainment-based programs. My study analyzes how historical influences have created a demand for such programming. Within this study, I trace the evolution of the act of cooking from social performances of identity and community to its media
beginnings as pedagogical opportunities then later its artful performance in various cooking shows and series, specifically the Netflix series, *Chef’s Table* (2015-2017).

In performance studies, the act of cooking as performance can be categorized as social action or performance. At its core, individuals have performed cooking for centuries, usually with communal effects or intentions. Within these examples, cooking has functioned in expansively diverse ways, demonstrating shifts in practice, purpose, technique, and presentation. In my reference to “social” and “artful” performance, I am adopting the continuum set forth by Jeffery Mason in his essay “Street Fairs: Social Space, Social Performance” (1996). Here, Mason builds on Richard Schechner’s early work, *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970-1976* (1977), in which Schechner suggests that the conventional boundaries of performance can be extended. As Schechner explains, “theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from ritualization in animal behavior (including humans) through performances in everyday life…to rites, ceremonies and performances: large-scale theatrical events” (*Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976* 1). Mason draws on Schechner’s argument and discusses performance as existing on a continuum ranging from social performance to artful performance. Mason writes,

> Typically, social performance involves “everyday” or “ordinary” behavior by people who may deny or qualify any awareness of their performative strategies and qualities, while artful performance involves what is typical of “the theatre,” where the participants work in terms of intent, craft and artistic convention. (Mason 303)

In my study, the concept of this continuum allows space for the act of cooking to exist in both social and artful performances so that the creation of artful performances onscreen do not replace any social performances, which will inevitably continue in domestic
spaces and individual lives. Therefore, social performances of cooking do not shift into something new entirely, but rather the type of performance expands to include new positions on the continuum.

My own experience demonstrates the range of performance found within the act of cooking, and by scrutinizing the role of performance in cooking further, it continues to expand from the personal to the public, professional, and into commercial practices. Examining the act of cooking as performance contributes to preexisting scholarship, facilitating studies of cooking as identity, ritual, communal, and performing “other.” Through this research, the act of cooking can be seen as functioning in ways beyond the social performances of early cooking around the fire or in domestic spaces.

Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner has identified seven functions of performance that help to locate the act of cooking more definitively as performance. The functions include: “To entertain; To make something that is beautiful; To mark or change identity; To make or foster community; To heal; To teach, persuade or convince; To deal with the sacred and/or the demonic” (Performance Studies: An Introduction 38). These seven functions establish performance as doing or creating something; they also highlight the functions of social, embodied, and constitutive behaviors of humans, which include the act of cooking, as performance. Most relevant to my discussion of cooking as a social and artful performance will be the functions of performance as entertaining, as depicting cooking and food as aesthetically beautiful, as marking identity of chef, and as fostering communities both in person and across mediated spaces.

The discussion of cooking as performance within performance studies is generally unexplored, although explorations and studies regarding food in/as performance are prevalent. In
“Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium,” performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “Food, and all that is associated with it, is already larger than life. It is already highly charged with meaning and affect. It is already performative and theatrical” (1). Food is easily established as performative, just as cooking can be clearly established as a social, embodied performance.

The general conversation within performance studies scholarship regarding food in/as performance informs a small portion of my research, yet I will expand current scholarship of food in/as performance to include and focus on the act of cooking as performance. If food and performance do in fact converge in their abilities “to do, to behave, and to show,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s discussion can also be expanded to the act of cooking, or what is specifically being performed during the physical cooking process (Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium 1).

Like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Leda Cooks, a professor of Communications, also writes about food in/as performance in her essay “You Are What You (Don’t) Eat? Food, Identity, and Resistance.” Cooks argues that “by performing actions of eating and doing-cooking that are morally and cultural coded we become, through our practices of consumption, what we eat,” suggesting a connection between food and identity (Cooks 101). Defining cooking as a performance of identity provides a foundation for this study and is carried throughout the discussion, specifically in the ways performances of identity influence the presentation of self to others, the position of authority within the cooking community, and the formation of relationships with viewers who are not physically present.

Outside of performance studies, various fields are saturated with information about the practices of food consumption, cultivation, and preparation. As “a language accessible to all,”
food studies has become increasingly interdisciplinary since the 1990s, and its growing popularity is demonstrated by the myriad of publications in the past decade (Counihan 19). Food studies first emerged as an influential interdisciplinary field in tandem with feminist and gender studies with a vast overlap in both areas of study. Other intersections quickly followed, which reached beyond food related fields, for example, children’s literature, film, and philosophy. The expanding nature of food studies exists because “food touches everything and is the foundation of every economy, marking social difference, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions” (Counihan and Van Esterik 3).

Contextualizing cooking as an evolving performance requires a look at historical surveys and media studies. Kathleen Collins, a political science professor, offers a comprehensive study of cooking shows in her book, Watching What We Eat (2009). Collins analyzes the political and social influences on television cooking shows and demonstrates the way in which food studies intersects with a variety of fields. Collins’ analysis of cooking shows reestablishes cooking as a human behavior and reveals the changes in how individuals interact with cooking after the introduction of television shows. Collins explores the growing interest in watching another person cook and a desire to experience, as an observer, the mastery of cooking.

**Methodology**

With so many existing studies of cooking and food from the perspectives of food and cultural studies, historical surveys, and media studies, it is important to ask, “Why performance studies?” By intersecting the information from other fields with performance studies concepts, the embodied act of cooking becomes an action of interest, both in the embodied performance of an individual and cooking as a viewed performance. As previously mentioned, within other areas of study, including performance studies, cooking as performance is not widely explored, nor is
the act of cooking in televised cooking shows. More often, a cultural lens is taken to cooking and food because these are so central to humanity and affect nearly every other aspect of life—gender, political, ecological, economical, social, status, ethnicity, class.

Cultural and media histories regarding cooking shows demonstrate the development of cultural trends and contextualize the performance of cooking over the past seventy years. My angle of study relies on the growing influence of televised cooking shows, along with shifts in the performance of cooking as public interest has changed in response to celebrity chefs and cooking shows as entertainment. Spanning from the 1950s through present day, sources that examine biographical information, specific cooking shows, and political or social histories provide a chronological foundation that allows specific moments in the performance of cooking to be analyzed from a comprehensive perspective. This concrete foundation can then be layered with qualitative research methods and concepts from performance studies.

Within this study, I use key performance studies concepts to look at the act of cooking in cooking shows in order to trace three developments: the shift of cooking as a domestic role to a professional identity, cooking as an embodied performance to one that is observed or viewed onscreen, and the expanding function of cooking from social to artful performances. Additionally, I explore cooking as performance on televised cooking shows and the evolution of the relationship between chef and viewer. These ideas are investigated through analysis of domestic, pre-television home cooks, early cooking shows in the 1950s and 1960s, The Food Network, and more recent examples of artful performances of cooking, such as Chef’s Table. In my discussion of the role and identity of the viewer in relation to cooking shows, I also use my own close readings of specific episodes of cooking shows to explore the use of the camera and the experience of the viewer.
Limitations

This study involves certain, necessary limitations in order to effectively present the argument in a concise and fluid structure with supporting research that contributes rather than distracts. One way to provide sufficient depth of analysis is by focusing on the act of cooking and to maintain its isolation from food in/as performance. The complex web of foodways inevitably intersects with the numerous factors considered in cultural studies, making it difficult to maintain a performance-studies-driven argument. Another delimitation of my study is established by my use of performances studies research and methodology, rather than delving into the myriad ideas within cultural studies and food studies. Several of these intersecting areas of cultural studies will be mentioned, but they will not given substantial attention in order to maintain the focus on cooking as performance.

An additional delimitation is created through the use of specific examples of cooking shows and specific moments from these shows to analyze individual components more closely. These choices are designed to serve the study by providing the best, most inclusive examples of the themes I explored. As this study is not intended to be a historical survey of chefs or cooking shows, many examples will remain unmentioned. In future studies of cooking as performance, food films, food documentaries, and a wider range of cooking shows and chefs could be included to expand the project.

Intentions of the Study

Examining the act of cooking through performance studies methodology and isolating its study from food in/as performance prompts several questions. In the broader scope of the thesis, as the performance of cooking evolves from the domestic space to mediated spaces of television and into Michelin star restaurants, several important questions develop. How has cooking as
performance evolved over time, especially since the advent and rise of the cooking show in the 1950s and 1960s? How does the identity of the individual engaged in the act of cooking change as it moves into public, professional, and mediated spaces? How has the shifting trend from instructional to spectacle-driven cooking shows mirrored the transition of embodied, social performances to viewed, artful performances of cooking? In what ways do performance studies concepts make it possible to trace the evolution of the act of cooking as performance on television?

These questions will be addressed in four chapters. Chapter One discusses the cooking as a constitutive act of being and becoming. This moves into a look at the social performance of cooking and the performance of identity, both of which are closely tied to such a constitutive behavior. Performances of cooking also involve domestic spaces where rituals and gender expectations continue to shape social performances of cooking. Cooking-based legacies develop through recipes, parental connections, teaching gestures, and personalized methods of cooking, for example, measuring by estimation, secret ingredients, and special techniques. Recipes form a performance archive that keeps record of a specific process, story, or identity, whether individual, cultural, or familial. The archive of recipes requires an audience or observer to bring them to life and open opportunities to perform the “other.”

Chapter Two explores cooking in public and mediated spaces, specifically within televised cooking shows, as they became popular in the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter demonstrates an additional layer within the identity of the cook as the domestic role transitions into a professional, legitimized identity. The commodification of cooking through the growth of restaurants and the desire to experience public cooking illuminates an interest in watching the professional at work and establishes the act of cooking as a trained skill rather than a chore for
the housewife. Initial radio or onscreen chefs were primarily female, and cooking was determined to be a feminine, domestic skill. However, as the identity of “chef” evolved into a professional setting, both onscreen and off, the territory became far more masculine as the act of cooking became a career in which financial gain and fame were available. The identity of “chef” was also influenced by the presentation of the individual chefs on television where chefs were known for their television personalities. Chapter Two provides a historical survey of early cooking shows, their hosts, and their purposes, structures, and rituals, specifically within the shows featuring Dione Lucas, Graham Kerr, James Beard, and Julia Child.

Chapter Three highlights the influence of audiences on televised cooking shows. Establishing the increasing impact of viewership through the continued growth of the Food Network and the types of programming it has produced places focus on the audience’s effect on the performance of cooking. Overtime, new shows included a variety of culinary competitions and were intended primarily as entertainment in response to the appeals of the Food Network’s viewers. The chapter also considers different types of audiences of cooking shows and how those dynamics affect the performance of cooking onscreen and the motivations of viewers to invest in these particular shows, leading to an opportunity for more explicitly artful performances of cooking.

Chapter Four uses specific episodes and moments from Food Network shows and episodes in the Netflix series Chef’s Table to illustrate the artful performance of cooking onscreen. As suggested in the previous chapter, themes of commodification and entertainment within cooking continue into more recent televised cooking shows or series. However, the focus is primarily on cooking as an artful performance that features spectacle, innovation, and an emphasis on aesthetics. Chapter Four will also examine cooking as a viewed performance,
highlighting the theatrical elements of cooking, the voyeuristic power of the backstage gaze, and the desire to gaze upon the chef as a highly skilled performer. Close readings from *Chef’s Table* indicate further shifts in the act of cooking as artful performance as it is depicted as imaginative creations, spectacle, innovation, and storytelling.

Returning to Grant Achatz’s artful performance of cooking in his episode of *Chef’s Table*, we encounter his excitement in how cooking can continually evolve as a performance and experience. The possibilities to combine flavors and innovate the presentation of dishes thrill his creative mind. Achatz plays with ideas of space, time, and memory through his cooking, and he considers the possibility of making a dish that floats in the air, creating a tomato that tastes like a strawberry or filling a pillow with the scent of lavender. He explains:

> For me, aroma has always been incredibly important in terms of my memory. That scent of roasted turkey immediately transports me back to when I ten years old on Thanksgiving Day surrounded by family. That’s a powerful thing. If you can capture that—if you can harness that to make a great dining experience—I think it’s compelling. [I] started thinking about involving smells into the experience. How do we start seasoning food with aroma? …We treat the emotional component of cooking food as a seasoning. You add salt, you add sugar, you add vinegar, you add nostalgia. If you’re able to move people, we’re moving on to something else. It’s not just about food. It’s not just about a restaurant or eating dinner. It’s about something more. (*Chef’s Table*, S2:E1, 00:17:15-00:19:37)

And while he eagerly speaks about “something more,” his furrowed brow and gentle gestures entice viewers to gaze at the screen. Of course, they are not able to experience the aroma he
creates on the screen, but his concentration on the craft demonstrates the level of intense skill required for a chef of his status that captivates attention. The vulnerability of the creative process, the journey of personal growth, the struggle of success, and the aesthetic beauty of Achatz’s cooking transform the documentary and illuminate the act of cooking as “something more” and something distinctly human.
A crack of lightning sent an excited shiver up my spine. The lights flickered twice before sending us into darkness, concealing my smile as my dad reached into the cabinets above the refrigerator for the matches. As a seven year old, I was thrilled by the adventure of creating our own light, so I trailed my dad’s every move as he collected wood from the rack outside and a stack of newspaper from the garage. I always pretended to understand the best way to stack the logs into the fireplace, a façade I’m now sure he easily saw through, but each time he would kindly help me rearrange the logs so the fire would take. I became obsessed with the way the initial flames would lick the crumpled newspaper we used as kindling, and I was transfixed with the colored ink of the comics flashing and writhing before blackening into ash. My dad’s hands confidently pushed the paper I had carefully balled under the logs until the flame leapt upwards. My fearlessness found its limitation in the fire, and my hands could never push the newspaper close enough to the embers to successfully maneuver it into place. In my wide-eyed wonder of his skill, I glanced over at him as he focused on the task at hand, the reflection of fire catching on the rim of his glasses. When I looked back, the logs had caught, so he shut the hearth doors, and I looked through, waiting to feel the heat flush my face.

Before long, I heard my dad rustling through the pantry as he pulled all the fixings for grilled cheese, a family tradition during power outages. My mom assembled the sandwiches in the kitchen and transferred them into our Camper’s Pie, which my dad would then push into the fire. And we would wait. My sister and I hovered over his shoulder, peaking into the fire at our concealed sandwiches, pestering him with our incessant questioning: “Dad, Dad, how much longer? Is it ready now?!” Somehow, he always managed to achieve a perfect golden brown
crunch on each side without getting an ounce of burnt campfire taste on them. We would all sit by the fire, pulling apart our gooey sandwiches, licking our fingers, and engaging in simple time together as a family while the storm raged on. There was something magical about the process and the feeling of being closer to nature, even though I was safe from the threatening storm in the comfort of my living room with glow sticks and flashlights. The fire flickered on our faces, and we looked at each other with mesmerized eyes and found comfort in the simple presence of one another.

**Cooking as a Constitutive Act**

In his most recent book, *Cooked* (2013), Michael Pollan focuses on cooking as an exclusively human behavior, attributing our evolution to the development of fire and cooked meat. Through the discovery of fire, cooking took “much of the work of digestion outside the body, using the energy of fire in (partial) place of the energy of our bodies to break down complex carbohydrates and render proteins more digestible” (Pollan 57). Therefore, the use of fire and the advent of cooking affected the human body, including the shape of the jaw, the size of the skull, and our digestive capabilities. This is why raw diets, a fad of modern day eating habits, utilize juicers and other technologies that allow raw foods to be broken down before the jaw and digestive track are involved. The evolution of human anatomy due to a new diet of cooked foods can categorize the act of cooking as a constitutive act of the human identity.

Richard Wrangham, an anthropologist and primatologist, discusses this in *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (2009). Wrangham explains how our history of evolution with the act of cooking is “tied to our adapted diet of cooked food, and the results pervade our lives, from our bodies to our minds” (20). In this way, cooking “sets us apart, helps us to mark and patrol the
borders between ourselves and nature’s other creatures,” and forms a unique human bond with the act of cooking (Pollan 53).

Just as the act of cooking is part of human behavior, performance also pervades every aspect of the human life. Moreover, a performance of “human” will involve a performance of cooking. The development and early use of fire was a means to perform culture, and it quickly became an important aspect of rituals and community. These uses demonstrate a shift from cooking as purely a function of survival to a performance that falls within poiesis, a performance theory term applied to anthropology by anthropologist and poststructuralist theorist Victor Turner. In *Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics*, Dwight Conquergood explains how Turner “subversively redefined the fundamental terms of discussion in ethnography by defining humankind as *homo performans*, humanity as performer, as a culture-inventing, social performing, self-making, and self-transforming creature” (358). Turner’s theory “foregrounded the culture-creating capacities of performance” and added a function of performance in its ability to be “making not faking,” as opposed to Plato’s idea of mimesis, which had “aligned performance with fakery and falsehood” (Conquergood, “Of Caravans and Carnivals” 138). This theoretical shift away from performance as pure mimicry to performance as meaning making can also be applied to the act of early cooking and its shift to include ritual, generally religious, practices. Building on the idea that poiesis is performance that involves “making not faking,” the use of cooking in rituals reveals that the act of cooking is a social action with the potential to move into cultural and artistic performances, and that it has a performative and multi-functional nature (Turner 93).
Early Cooking Rituals: Social Performances of Cooking

As “the cooking apes, the creatures of the flame,” there is a primal element within the act of cooking and an essential inherent quality of cooking as social performance (Wrangham 20). From its invention, the act of cooking has held various functions of performance and, through ritual practices, has been closely tied to community and relationships. Historically, the act of cooking when done for nourishment was a communal practice. Food was prepared for a group of people for a common purpose, and many hands were involved in the process, therefore bonding the group. However, an additional interest in cooking as a cultural or religious performance is introduced when examining ritual sacrifices. As cooking became a ritual performance in the form of animal sacrifices to the gods, a spiritual relationship and community formed that went beyond the physical and emotional bonding that could occur through sharing a meal. Michael Pollan discusses the connections between sacrificial rituals and the act of cooking, writing:

It’s striking how many different cultures at so many different times have practiced some form of animal sacrifice involving the roasting of meat over a fire, and just how many of these rituals conceived of the smoke from these cook fires as a medium of communication between humans and gods. (Pollan 40)

Through ritual, the act of cooking expanded further into additional methods of communication, initiated public performances, and formed multiple communities; the first within the earthly community and the second relationship between the earth-bound and spiritual realms. The act of cooking in this transcendental role emphasizes the importance contained within the act and its early potential to function beyond a social performance. Focusing on the physical community, rituals provided opportunities for a shared experience in that consuming “the same animal, prepared according to the agreed-upon rules of the group, strengthens the ties binding the group
together” (Pollan 97). Through these practices, the act of cooking is elevated to a more meaningful position, as if the transformation and continued survival of humankind was not already meaningful enough. In ritual performances, the necessity of cooking begins to shift slightly to include a desire to cook or to use cooking for other purposes. There were also specific roles for individuals present in rituals that were assigned to the aspects of cooking. While roles were not directly intended to elevate any specific action, early rituals began to create a hierarchy involving the act of cooking and indirectly associated it with a certain status within the community.

**Identity as Performance**

Researching the advent and foundational aspects of cooking provides a starting point to examine the act of cooking as an evolving performance of identity. The act of cooking in its earliest forms demonstrates poiesis, making not faking, and gives potential to its function as Conquergood’s complementary concept of kinesis, the breaking and remaking of performance. As the act shifts to include a new layer of functionality, so too does the identity and role of the performer embodying, for example, the act of cooking. To clarify that process, this chapter examines social performances of cooking and how the embodied performance is affected by different performances of identity.

Tracing the act of cooking through its roles as a human behavior allows for an exploration of identity and community in relation to social performances of cooking. It is useful to begin with foundational aspects of identity as performance and then consider the act of cooking as a facilitator of community and performing both for others and as chef. In domestic spaces, cooking usually revolves around familial connections and small, extended communities. These spaces offer examples of cooking as kinesis, the remaking of performance, which can
involve passing recipes and secret ingredients through multiple generations or combining cultural cuisines through multiethnic families. Additionally, culinary tourism accounts for how an individual can perform otherness through the embodied experience of cooking different cuisines or ethnic recipes.

In order to take the journey from domestic cooking to mediated performances of cooking, it is necessary to explain the definitions and uses of identity as performance and their implications in regards to the performance of self, the performance of self for others, and the introduction of these ideas to a performance of identity in televised spaces. Performance studies scholarship situates identity as a construction of self or, as philosopher Judith Butler describes, “a stylized repetition of acts” (187). In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988), Butler speaks of gender performativity, but the concept can be more widely applied to any action through which we create an identity, such as careers, athletics, hobbies, relationships, or personal style. We, as humans, look to embodied acts to identify ourselves. We construct ourselves through what we do, whether it is daily behaviors or less frequent actions. We become what we repeatedly do. In the act of cooking, the performer may repeat a specific action such as kneading and stirring or making recipes so often they are memorized. The broader act of repetitive cooking, regardless of what is being cooked, has traditionally been assigned as part of domestic, feminine housework. Although the act of cooking is generally viewed as an aspect of a domestic role, limiting its performance to this space ignores the undeniable transformative power of cooking for the self, the performer. As Michael Pollan explains:

In an art such as cooking, something certainly happened to the objects at hand—literally at hand insofar as one engaged in manual activity to transform things—but something also happened to the subject engaging in the actions: By leaping in
with one’s full self, one’s full bodily engagement, one took pleasure and one grew as a person. To shortcut the culinary process would be to shortcut the cultivation of self. (25)

However, personal growth and identity are affected by more than the repeated practice of embodied acts. Erving Goffman argues that the performance of self is heavily influenced by the presence of and relationship to another person, specifically within the social interactions of daily life. Goffman explains that “when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (4). Through a selection of actions, “the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him” (Goffman 2). Of course, Goffman’s ideas become more complex with the introduction of media, especially television, with its varied audiences live in the studio or distanced at home.

Cooking as an act tied to constructions of identity creates a performance reliant on an individual and his/her specific embodied repetitions of the act. As the act of cooking is repeated, the identities within domestic cooking begin to narrow, generally into a gendered, feminine, and still very social expression of identity. Cooking as a marker of identity ranges from its very primal performance of “human” to social performances in domestic spaces among families, and in artful or commercial performances of “chef.” As much as the act of cooking can construct an identity of self, gender, or profession, the performance has rarely been a strictly individual practice. Generally, individuals cook for others, with others, or with the assistance of others in gathering and securing food. Cooking has seldom been, especially in the initial acts of cooking, an individual performance for the self. Rather, the act of cooking is performed in community.
Cooking as a Performance of Community

Examining the individual identity of the performer within the act of cooking expands the discussion and considers the other participants involved in the performance. Social performances of cooking in domestic spaces offer a variety of functions, audiences, and intentions. A bonded community and the act of cooking have been interwoven from the beginning of human existence, if not purely because of the time-intensive nature of maintaining a fire. Early cooking especially demanded collaboration, and according to Catherine Perlès, a French archaeologist, “cooking ends individual self-sufficiency” (qtd. in Pollan 96). Sharing a meal also meant sharing the process of cooking, and as the performance was repeated, cooking became a solidified group experience. By using Butler’s concepts of the performance of identity to analyze the communities formed by the act of cooking, it can be said again that we are what we repeatedly do. Just as this theory applies to the individual, it can be expanded to identify a group of people. In *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (1999), food scholar Carole M. Counihan discusses how food “is a product and mirror of the organization of society on both the broadest and most intimate levels” (6). Similarly, Eugene Anderson writes that food “conveys messages about group identity” (Anderson 128). Upon recognizing the changing, performative nature of cooking and its value, the act can also be seen as a construction of group identity that continues to change and evolve as “a process rather than a static marker” (Blend 48). Given these realities, the identity of community in domestic spaces becomes an important starting point in the discussion of cooking as a social performance.

Domestic Performances of Cooking as Ritual

The act of cooking has always been a social performance and an aspect of daily life, and it is therefore closely tied to the formation and performance of community. By its Latin
translation, “companion” means “bread sharer” or *cum panis*, which demonstrates the relationships formed over a meal (Anderson 125). The act of cooking is not only a reason to bring the immediate family together at the table, but it also functions as justification for bringing extended family and friends together for holidays and numerous other circumstances. Generally, these occasions are associated with engaging in a meal solely through consumption, but the act of cooking is a significant area of performance before the food is placed on the table. In domestic spaces, cooking became an opportunity for building familial connections, generally between women, and it provided a foundational space for rituals to perform beyond the individual by passing the embodied performance through multiple generations.

In *A Bite Off Mama’s Plate: Mothers’ and Daughters’ Connections through Food* (2001), Miriam Meyers delves into the relationships facilitated and formed between mothers and daughters in the kitchen while cooking. She points to ways in which women have held “responsibility for cooking and for meals in the past, and, for the most part, in the present, [meaning] that mothers and daughters are linked through food in ways fathers and sons are not” (Meyers 34). With the kitchen as a space for familial, feminine connections, cooking expectations singles out members within a community to be designated with the role. Through cooking rituals within both broad and specific communities, a hierarchy and specificity develops around the performance and determines which individual is supposed to be cooking, who is most skilled, and how it moves to the next generation.

In *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (1979), anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport defines ritual “as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers” (176). Ritual is also described as “stylized, repetitive, stereotyped, often but not always decorous, and they also tend to occur at special places and at times fixed by
the clock, calendar, or specified circumstance” (Rappaport 176). Cooking can be categorized as a secular ritual, “where theater and anthropology overlap” and where performance can also function as a form of comfort and stability (Bial 87). Rituals, according to Richard Schechner, “give the impression of permanence, of ‘always having been’” (Performance Studies: An Introduction 81). This is especially true in traditional cooking recipes and familial traditions where recipes and expectations are passed down through generations. The indirect, or direct, connection of cooking to every aspect of human life causes the act to be consequently tied to our relationships and communities. Cooking becomes ritualized through repeated acts within the calendar year, whether on a daily basis or specific holidays, as well as through the organization of more specific roles and relationships; for example, certain family members are associated or entrusted with cooking well-known recipes and dishes for the gathering. The ritual can also expand the act of cooking to include secondary acts surrounding it, such as children playing in the flour sprinkled on the counter or ritualized conversations had while preparing meals.

Familial rituals and modern cooking rituals are packed with numerous details and variables. Cooking-based rituals and experiences in the family kitchen teach the accepted practices of the social performance, strengthen traditions, and enforce gender roles for a particular group or community. In the safety of the home kitchen, younger generations learn through observation the rules for the act of cooking. Daily performances of cooking establish familial expectations and “also observe certain rules: Who sits where is based either on status or on habit; there is a restriction on moving about; conversations are expected” (Armelagos and Farb 131). Many rules involve gathering around the table, but expectations extend beyond who is responsible for setting the table, who is sitting while the food is served, and who clears the dishes after the meal. During the process of cooking, men are associated with cooking and carving the
meat, but women are responsible for planning meals, creating an appropriate combination and balance of recipes, cooking, serving, and cleaning up after the meal. In turn, cooking rituals performed in domestic spaces have established the act of cooking as a marker of feminine identity.

Aside from generating normative gender roles, rituals in domestic kitchen spaces also serve to teach the rules and boundaries within the logistics of cooking. Many recipe rituals and rules are necessary in order for cooking to yield the desired results, such as the need to properly cream the butter and sugar first for baked goods to have the expected consistency. Through experiencing cooking as an observer in the kitchen or by embodying the performance, a “cook soon learns what can be varied in making a dish, and what cannot…Cooks also learn when they can use shortcuts and when they cannot” (Anderson 112). We learn how to embody and participate in cooking rituals first through observation. Along with observation, ritualized conversation is a common means of communication in family life, especially in the kitchen where daily comments of “What’s for dinner?” and “It smells good in here!” are heard. Behavior in the kitchen and future performances of cooking are shaped by these repeated acts. Our recipes and cooking are maintained in similar ways to identity and other cultural aspects of our lives. Eugene Anderson comments on these abilities and patterns by comparing the process of learning to cook “just as children learn their language: by inferring guidelines from practice,” and by seeing the guidelines in action (112).

Holidays and other calendar celebrations such as birthdays or reunions offer another opportunity for rituals and communities to form. Since the kitchen serves as a gathering place and “a communication center for the entire household,” holidays generally revolve around this space (Meyers 24). Special occasions in the kitchen are where legacies are lived out and
continued, whether in their embodiment by the original legacy holder or in a pedagogical moment for a younger generation. In addition, holiday recipes and “traditional foods can be especially important in a family where the daily food is undistinguished or where the mother does not normally invite children into the kitchen” (Meyers 24). Unlike daily performances of cooking, holiday rituals offer distinguished performances and lenience in the presence of different bodies in the kitchen and their participation in the performances of cooking. All consequential performances of cooking are shaped by these experiences and determine how the identifying roles within the act of cooking move forward. Through rituals, the proper embodied performances are learned along with the expectations for identities within cooking.

Cooking as a Performance of Legacy

Within the rituals and identities of cooking, cooking-based legacies develop through unique recipes, familial connections, specific gestures, and personalized techniques of cooking. Recipes form a performance archive and keep record of a specific process, story, or identity, whether individual, cultural, or familial. Handwritten recipe cards provide both a memory of the past and a promise of the continued ritual, if someone is willing to embody the dish’s script. Sherrie Inness elaborates on the use of recipes as legacy in *Cooking Lessons: The Politics of Gender and Food* (2001). She writes that to “remember a recipe is to honor the woman it comes from, how it was passed on to her, and where she situates herself within a culinary female lineage that defies patriarchal notions of genealogy” (Inness 46). The recipe holder is entrusted with the continuation of a specific, irreplaceable identity. The desire to preserve or collect recipes can take many forms: “making up collections of family recipes for wedding gifts for the younger generation, writing down Grandmother’s verbal instructions, setting up a computerized family recipe data base, and developing family cookbooks” (Meyers 112). A collection of
recipes archives past performances in an effort to preserve the past with the intentions of
recreating the performance of cooking in the future. In other words, the script stands in place of a
lost performance, unable to be wholly repeated, but part of the archive to become embodied once
again.

Cooking legacies idealize an individual’s skill or beloved role within a family and hint at
an ability to master a certain level of cooking and a nearly unachievable standard. The individual
who holds the expertise, usually a grandmother or great-grandmother, is viewed with a reverence
that holds them above the rest, merely for the performance of her cooking. Hours are spent in the
kitchen, learning her secret ingredients, how to measure by touch, and how to replicate her
perfected gestures. Like any performer on stage, these movements and intuitive abilities are tied
to the body and cannot be completely taught. Therefore, the archived recipes, though followed
perfectly in repeated performances, never come out quite the same. Again, this demonstrates a
standard that is strived for, a desire that is compounded upon the development of cooking shows
on television.

Through these repeated performances in different bodies, the performance of cooking-
based legacies also introduce a performance of the “other” and how embodied performances
often have a strong, visceral connection between the performer and an invisible, often past,
presence. When interviewing women for her book, Meyers recalls one participant saying, “When
I use the cookie cutters, it feels like I am holding hands with my mother or my grandmothers”
(Meyers 21). The emotional connection found within the embodied performance of cooking
encourages and almost demands a presence of some type of relationship, whether physically
present, imaginative, or a memory. In a less common example, Luce Giard reflected on her own
childhood to discuss the power of observation, sense memory, and legacy to impart cooking
knowledge on her as the unwilling student in her family kitchen. Upon moving away from home, she recognized her dormant cooking abilities and determined her knowledge reserve was a result of pure observation of the performance of cooking, despite her protests against directly participating in the act. As she explains:

I already knew all the sounds: the gentle hiss of simmering water, the sputtering of melting meat drippings; and the dull thud of the kneading hand...I had to admit that I too had been provided with a woman’s knowledge and that it had crept into me, slipping past my mind’s surveillance. It was something that came to me from my body and that integrated me into the great corps of women of my lineage, incorporating me into their anonymous ranks. (de Certeau and Giard 68)

While the act of cooking is ultimately an embodied performance, Giard’s unexpected performance demonstrates the importance of spectating within the social performance of cooking. She stresses the connection between women and cooking, suggesting the matriarchal legacy is engrained, regardless of interest or upbringing.

**Performing Cultural Otherness**

Cooking legacies create and encourage opportunities for experiencing otherness through cooking. The act of cooking can be a performance of self, of community, and more specifically as a gender performance, but these performances continue to expand and gain significance through cultural otherness. Within the performance of a cooking legacy, a specific performance is sought after and repeated by following the recipe archive or by recreating gestures or instructions. In this way, the cook in domestic spaces is practicing otherness and expanding her cooking experiences by embodying other performances. The growing skills of the home cook created further expectations in his/her abilities to excel in more areas and cuisines. In the late
twentieth century, a rising interest in ethnic cuisines encouraged experts in each and a desire for 
authenticity, tying in aspects of class and elite status.

In the United States, a desire to experience different cuisines peaked after World War II 
as soldiers returned home and sparked a renewed interest in international travel, ideas, and tastes. 
Empowered by the military success in Europe, “Americans developed a desire to visit foreign 
countries and taste new, exotic foods. They felt bold but still apprehensive about European 
sophistication” (Collins 46). With a sudden desire for internationalism within the predominantly 
white, American bourgeoisie, individuals sought a tourist experience through cuisine, often 
found by dining at ethnic restaurants and embodying the other with the help of cookbooks and 
television shows; one recognizable example is Julia Child’s show, The French Chef, and her 
passion for making French cooking accessible for Americans.

In Culinary Tourism (2004), Lucy Long’s definition of “other” “refers to the 
anthropological notion of humans defining the world according to their own socially constructed 
perceptions of reality, perceptions that divide the world into the known and familiar as opposed 
to the unknown other” (23-24). Her discussion of culinary tourism extends the performance of 
the other into food and cultural studies, because it explores the idea of “the intentional, 
exploratory participation in the foodways of an other—participation including the consumption, 
preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to 
belong to a culinary system not one’s own” (Long 20-21). Focusing on the act of cooking, rather 
than consumption of ethnic meals, provides an opportunity to study an embodied performance of 
“other,” the empowerment of the cook, and the broadening of personal experience. Jack Goody 
points to the valuable role of cookbooks in the expansion of the personal archive into “other” 
cuisines. In Goody’s view, “an individual can always consult his own recipe books, published
cookbooks, or the columns of the newspaper, in order to extend the number of dishes that he can prepare” (Goody 89).

Cuisines are developed and performed “to signal ethnicity,” which “has clearly grown with the rise of trade, contact, and regional interaction. It has also grown with nationalism; each ethnic group feels it must assert its identity by having a distinctive cuisine” (Anderson 200). Cooking becomes yet another marker of a collective identity and often an ethnic group’s “sense of place’ is very much involved with the sense of taste” (Anderson 130). Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, anthropologist and author of Rice as Self (1993), refers to the permanent connection of food and cooking to the self, and how cultural identification, in this case Japanese identification, is achieved through the act of cooking, along with other foodways behaviors. The interwoven nature of cuisine, geographic location, and the specificity and claim over certain foods and styles of cooking creates a specific and complex group identity, which can definitively position others as outsiders. However, the notion of tourism can also be encouraged as the “other” is exoticized in their cuisine’s presentation, taste, and ingredients. The tourist gaze seeks the differences between previous and present experiences, which causes a heightened focus on the “other.” Long explains immersion as a necessary component of culinary tourism, linking it to a performance of “other.” She writes: “Sight seeing is only a partial engagement with otherness, whereas culinary tourism, utilizing the senses of taste, smell, touch, and vision, offers a deeper, more integrated level of experience. It engages one’s physical being, not simply as an observer, but as a participant as well” (Long 21).

**Conclusion: Moving Towards “Chef”**

From the earliest social and primal performances of the act of cooking, humans have been layering meaning onto the embodiment of cooking. The performance of self and
community illuminate the ways in which cooking has moved through generations and how that performance involves a breaking and remaking of culture and identity, which moves across different performances and generations. As Ronald J. Pelias writes:

Performance is a communicative act embodying cultural norms and values. In this way, performance has the power to maintain cultural traditions and beliefs. Yet performance also has the power to transform culture. By stretching the limits of cultural expectations, by providing alternative visions, performance can bring about change. (11)

As the discussion of cooking as performance onscreen continues in the next chapter, the commodification of cooking, with a specific focus on early cooking shows, points to the legitimized “chef” as a professional identity. The construction of individual identities and roles through cooking, with the increased role of television, public, and commercial performances in the 1950s and 1960s, also led to the more masculine identity of the chef. Although women are empowered by and valued in their role as legacy bearer, as the performance of cooking became commodified, it is men who gained commercial success and reaped the benefits of the legitimized profession of “chef.” The professional presence in the kitchen also formed a hierarchy of cooking knowledge, and home cooks could be taught new skills and recipes through cooking shows. Further, the domestic spaces and home kitchens were able to be in community with chefs through television cooking shows, which opened new ways of viewing the professional’s act of cooking for entertainment rather than embodying the performance.
CHAPTER II.
THE PROFESSIONAL CHEF: MOVING THE ACT OF COOKING TO TELEVISION

I knew better than to pause beside the window displays. I had learned in my first nine years of life that it only increased the temptation and prolonged the wait. The little bell jingled as I pulled open the door for my mom, an act of bribery disguised as good behavior while I picked out a cookie in my mind and deeply inhaled the sweetness of our favorite local bakery. Usually we could justify a trip to the bakery with any special occasion: the end of a gymnastics season, birthdays, get well presents, the first day of school—once I managed to get a cookie after losing a tooth.

The first sight of the bakery was always overwhelming. I was often distracted by the beautiful collections of cookies that were arranged into themed bouquets by the front door. The sugar cookies were uniformly iced to perfection in bright colors and clean lines, decorated into smiling flowers and cartooned suns. At the front counter, a woman carefully iced fresh cookies with a variety of piping bags. Her fluid motions were intoxicating while she turned sugar cookies into pristinely covered surfaces for further decoration, but I knew better than to let myself be drawn in. I had watched this process dozens of times and had decided the real action was further into the bakery and almost out of my line of sight.

If I was lucky, I could stand to the far side of the counter and peer into the back working area of the bakery where a man covered single-tiered cakes with layers of buttercream icing. Over several years of visits, I collected ideas ranging in varying degrees of complexity and filed them away in my mind. He could smooth the entire surface of the cake with a few spins of the turntable and a steady placement of an icing tool. He created gorgeous flowers with quick pulls of the icing bag, moving so flawlessly I would forget to blink. A voyeur to his skillful
performance, I was wrapped up in his ability to shave blocks of chocolate into delicate spirals, pipe beaded borders that shimmered in the sunlight, and curl icing into beautiful cursive upon the cakes. I observed the gestures so closely, I felt as though I conjure the skills up from memory and into my own hands.

On frequent occasions, I “hosted” my own cooking show from behind our kitchen island. My most popular performances occurred during the annual birthday episodes in which I would bake a treat to take into my grade school homeroom class. Of course, my mother guest starred and graciously did most of the work while I attempted my hand with the icing. As a former cake decorator, she was able to hand me all the proper icing tips and demonstrate the basics. But I expected more. I had images of professionally iced cookies spinning in my head as I carefully squeezed individual drops of food coloring into the white buttercream. Even in mixing the icing, I noticed how I struggled to keep my gestures strong and efficient. Icing spread onto the handle of the spatula, making my hands sticky. I was clumsy with the butter knife, and the icing refused to sit along the edge of the heart-shaped cookies. My piping was inconsistent at best, but I curled strings of pink icing into messy hearts and remained poised as I spoke to the “camera” and explained my work. I used a vegetable peeler on a block of chocolate and only managed to produce thin, crumbled shavings. Clearly, minutes spent observing a professional cake decorator did not translate to a performance of my own.

I was desperate to imitate what I had seen. I understood that a professional level of cooking was compelling and had finesse. Recognized by my lack of ability, I was only able to embody the cake decorator’s skill through my imagination. In my body, the knowledge felt complex, and I struggled to find fluidity in the gestures I saw in the decorator’s hands. Even
though I was aware of my novice skills, I had come to the understanding that viewing a professional at work was compelling, desirable, valuable, and worth pretending to emulate.

**Commodified Cooking**

As the act of cooking was commodified in the second half of the twentieth century, opportunities for profit and prestige became more prevalent. These opportunities led to the act of cooking in a commercial setting, outside of a strictly social performance. The ability to cook professionally influenced several aspects of the performance of cooking, including gender, status, skill level, and personality. The separation between cooking in domestic spaces and in a commercial setting established a hierarchy within cooking and legitimized the identity of the chef as someone distinct from the home cook. The identity of the individual chef became as important to the cooking itself, especially in the early cooking shows of the 1960s and 1970s. In this chapter, the discussion of cooking as performance includes an analysis of early cooking shows hosts and program structures, along with the influence of early cooking shows on presenting performances of cooking as entertainment and the increased role of the viewer. In addition, the overall commodification of cooking, masculine participation and dominance in the industry, and televised spaces can be examined to determine how the role of chef was legitimized and how it grew to encourage artful performances of cooking.

The commodification of cooking was linked to numerous factors long before televised cooking shows were introduced to the United States. In the 1930s, the popularization of the restaurant, a growing interest in experience the act of cooking in public, and radio shows all contributed to the commercialization of cooking. Later, in the 1950s, interest in restaurants and the desire to experience cooking in public spaces were influenced by an increase in leisure time
for many Americans, the appeal of other cultures and authentic, ethnic cuisine, and the spectacle often provided by the experience, such as open kitchens.

Early restaurants, specifically in New York City, were owned and run by individuals serving their native cuisine. As Anglo-Americans became more open to new experiences and ethnic cuisines, the restaurant industry continued growing alongside the demand. In We Are What We Eat (1998), Donna Gabaccia notes that crossing “the cultural borders of America’s many eating communities proceeded in a series of overlapping phases from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, but the years between 1900 and 1940 represented a particularly intensive phase of cross-cultural borrowing” (94). Dining out created opportunities for Anglo-Americans to engage in viewing the act of cooking and introduced them to new understandings of the “other,” in this case, through authentic, ethnic cuisines. Food studies scholar Donna Gabaccia explains that “in 1930, New York’s multiethnic population had become an essential part of the city’s appeal to visitors and tourists,” but their cuisine commodified their presence in the city in new ways and made culinary tourism more accessible (Gabaccia 94). The expansion of cooking as an embodied performance to a viewed performance began with the restaurant and public settings and continued to evolve as televised cooking programs became more popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

Early Cooking Shows

After World War II, there was a clear shift in expectations for middle-class women to return to domestic spaces after entering the workplace as part of the war effort. Rosie the Riveter was no longer a highly encouraged path, and instead there was a renewed emphasis on the picturesque housewife as men returned home and restored order in their previous jobs. These changes affected far more than gender expectations and roles; the postwar social climate changed
how women were expected to structure their time at home and the skills they were expected to master, cooking being among the list of sought after abilities.

With this newly created time for housewives, the cooking industry adjusted its efforts to more effectively sell to the new demographic and to encourage an emphasis placed on learning to cook for one’s family and to properly host guests for dinner. These patterns, along with the onset of television programs, led to early cooking shows. Before television, radio programs offered instructional programs such as *Housekeeper’s Chat* (1926) with the segment “What Shall We Have for Dinner?” where women at home could copy down recipes to try for their families. Radio also provided an advertising platform for appliances and products that promised to enhance the life of a housewife in the kitchen. These products and ideas were stressed during the postwar shift because women were suddenly expected to spend the entire day working in the home. Therefore, recipes also shifted from quick meals that could be whipped up after work to recipes that could take most or all of a day.

Interest in cooking-oriented radio programs dissolved as television became more prominent and the visual aspects of performance could be demonstrated. Like radio programs, televised shows were still pedagogical in nature, but instead of the note-taking required by radio shows, televised shows transformed cooking into a shared, embodied performance for the chef onscreen and the home viewer. Early viewership was influenced by the few television channels available, but as the number of television stations increased to over three hundred from the late 1940s to the mid 1950s, regional cooking programs were given a venue for success (Collins 31). As cooking shows grew into a genre of their own, ritualized formats, hosts, and aesthetics quickly developed. Marsha Cassidy addresses the increase of cooking shows on television by saying,
Cooking shows of the late 1940s and 1950s served as an important way to draw women to their TV sets during the day. They were also easy to sponsor and self-sustaining economically. During this period, viewers frequently had access to only one or two channels. These were important reasons why the early cooking shows became a standard genre of American television. (qtd. in Collins 60)

With a presence from the onset of broadcasting, cooking or home-economic shows with cooking segments also provided a path for radio personalities, such as Betty Crocker, to transfer to television and continue their programs.

“Chef” as a Legitimized Identity

Although people were still using cooking in daily life as a social performance and apart from television throughout the twentieth century, the legitimatization of the chef as an expert and professional identity formed an additional layer to the performance of cooking. This, in combination with the increasing role of television and cooking shows, led to the eventual performance of the act of cooking as an artful performance in the twenty-first century. The identity of the chef evolved from performances of cooking as identity, community, ritual, legacy, and otherness. As performances of cooking moved further into the public sphere and became more established as a commercial act in the 1960s and 1970s, the identity of the performer was also associated with new expectations and characteristics. The commodification of cooking allowed television to become a platform for performing as chef and as viewer, therefore expanding the skill of cooking into a professional, as well as personal, identity.

Cooking shows created a public, readily accessible set of teachers, and they established a hierarchy of cooking knowledge and technical knowledge, thus solidifying the notion that cooking could be mastered and perfected in more tangible ways than personal taste. Its further
commercialization through television offered an accepted standard for middle-class, Anglo-America where the audiences were usually women and wives who stayed at home. With a wider range of experiences in culinary otherness that were contingent on financial resources and leisure time, a division of status within the performance of cooking also developed. Eugene Anderson discusses the distinguished desire of elite groups who “always try to mark themselves off by consumption of special-status of prestige foods (caviar, champagne, goat cheese, etc.), and upwardly mobile people who try to rise in respect by being seen eating those foods” (136). These groups push the performance of cooking forward as status imitation changes trends in taste, and “foods and restaurants of the ‘in’ crowd are quickly discovered and patronized by people who yearn to be ‘in’” (Anderson 136).

Otherness in Televised Cooking Shows

The introduction of televised cooking shows demonstrated a presence of the professional embodiment of “the other” and encouraged home cooks to learn this ability as well. Working with preexisting materials such as recipes and cookbooks, television shows enabled home cooks to perform other more easily. In one episode of The Frugal Gourmet (1973, 1983-1997), host Jeff Smith explains:

The Frugal Gourmet is committed to trying to understand other peoples and trying to educate your own children to understand other people. A cuisine, a style of cooking is a way of thinking more than it is a way of eating…We do things [with certain food products] because of the way we think about ourselves. (qtd. in Collins 147)

The newly discovered accessibility to performances of different ethnic cuisines, and the representation of these environments onscreen in the second half of the twentieth century,
provided mainstream American with opportunities to expand their domestic cooking experiences. There are numerous limitations to performing the other that are simply unobtainable, such as race, ethnicity, and the accessibility of geographically specific ingredients, but the act of cooking and the production of an ethnic dish does create embodied opportunities to be transported by cuisine. Television illustrates more explicitly the commodification and commercialization of cooking and ethnic cuisines, as shows like The French Chef (1963-1973) and many recent programs on the Food Network have been dedicated to specific traditions and techniques from various localities. The limitations of the repeated performance of local cuisines have been influenced by the “continuous pressure from commercial enterprise aimed at profiting by turning into a national fad every localized taste opportunity” (Mintz 114). The commercialization of local cuisine has also presented new implications of how the other was embodied. Usually the performer has been privileged, white, of a higher socio-economic status, and able to spend leisure time and financial resources exploring these cuisines of the exoticized other.

The presentation of ethnic kitchen environments on television cooking shows starting in the late 1940s has also provided examples of cliché roles and played into mainstream America’s understanding of its ethnic minorities and the performances of cooking their cuisines. An early cooking show, Chef Milani (1949-1950), starred Chef Milani, an Italian entertainer and chef with a thick accent who spoke about cooking as

the kitchen behind him buzzed with activity: his plump, smiling, and servile wife,
the impish helper Bobby, the interjecting emcee Luigi, all bustling, joking,
laughing, and making noises about how good the kitchen smelled and wondering
Chef Milani and other ethnic chefs on television represented far more than the self; they were unknowingly standing in for the conventional views of their ethnicity, community, lifestyle, and cultural identity. However, while these were perhaps misrepresentations of various ethnic groups, the categories served to define different types of performances of the “other” and helped mainstream America appreciate certain dishes. In becoming more comfortable with ethnic cuisines, Anglo-Americans were able to expand their knowledge of cooking and experience ethnic cuisines as if they were physically travelling to new places. With the foundation laid for appreciating and accepting the other, domestic home cooks were enabled to embody these performances, especially through cooking shows hosted by the experts in a specific cuisine or ethnic background. Cooking shows recognized the limitations of authenticity of different cuisines by changing techniques and ingredients to use items that were accessible for American audiences. In the case of Julia Child’s show, “in the specifically geographic context of America, her notion of ‘mastering the art of French cooking’ frequently meant not cooking exactly as the French do but cooking in ways that would lead to results comparable to those of the French” (Polan 5). Despite inaccuracies in performances of the other, home cooks were able to expand their skills in the kitchen and perform cooking in new ways. These performances opened doors for chefs to specialize their knowledge and become responsible for teaching home cooks, therefore layering more of meaning, skill, and interest onto the act of cooking.

Onscreen Influence

From the onset of widely-viewed televised cooking programs in the 1950s, the presence of chefs onscreen formed another layer within the relationship between the embodied action of
the performer and the viewer. The performance of identity onscreen also complicated the ideals of the home cook, both in their expected abilities in the kitchen and in their demeanor and appearance. Cooking shows introduced, in a more direct way, what type of individual would be the ideal form to embody the act of cooking. Generally the cooking show host needed to be appealing to listen to, learn from, and look at, or at least have an undeniably entertaining personality. Hosts were the qualified teachers of the act of cooking and were identified by their possession of technical skills. In restaurants, the chefs were often never seen because of the work done in the concealed kitchen, but television placed them front and center, exposing their personality, knowledge, and abilities before the viewer. This public display allowed the performer to be observed just as closely as the cooking itself, and as the skills grew in complexity and the potential for success in the industry was proven, men stepped in. Luce Giard points to the gendered distinction as cooking became commercialized, competitive, and technical. She writes:

A series of techniques [tours de main] that one must observe before being able to imitate them: “To loosen a crêpe, you give the pan a sharp rap, like this.” These are multifaceted activities that people consider very simple or even a little stupid, except in the rare cases where they are carried out with a certain degree of excellence, with extreme refinement—but then it becomes the business of great chefs, who, of course, are men. (de Certeau and Giard 72)

“Chef” as a Masculine Performance

Along with a professional label of “chef,” this identity evolved from a feminine role within domestic spaces into a more masculine identity beginning in the 1970s. Suddenly, the act of cooking had become a skill to master and a way to gain recognition, prestige, and fame. With
opportunities in restaurants and onscreen, the act of cooking became a choice rather than a chore, and men capitalized on the industry. As Gary Alan Fine writes in *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work* (2009), “Although women bear the primary responsibility for cooking for the family, in institutional spaces and modest establishments, cooking that involves creativity and high-volume service, or at prestigious dining places, is typically defined as a job for men” (241). The professional space developed over the second half of the twentieth century, a large influence being the increasingly prominent televised presence of cooking. A 1976 article in *Forbes* magazine, “The Kitchen: America’s Playroom,” stated, “Cooking, once a demeaning activity fit only for servants, sissies and overweight mothers-in-law, has begun taking on glamour” (qtd. in Collins 105). The ability to cook well and effortlessly entertain was gaining social value and a prestigious status.

The business aspects now associated with the chef shifted the act of cooking into a patriarchal lineage of property and professional skill while the social, domestic performances of legacy were still feminized. As the central figure and the public image of a higher level of cooking, many hosts of popular cooking shows beginning in the 1970s were men, and this “was indicative of both the increased status of cooking and the fading out of traditional gender roles” (Collins 137). The masculine space of the dining room began to expand into the kitchen, not necessarily as a social performance, but rather a more artful performance that functioned as entertainment and control over pedagogical methods. While speaking to a reporter of the *Tribune* in 1960, Francois Pope, said: “One of the main reasons for our success in television is the formality projected by a father and sons teaching women how to cook…Cooking is not a job or a chore and women can more easily see this when men act as their teachers. The finest cooks in the world are men” (“Francis Pope” 18). The identity of chef within the act of cooking as
performance became a masculine practice, and the popular expectations of “chef” forced a much more masculine, public, and commercial approach to cooking. Women were still able to succeed onscreen as chefs, but the change in title occurred alongside the developed presence of men in performing the act of cooking.

“Chef” as Television Personality

Regardless of gender, both male and female chefs were required to successfully perform the self on television, where personality was often more important than the talent of the chef. The personality of a cooking show host or celebrity chef allowed them to be successful and recognized for their performances of cooking and as a qualified chef. The careers of Martha Stewart, Rachael Ray, and Emeril Lagasse, among others, have emphasized the role of the chef’s personality to the success of the show. In the case of The Food Network, Collins argues that “on a channel devoted to food, the content almost becomes secondary,” and that “the host-driven show is truly the hallmark of the modern cooking show” (175). In her study of the celebrity chef, she concludes that The Food Network is a self-propelling industry that has created cooking competition shows that often leave cooking itself in the background and instead seek to find the next star, celebrity chef, or the best home cook in America.

The emphasis placed on the host created an additional layer on the performance of the onscreen self because an individual had to be both skilled in cooking and an enjoyable and friendly personality. As the host of a show, viewers wanted a relatable person who represented an ideal version of themselves. The interest was found in the possibility of becoming like these hosts who were able to perform cooking effortlessly and perform who the viewer wanted to be. Using Martha Stewart’s onscreen performance of seeming perfection, the ideals presented through her show, Martha Stewart Living (1993-2004) set an impossible standard of home
making for the average viewer. However, “the reflection of who we are situated beside the
reflection of who we want to be…seems to be the magical combination” of a successful
television chef (Collins 65). Failure to perform this showed lower ratings, a crucial element as
competition between networks, hosts, and individual programs increased. Two early examples
were James Beard in his show *I Love To Eat* (1946-1947) where his personality failed to
translate on camera despite his immense skill in the kitchen, and Dione Lucas who had limited
success with *The Dione Lucas Cooking Show* (1949-1950). Lucas struggled to present herself as
something other than a cooking instructor, and “her demeanor was too stiff to mediate the rigors
of instruction with a diverting air of entertainment” (Polan 8). However, the early presence of
Beard and Lucas on television before the host position became more competitive helped shape
the mold for what would become a standard for the cooking show host’s identity.

The voices and individuals heard on the radio were suddenly able to take on the identity
of a physical performer, meaning there was a new focus on the appearance, demeanor, voice, and
style of individuals seeking to make a career cooking on television. The early cooking show
genre also created a series of expectations for the show’s host. Individual hosts had to look the
part and fit into the role of teacher while also being engaging. Together, the identity of the host
and the structure of the televised cooking show formed specific expectations for their viewers.

The intent of early cooking shows was similar to radio programs as they “were instructive
and prescriptive, teaching housewives how to perform their kitchen duties with pragmatism and
confidence” (Collins 30). However, in an attempt to provide variations of pedagogical shows and
more efficiently reach and intrigue their audiences, shows began departing from their typical
structure. Florence Hanford, the host of Philadelphia-based *Television Kitchen* (1949-1969)
strayed from the model by refusing to dictate the precise recipe, justifying her decision by
claiming she may not give the instructions thoroughly enough or the viewer may not copy it down correctly, creating unwanted results at home. Despite her deviation in this seemingly small manner, Hanford fit the mold of the desirable host. Like many other cooking show hosts, she was a white woman with a small stature and a neutral, pleasant demeanor.

Desirable hosts “were older, homey, matronly women who looked, it could be said, like the stereotype of the caring auntie who is wise yet tender and dispenses advice with care and assurance” (Polan 50). Another successful type was “the perky, cheery housewife who was pretty in a wholesome but not overtly sexy way” and was able to present the ideal version of a common housewife while also being accessible (Polan 50). There was a desire for the female viewer to be able to identify with her onscreen counterpart and for a home cook to believe in her potential to acquire the skills and expertise of a cooking show host. In this manner, the onscreen chef was not simply teaching cooking skills and recipes, they were also selling an identity, a way of being the idyllic housewife. The typical cooking show “was not only aimed at an audience of housewives, it was also involved in the discursive construction of this social identity” (de Solier 469). The ideal host was a body through which the act of cooking, as a skill, could be performed and sold to the female viewers at home. Selling an identity of excellence in a domestic role demonstrates another change in the intention of early cooking shows. A normative standard was established for what type of woman could be a good cook, and in turn, a good wife, mother, and host. The growing food industry continued to capitalize on these ideas through cookbooks, products, mainstream recipes, and a more diverse range of cooking shows.

Just as the appearance, attitude, and personality of the host played a role in the familiarity of a cooking show, the overall structure of each episode and use of the camera functioned in familiar ways for its viewers. Throughout their history, cooking shows themselves have
functioned as a type of ritual, both within the daily routines of their viewers and within the format of the show itself. The formation of a ritual implies that a show is consistent in visual appearance, arrangement, and often signature greetings or catchphrases. As in any performance, the televised production is marked by rules, scripts, and plans designed to make the show communicate effectively with an audience. As more shows were produced, a cooking show genre, as well as defining guidelines for the genre, developed. While formats and styles varied from show to show, the overall idea of how to create a long-running cooking show on television became apparent.

In her “how to” manual for a successful cooking show, *Women on TV* (1954), Ellen Pennell urges more women to appear on television, in their own cooking segments, because “women believe women” rather than being taught a domestic skill by a man (iii). In *Watching What We Eat*, Kathleen Collins summarizes the manual and highlights the detailed nature of Pennell’s information, demonstrating the genre’s solidified standards and expectations.

Pennell provided specific guidelines, such as the number of people who should appear on a show, rehearsal time, script preparation, demo tables, lettering on charts, vocabulary, clothing, kitchen colors, the use of props (they increase interest, the manual told readers), choosing products of sponsorship, and the importance of voice (sounding “too sexy” was bad; sounding “like a good cook in her own home” was good). The message was encouraging and conveyed the idea that the television industry needed more women’s talents. (34)

Pennell describes the visual rituals viewers of early cooking shows would have expected to see but would not have been aware of noticing. Of course, a particular kitchen or a familiar space would be recognized, but the color of certain elements or the number of sponsored products
throughout the space would remain undetected by an average viewer. Framing the act of cooking as a type of ritual, one of the seven functions of performance, and as a performance of comfort, community, and identity opens up the discussion to consider the new dynamics between the TV host, the viewer, and the performativity of cooking.

The cooking shows hosted by Dione Lucas, James Beard, Julia Child, and Graham Kerr reveal both overarching and specific rituals and identities important to each show. Looking for patterns across these shows, the traditional, social performances of cooking begin to fade as opportunities for entertainment and artful performances arise. These changes in performance have also affected the type of performer and what viewers were and are interested in watching, because cooking shows have reduced the emphasis on learning to embody the skill and become much more focused on entertaining and depicting a master chef at work in the kitchen. The more strict personality of Lucas was overlooked for more outgoing chefs, such as Kerr and Child, and the cooking industry magnified the style, personality, and skill of the individual chef. An exploration of these four individuals’ television careers demonstrates their ability to use normative identity markers and conventionalized program formats to become successful. It also reveals how their shows functioned within the evolution of onscreen cooking and its expansion into artful performances.

**James Beard**

A major shift in early cooking shows occurred with James Beard and his show *I Love to Eat* (1946-1947), which began as a fifteen minute segment sponsored by Elsie the Cow, the mascot of the Borden Dairy Company. In the mid and late 1940s, most cooking shows or segments were hosted by female home economists who were specifically positioned to instruct their viewers on domestic skills. However, Beard’s intention was “to combine instruction and
fun—the pattern for nearly every successful TV chef who came after him” (Collins 27). As a trained stage actor, Beard sought theatricality during his time onscreen, but his skill on the stage did not translate effectively to a natural television personality. *I Love to Eat* was an important early contribution to the evolution of the act of cooking on television as it started to become about more than the social action or skill. In his autobiography *Delights and Prejudices* (1964), Beard wrote, “Put on a fine show! Like the theater, offering food and hospitality to people is a matter of showmanship” (219).

While this may be true, a retrospective reading of Beard’s performance reveals numerous instances of awkwardly forced product placement. Product sponsorship was a standard component of nearly all cooking shows, but Beard’s attempt to “combine direct plugs…with dramatized scenes in which commercial messages entered the flow of the story in characters’ ordinary conversation” did not have the integrated effect it was designed to create (Polan 52).

Early cooking shows were rehearsed performances, so scripted moments were expected, but it would appear Beard was unable to reconcile the roles of salesmanship and showmanship in a convincing manner. However, Beard contributed to the evolution the earliest cooking shows by embodying a female skill in a male body, thus creating a non-normative performance of the act of cooking and introducing masculine presence in the cooking profession. *I Love to Eat* demonstrates the beginning of men using their dominance within society to represent the cooking industry as authoritative figure and expert capable of teaching women.

**Dione Lucas**

Perhaps the first well-known female onscreen chef was Dione Lucas, the first woman to graduate from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and the host of *To The Queen’s Taste* (1948). The show was renamed *The Dione Lucas Cooking Show* in 1949 and continued running for another year.
Lucas easily fit the onscreen role of instructor and appealed to both the average and skilled home cook by encouraging women “to feel empowered by their kitchen skills instead of bound to them” (Collins 58). Through this goal, she became an advocate for teaching her viewers how to embody the art of French cooking, building on her predecessor’s show and adding a layer of gourmet cooking and a professional tone. Lucas’s behavior and appearance during her show performed these intentions well. She dressed more formally than other hosts, rarely wore an apron, and did not taste her recipes as she cooked, all forming her image as “a self-possessed, unruffled woman of poise with a bit of a hardened edge” (Polan 74). Lucas’s persona demonstrated complete control in her appearance, control within the kitchen, and control over the viewer’s ability to learn her recipes and French techniques.

Unlike Beard, her performance of cooking was more focused on the cooking itself, and each episode highlighted one’s ability to improve in this skill. She struck a balance by teaching ambitious, gourmet dishes with recognizable ingredients without sacrificing the difficulty of certain techniques. Lucas insisted on completing the recipe without shortcuts, which she deemed to be cheating, with all steps discussed on camera within the thirty-minute show. For all her serious directions and expectations, Lucas’s performance was not void of playful quips or mistakes, but she was not able to naturally deliver this personality. Dana Polan explains that even “at her wryest, Lucas seems not to be a very dynamic performer, and her stabs at an authenticity of personality are marred by her willingness to serve shamelessly as a shill for branded products” (75). Within each episode of her show, Lucas advertised appliances and brand name products, and while expected for an early cooking show format, these moments interrupted and pulled focus away from her show’s intent.
Regardless of how Lucas’s performance of personality was received by viewers, her “universal appeal could largely be attributed to the fact that viewers liked watching the artist at work, an element that in part explains the sustained appeal of cooking shows over the course of the next fifty years” (Collins 59). Collins suggests viewership of Lucas’s show “might answer the question as to why people who don’t cook would ever watch a cooking show. Though she was a real woman undertaking real tasks, she was transformed by the magic of TV into a performer” (Collins 53). The response of many home cooks to Lucas’ performance of cooking illustrated a sense of intrigue about the act of cooking as well as a desire to observe it. The popularity of *The Dione Lucas Cooking Show* set the stage for future onscreen chefs, solidified a precedent for French cooking in the United States, and established a place for female success in onscreen cooking. Although Lucas’s show aired nearly a decade before Julia Child debuted on television, the timing of Lucas’s career and her position as a pioneer of the cooking show genre offered an established platform for chefs in the 1950s and 1960s to build upon.

**Julia Child**

By the premiere of *The French Chef* in 1963, America was ready for the personality, non-normative identity, and new rituals of Julia Child’s show. Audiences embraced *The French Chef* enthusiastically, which is proven by the longevity of her show that lasted until 1973. Child was adamant about the home cook’s ability to follow any recipe, even the most intimidating and complex French recipes, and she reassured her viewers by openly admitting to mistakes of her own throughout her show. Child “was not the first cook on television, but as the first to prop open the door of culinary progressivism, she may have been the most important,” and her onscreen presence further legitimized the profession of cooking and made strides for women in this profession as well (Collins 2). She was the whole package for a cooking show host: a natural
onscreen personality, likeable, relatable, and incredibly skilled in French cooking. Child was not simply known for being popular within the preexisting cooking genre, she revolutionized the genre itself by being “one of the first to present a purely food-centered cooking show as opposed to a homemaking show, and, at the same time, as if by accident, a host-centered cooking show” (Collins 73). Perhaps it was through a combination of factors, particularly her thorough knowledge and personable, authentic personality, that made her the exception to the male-dominated domain of the celebrity chef.

The performance of cooking by Child could be immediately recognized as unique, simply based on her physical appearance. Child stood over six feet tall and “was not of the mold favored by Hollywood producers”; she was “sometimes awkward and [she] never tried to feign a TV persona” (Collins 75). Her personality and demeanor in the kitchen were far different from other hosts, such as Dione Lucas, but her differences only served to benefit her, as she quickly became the star of television broadcasting in the 1960s.

Aside from her appearance, Child’s personality was a progressive shift for the performance of cooking, and she was able to strike a balance between her role as a knowledgeable teacher while also being viewed as likeable. The opening of the episode “To Roast a Chicken” (1969) depicts Child standing behind a row of whole, raw chickens, perched upright as she declares each chicken’s name while pointing at it with her knife. She recites, “Julia Child presents…the chicken sisters! Ms. Broiler, Ms. Fryer, Ms. Roaster, Ms. Canapé, Ms. Stewer, and Old Madame Hen” (The French Chef, S7:E14, 00:00:00-00:00:52). As her theme music plays, the camera zooms in to pan across the row of raw chickens. Upon closer examination, it is possible to see the edges of Child’s apron bouncing along with the music behind the chickens. Through this, and dozens of other examples, it is apparent that Child had
mastered the art of taking pedagogical situations of difficult skills and making them memorable and entertaining. Perhaps her most endearing quality was her ability to make, laugh at, and adapt to her mistakes. Child herself wrote, “One of the secrets of cooking is to learn to correct something if you can, and bear with it if you cannot” (qtd. Collins 78). As Polan explains, viewers “liked that a person whose very appearance on the public medium of television made her special was not so special that she wouldn’t sometimes make mistakes, admit them, and set out to rectify them” (32). Child’s ability to make mistakes and quickly adapt in a humorous yet helpful manner became a valuable aspect of her teaching and cooking style. Her enthusiasm and can-do attitude encouraged optimism in the face of failure, and she maintained an aura of bravery to overcome the fear, which so often struck Americans when facing a seemingly complex task, such as making sugar syrup or deboning a chicken.

Watching *The French Chef* became about watching Child. Her inability to create a personality for television made her all the more compelling. As Laura Shapiro writes in *Julia Child* (2007), “Julia had no gift for artifice: she could perform, but she couldn’t pretend” (101). Although many viewers were interested in learning about French cooking, the pedagogical intent was beginning to find equal partnership with a personable, entertaining host. Viewers were still inclined to embody the act of cooking, but perhaps this was done in an effort to be like Julia and to mimic her onscreen performance.

*The French Chef*

The structure of individual episodes of *The French Chef* developed new rituals and moments for the viewers and shaped the evolution of cooking as performance by shifting further into entertainment and more explicitly forming a virtual community. One major change in the physical space of the show was the inclusion of a dining room set. By 1952, approximately
twenty-five percent of television stations had a permanent kitchen set that included a dining room (Polan 46). An integral aspect of *The French Chef* was the comforting ritual in which Child would carry her dish into the dining room, sit down at the table, and possibility suggest a wine pairing for the meal before signing off with her signature, “bon appetit!” This invitation for her viewers to sit across from her and enjoy the meal formed a sense of inclusion and community. As Polan explains in *Julia Child’s The French Chef* (2011),

> The emphasis on the pleasures of consumption that would be so central to the set design of *The French Chef*, where the kitchen was right next to a dining room, was not yet present in the early shows, where all that mattered was the homemaker’s efficiency in getting food made and not the enjoyment that ensured from eating it. (46)

Just as the end of an episode was signaled by ritual, so was the opening sequence for *The French Chef*. The first view into Child’s world was always a close up of her hands working on an ingredient or recipe that would be the focus of the episode before her voice joined the movement, explaining the action. Here, audiences have caught her in the middle of her quiet work, inside her kitchen, providing the viewer with a sense of intimacy through her informal demeanor and presence in her personal space. Eventually there would be a full shot of Child in her kitchen, continuing with the work or discussing the theme and background information vital for engaging the interest of viewers. After a moment dedicated to discussing the plan and purpose for the episode, cheery music begins playing as “THE FRENCH CHEF” would appear on the screen for several moments before being replaced by “with JULIA CHILD.” With this opening, the tone and intent of the show along with the host’s ability and personality are introduced through ritual.
Graham Kerr

*The Galloping Gourmet* (1969-1971), hosted by Graham Kerr, was an energetic and performative cooking show filmed with a live studio audience. Unlike popular shows before it, Kerr’s use of a live audience, as can be expected, changed the dynamic of the relationship with his viewers and affected how he spoke, responded to audience reactions, made jokes, and performed the act and gestures of cooking. The structure of *The Galloping Gourmet*, from the opening moments of each episode, was unlike other shows. A wildly cheering audience would welcome Kerr to the stage where he performed a type of monologue, similar to the explanation of ingredients and recipes shared by other hosts at the beginning of each episode. Here, Kerr’s theatrical and comedic personality was introduced. Perhaps out of all the chefs being explored in this study, Kerr was the most focused on his performance as an entertainer. During every show, he explained his recipe as he cooked, layering his actions with props and humor so the show never settled on a serious cooking lesson.

Kerr’s position as a male host at the end of the 1960s allowed his show to emphasize entertainment. The status of gourmet cooking, the appeal for Americans to experience this type of cooking, and the previously established cooking show genre opened doors for Kerr to perform cooking in new ways. As viewers and novice home cooks “felt more at ease in their kitchens and knowledge of food and cooking were woven into American culture inch by inch, producers of cooking shows took the cue that there was more room for fun” (Collins 4). Kerr’s energy, quick humor, and likeable personality made him well suited for a career onscreen. Kerr spoke about his experience with *The Galloping Gourmet* in a 2005 interview:

People were beginning to acquire experiences as well as stuff…Eating wasn’t just eating. You could actually experience something and have a story to tell. It was a
culture shift from the norm, from the steak and potatoes. And I think we arrived at exactly that time. (qtd. in Collins 114)

Kerr’s timely arrival also made possible the use of a live studio audience. Their presence changed nearly every aspect of his performance whether involving his response to laughter, applause, or a sigh upon seeing his finished recipes on the plate. The spectators were engaged throughout the performance, becoming an integrated aspect of it. The Galloping Gourmet’s live audience illustrates a further step on the spectrum of social and artful performance.

**Conclusion: Who Is Watching?**

Within the act of cooking, an identity forms both for the individual and the community, eventually leading to “chef” as the single identifier necessary for describing oneself. “Chef” becomes a stand-alone identity rather than an attribute or skill of the housewife, and cooking becomes a legitimized profession. Of course, the chef identity has not always existed, but when looking at the food industry today, it becomes clear that the act of cooking has become a highly competitive skill that has been legitimized and idealized as a professional pursuit. Individual chefs have been increasingly highlighted on television, and in turn, viewers have become accustomed to cooking shows with recognizable chefs performing the act of cooking. In the next chapter, attention will turn to the influence of audiences and the importance of the viewer as an interest in watching the professional chef engaged in the act of cooking grew with the creation of the Food Network. As cooking shows began shifting from purely instructional to entertainment, the relationship between onscreen chefs and their audiences encouraged specific types of hosts, chefs, and show content, all of them oriented to the viewer’s desire to watch the act of cooking on television.
CHAPTER III.

FEASTING WITH THEIR EYES: THE AUDIENCE’S EFFECT ON PERFORMANCE

Thirty-one steps.

I counted them every day.

It took thirty-one steps to get from the end of my driveway, through the garage, to just inside the back door of my childhood home. Every day I would take thirty-one steps, leaving the school bus behind and entering into the familiar scene of our kitchen, a safe haven from my world of worksheets and math problems. My mom would be moving about, dipping in the fridge, peaking through the oven door, and spinning back to the microwave when the timer sounded.

The afternoon snack was a well-worn ritual in during my weekday routine. I would kick my shoes off by the door and fling my book bag down as she pulled homemade pita chips from the oven and asked how my day was. More often than not, I would end up standing at the counter, enjoying her company while snacking on the warm treat she had prepared.

In the background, the Food Network, specifically a show hosted by Rachael Ray, would be softly explaining any number of recipes while images of delicious desserts graced the screen. The show was called *Sweet Dreams*; a thirty-minute program in which Rachael Ray would bake tasty treats that were the ideal midnight snacks. Gazing upon her red velvet cake suddenly made my pita chips seem far too healthy and bland as my sweet tooth craved chocolate (or at least a sprinkle of cinnamon sugar over the chips). Every day, promptly at 3:30 p.m., Rachael was waiting for me, and I looked forward to the chocolate-filled concoctions I could coerce my mom into baking months later for my birthday. It was a simple routine, something I never thought to memorize, yet the memory remains as one where I recognized the dissonance between Rachael’s
onscreen experience and my own. I was simultaneously engrossed in the performance of onscreen cooking while being present in my mom’s company and cooking.

Our snack ritual was connected to spaces on the screen, and as viewers, we engaged in Rachael Ray’s show and performed as mediated viewers, sharing an experience together, but apart. The dual spaces of our kitchens performed distance and disconnect, but the act of cooking connected our experiences. My embodied experience in our own kitchen engaged with Rachael Ray’s commercialized kitchen and public space. In this way, the act of cooking, whether in an embodied space or imitated kitchen, fostered a virtual community and connected spaces together through the screen.

The Food Network Commodity

Through the rise of television shows especially, an emphasis on cooking as an event to experience, entertain, and view was added to the established social and embodied performances of cooking. This chapter explores the commodification of cooking in a brief history of Food Network shows and celebrity chefs that illustrates ideas of virtual community, the audience’s experience of televised cooking, and the added element of entertainment to a primarily pedagogical, social performance. How did the Food Network affect the act of cooking as performance both in its embodiment by the onscreen chefs and in its ability to attract viewers through entertainment? How did the addition of spectacle-driven shows to instructional programming mirror the transition from cooking as an embodied performance to one of viewership? Focusing on the audience, it appears that for studio audiences and viewers at home, the performances of cooking have been designed to cater to the experiences of viewers, fostering their desire to watch the act of cooking and be entertained.
Early cooking shows in the 1960s and 1970s introduced the American public to professional chefs, gourmet cooking, and performances of cooking that displayed new skills and created new opportunities for home cooks. Televised chefs expanded the idea of who could excel at cooking. They also framed cooking as something beyond a social performance and legitimized the profession of chef. These early shows formed a foundation from which more specific programs could be developed as an audience for cooking shows grew. Due to entertaining celebrity chefs like Graham Kerr and Julia Child, in the 1960s and 1970s, the act of cooking gained a wide viewership and encouraged a mediated audience outside of pedagogical objectives.

As the act of cooking became professionalized and performed in public spaces during the 1960s and 1970s, it became commodified further due to the creation of the Food Network in 1993 and its subsequent popularization in the following years. The Food Network was launched on November 22, 1993 and quickly took off as the second fastest growing cable network by 1997. Under founder Reese Schonfeld’s leadership, in 1996 the network’s mission began as “TV for people who cook,” but this was changed to “TV for everyone who loves to eat” by its subsequent CEO Erica Gruen in 1996 (Collins 167). Gruen altered the network’s target audience through new programs that emphasized entertainment and televised the act of cooking, while at the same time deemphasizing the actual cooking that took place, regardless of the chef’s talent. Perhaps this shift can be seen most clearly in the longevity of Emeril Lagasse’s career on the Food Network. In 1994, Lagasse was given an opportunity to host his first show, *Essence of Emeril* (1994-2007), which focused on preparing innovative versions of traditional recipes for the average home cook to recreate. Within this daytime program, Lagasse’s demeanor was relaxed and patient, offering viewers a more conventional show focused on pedagogical
intentions through clear instructions, simple techniques, and accessible recipes. Given his immediate success, Lagasse’s skill and appealing personality offered producers opportunities for further gain. Lagasse was given another program, *Emeril Live* (1997-2010), which aired in the evenings and quickly became a recognizable feature of the Food Network. *Emeril Live* was characterized by an enthusiastic audience and high-energy cooking interspersed with catchphrases and humor. Kathleen Collins compares his show to evening talk shows. She writes, “Like David Letterman or Jay Leno, Emeril performed in front of a live audience, had a band, told jokes, stood behind a ‘desk,’ interacted with the audience and band and was the main element of the show’s appeal” (Collins 169). Through chefs like Lagasse, the act of cooking by celebrity chefs became a desirable program feature for viewers apart from instructional shows, and performances of cooking on such shows aimed to entertain the viewers above all else.

As was true for early cooking show hosts, personality was a key component to success in the shows of the Food Network, especially as the call for entertaining personalities increased. Chef and host Anthony Bourdain explains, “Experience has shown [the Food Network] that people don’t really give a shit what’s cooking. They care about who’s cooking” (qtd. in Collins 175). The performances of cooking on television amplified the value of a chef’s likeability, an aspect that fell in line with the standard for television chefs initiated by early shows. The Food Network furthered the importance of entertaining performances of cooking and performances of self and pushed expectations away from purely instructional purposes or chefs.

Despite these evolving standards for the identity of the onscreen chef, Bob Tuschman, General Manager and Senior Vice President of the Food Network, understood the importance of chef relatability and a connection to the audience, and he felt this was achieved through the unfiltered and genuine presentation of chefs onscreen. He says, “One of the things that separates
us as a nonfiction network from a lot of the other TV possibilities is that nobody on our air is an actor. Everybody is just who they are as people. And in the best way, these people really can’t act” (qtd. in Collins 183). Audiences were drawn to knowledgeable chefs they were able to relate to them on a personal level. To remain on air, a successful onscreen chef needed to be popular with audiences. As acquiring airtime and individual programs on the Food Network became more competitive, pleasing the audience became more important for the hosts, both in presenting a likeable personality and in the structure and content of their show.

**The Block Schedule**

As suggested by the brief example of Emeril Lagasse starting in the 1990s, the Food Network has boasted a range of programs that split into two main categories: instructional programs and entertaining shows. In the daytime block, “Food Network in the Kitchen,” cooking shows target home viewers who have a genuine interest in learning how to cook or in seeing the complete process with little distraction. Hosts like Rachael Ray and Giada De Laurentiis share tips for the home viewer: how to create quick meals for the family, save money when shopping for ingredients, and other helpful tricks in the kitchen. Daytime programs offer viewers opportunities to have more intimacy with the onscreen chef and to participate more actively in the act of cooking.

Participation could take many forms, such as embodying the performance along with the chef, taking notes or recipes, or in some cases, by calling into the show with questions. Sara Moulton, the host of *Cooking Live* (1996-2002), used her show to engage with audiences and encourage the simultaneous embodiment of cooking. As part of this process, Moulton took calls from viewers live on-air and helped her fellow cooks through the difficulties of the recipes or various questions about ingredient substitution and preparation. The structure and intent of her
show, and “the pseudo-friendship that viewers developed with Moulton, kept them loyally returning” (Collins 174). By cooking in real-time, theoretically with viewers at home, Moulton completed all of the prep work on camera and remained present in the process for audiences to see. In the midst of a growing interest in entertainment-based cooking shows, this dynamic offered a slight return to the instructional programs of the 1960s and encouraged social performances of cooking.

During primetime, “Food Network Nighttime” airs a number of shows focused on entertaining audiences, including cooking competitions, shows with live studio audiences, and reality shows. In the evenings, “‘way more than cooking’ programs hosts construct cooking as competitive contest and cooking as a journey,” rather than a skill to learn (Swenson 41). Starting in the late1990s, instructional and entertaining cooking shows were juxtaposed on the same television network. Not only did entertainment-based cooking shows become popular through the Food Network, but they also opened new avenues for chefs to engage in performances of cooking in public spaces and encouraged viewers to simply watch the performance without any motivation other than pleasure. According to a 2007 article in The New York Times, the Food Network’s “signature weekend block of instructional programs, known collectively as ‘In the Kitchen,’ [has] lost 15 percent of its audience in the last year, to 830,000 viewers on average” (Jensen). By comparison, “its average 2007 prime-time audiences of 778,000 viewers” was the highest it had ever been (Jensen). This statistic offers an insight into the prevalence of audience-driven performances of cooking and the effectiveness of the Food Network’s primetime shows in attracting and entertaining viewers with the act of cooking.
Competitive Cooking Shows

Within primetime programming on the Food Network, competitive cooking shows of various topics have dominated airtime; shows like Hell’s Kitchen (2005-2017), Cupcake Wars (2009-2017), Iron Chef America (2005-2017), and MasterChef (2005-2017) became long-running programs with avid followers. Aside from the inherent drama within any competition, these shows also began to emphasize the spectacular nature of the act of cooking in performance. Competitive cooking shows were filled with exciting content but also included aesthetic elements to provide viewers with opportunities to feast with their eyes.

There are three fundamental types of visual spectacle most common in competitive cooking shows: plating, scale, and innovative techniques. In a medium that primarily communicates visually, the aesthetics of each dish, studio kitchen, chef’s apron, and ingredients are important for the viewer. Apart from the television industry, chefs in Michelin star restaurants focus on the presentations of their dishes, thus demonstrating the importance of artful plating in the cooking industry. However, cooking competitions in particular present discussions of plating, and they critique the contestants’ plating efforts as part of the overall judgment in excellence in order to determine a winner.

The second form of spectacle is the creation of large-scale pieces, usually seen in baking competitions such as Ace of Cakes (2006-2011) or Sugar Impossible (2010). The performance of cooking includes the creation of large-scale presentations or incredible height requirements that both validate the level of professional skills of the participants and hold the audience in suspense as the finished pieces dangerously sway before judging. Why else would cake or sugar sculpture competitions require teams to carry their finished creations to a separate judging table? As they struggle with the weight of their edible art and shout directions to each other to keep the
delicately balanced piece together, the audience is invited to view their emotional distress. Audiences are invested in protecting and preserving the work, even though logic tells them it will be thrown away or eaten after the winner is announced and the cameras stop filming.

Finally, innovative techniques can be a form of spectacle for audiences because they present new experiences visually and intellectually, and the techniques performed are associated with professional levels of cooking and exoticized as an unattainable method for the home cook. For example, a smoking gun or dry ice can be used to create a desired flavor in a dish, but ultimately it is presented on television as a visual effect when the dish is served. In Season 7 Episode 16 of *MasterChef* (2005-2017), guest judge Chef Richard Blais cooks a dish and artistically plates the components of the dish on a cutting board before placing a glass dome over the food. Then, Chef Blais uses a smoking gun to fill the dome with smoke so that when it is placed before the judges, its presentation involves an air of mystery and a spectacular reveal as the dome is lifted and the wisps of smoke dissipate.

**Food Network Audiences**

As gourmet cooking gained an influential presence in American culture and television through the Food Network, the act of cooking also acquired a function of entertainment and began to cater more directly to viewers who were more interested in watching the screen. Rather than encouraging home cooks to hone their skills, hosts embodied the ultimate desire of their audiences, who were now able to engage with a professional and artful performance of cooking through their position as viewer. Competitive cooking shows in the 1990s were far removed from the early instructional cooking shows of the 1960s and 1970s and the daytime programming of the Food Network. These were often part of a self-perpetuating celebrity chef system, and they highlighted the performance of cooking as a spectated event that more heavily considered
the audience’s entertainment desires. Rather than encouraging embodied performances of cooking, the Food Network, and competitive and entertainment-based shows in particular, developed a group of distanced viewers, engaged in the performance of cooking through viewership. Erica Gruen has noted how audiences of the Food Network were attracted to these types of shows, saying:

They watch television to have fun. It’s an entertainment medium. And if they learn something while they’re having fun, that’s good too, that’s a plus. But if you want to learn how to cook there are a ton of cookbooks and magazines you can read. You’re not going to watch television to learn how to cook...So we can provide an entertaining experience but we don’t have to give every little detail.

(qtd. in Collins 167)

The embodied, social performances of cooking could now be experienced as a social performance of a different kind: that of watching the act of cooking on television. The Food Network thrived on a growing audience interested in closely viewing the act of cooking, and this captivated audience was a necessary component in the expansion of the act of cooking to an artful performance on television. Linguists Keri and Kelsi Matwick write that “television cooking shows emphasize the esthetics of food more than its function to feed; the discourse emphasizes the visual style and presentation of cooking” (320). Of course, cooking shows were never able to “function to feed” in a literal sense, though instructional shows could facilitate embodied acts of cooking more directly. Yet, as the Food Network viewership increased in the late 1990s, the relationship between television audiences and the act of cooking as performance encouraged more programs centered on aesthetic and entertaining performances.
Cooking show audiences can be divided into two categories: those who desire to embody—or who do embody—the act of cooking and those who watch the act of cooking performed. In discussing diverse, televised performances of cooking, audiences are a critical topic to explore in order to analyze emerging types of audiences in response to expanding types of cooking shows. A program’s survival is defined by the size and consistency of its viewership, and audience preferences or viewing trends also shape future shows. The complex relationship between watching and the performance of the act of cooking onscreen can be demonstrated through a more detailed examination of audiences.

Audience, viewer, and spectator are defined differently across theatre and media studies, usually because theatre studies discusses a live audience while film and media studies refer to a mediated audience. However, cooking shows can have studio audiences present during filming or home audiences viewing the program on television. The audience relationship is complicated further when examining the layered dynamic of a distanced viewer watching a cooking show in which there is a live audience. Communication and media scholars Robert Abelman and David Atkin note, “An audience differs from a witness or mere observer in that audience participation is most often purposeful and goal-oriented, whereas witnesses and observers are most often involuntary, accidental, or incidental participants” (2). “Audience” can refer to “a group of observers of a performance,” both in regards to a studio and mediated audience (Kennedy 4). While “audience” can refer to both live and mediated audiences, I use “audience” to refer to a distanced, mediated group of individuals, and “studio audience” to refer to those present during filming.

“Spectator,” has psychoanalytic connotations in film theory, so it is better to use “viewership” rather than “spectatorship,” and, when necessary, to use “spectator” from theatre
studies in an effort to distinguish individual audience members who are physically present from those who are distanced. Using Dennis Kennedy’s definition, “spectator refers to an individual member of an audience,” it specifically represents an individual physically present for the performance as part of the studio audience (Kennedy 4). If “spectator” defines the physically present individual, its counterpart in this study is “viewer,” which is an individual member of the distanced or mediated audience, one who is watching the performance on television.

**Live, Mediated, and Mixed Audiences**

The dynamic between a cooking show host and his/her audience is greatly affected when there is a live, studio audience present. Additionally, the dynamic energy and level of entertainment are increased for the show and for home viewers. Returning to the familiar example of *Emeril Live!*, there is an opportunity for a “break in the traditional ‘aesthetic distance’ between performer and audience” that had been the standard in early cooking shows (Matwick 317). In *Vicarious Consumption: Food, Television and the Ambiguity of Modernity* (2000), Pauline Adema addresses Emeril’s treatment of audiences as he “engages the studio and television audiences by talking to them, teasing them, posing rhetorical questions, and maintaining direct eye contact” (115). This example includes both the live audience and mixed audiences, in which there is a layered combination of a mediated audience watching a show where there is a studio audience present. A live audience provides mediated audiences with signals as to what they ought to be feeling while viewing the show away from the studio. Although the home audience could not feel the energy in the studio, and does not smell or taste the food Emeril cooked, the live audience served to encourage home viewers to share their experience with Emeril. Their applause, laughter, and the ooh’s and ah’s in responses to the smells of the food dialogued with Emeril’s jokes and comments in a way that was unattainable to
home viewers, but that encouraged their identity as part of the audience although not physically present. In an effort to engage the distanced audience, Emeril spoke to the camera as if it were another audience member present in studio, inviting viewers into the experience and creating a personal relationship with them.

According to Abelman and Atkin, the mediated audience of home viewers is distinguished from the studio audience in three major ways. First, they are “physically segregated from the performance” (3). However, there is an exception to this in some daytime programs that offer viewers opportunities to call-in and speak with the host, which alters the performance of cooking and is televised for other viewers watching. Second, mediated audience members are physically separated from other viewers, and finally, they are “powerless as individual but empowered as a group,” meaning that although viewership determines the success of a program, mediated audience members cannot act in unity (Abelman and Atkin 3). Adding to this list, mediated audiences are also physically and vocally passive compared to studio audiences because action and response are not required for the televised performance to continue.

Daytime and primetime cooking shows were both influenced by mediated audiences, and the structure of each often reflected the importance of actively engaging the home viewer in the onscreen performance. Daytime programs were more obviously directed towards an individual as hosts made eye contact with the camera and spoke as if the camera were a person. Matwick explains, “Although the viewer is not physically present, the speaker senses her presence and carries out the expectations of a conversation” (317). A similar audience inclusion can also be seen on some primetime Food Network shows. For example, on Iron Chef America (2005-2017), Alton Brown and Kevin Brauch serve as floor reporters to provide commentary for the viewers
and to provide a sense of inclusion and insight into the acts of cooking. On *Chopped* (2009-2017), host Ted Allen commentates to facilitate the action and dramatize mistakes or moments of uncertainty.

It is possible to discuss the types of audiences watching televised performances of cooking as well as audience relationships and dynamics. Analyzing the various types of audiences also helps establish the motivations for viewing the act of cooking and how audiences encouraged the performances of cooking towards an artful performance. By participating in specifically entertainment-based programs through viewership, audiences have demonstrated their interest in viewing cooking for pleasure. Trends seen in the 1990s and 2000s signaled to producers of the Food Network that in order to please audiences, they must continue and increase the use of spectacle, suspense, drama, and more difficult challenges in competitions that steered away from instructional or constructive ideas for the home cook. As the Food Network became more successful, other onscreen performances of cooking developed and encouraged audiences to indulge visually in the act of cooking more consistently.

The success of cooking shows is generally assessed by their viewership and is influenced by three different types of audiences: studio audience, mediated audience, and a layered combination of both. Regardless of the category, both studio and mediated audiences function as a mass audience, which “is composed of the scattered spectators of television” (Kennedy 7). Mass audiences can determine a program’s success through a large viewership or by generating a positive rating. However, the mass audience is not truly representative of a collective experience because it remains specific to the individual. Kennedy identifies the individual nature within a mass audience and writes:
audiences are not (and probably never have been) homogeneous social and psychological groups, their experiences are not uniform and impossible to standardize, their reactions are chiefly private and internal, and recording their encounters with events, regardless of the mechanism used to survey or register them, is usually belated and inevitably partial. (Kennedy 3)

The heterogeneous nature of mass audiences provides opportunities for “communitas,” a performance studies concept developed by Victor Turner. Jill Dolan defines communitas as “the moments in a theatre event or a ritual in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way…and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience” (166). Through communitas, a live audience can form a communal bond during a performance, while isolated mediated audiences cannot. Many viewers may be aware their individual experience is a “mass audience engaged in a simultaneous act,” similar to larger televised events like the Super Bowl or a popular season finale, but they still have an individual viewing experience (Abelman and Atkin 4). Kennedy explains, “the knowledge that one is watching the same programme at the same time as millions of others is directly connected to the cultural commonality television can provide and creates an audience, though an audience without presence” (6). Although mediated audiences can create a virtual community, a more intimate and direct relationship can be formed between host and viewer.

In the development of the Food Network, audiences of cooking shows encouraged the network to produce more entertainment-based programs based on their viewing preferences. In turn, the network continued producing shows that emphasized the visual aspects of cooking for home audiences to enjoy. As this pattern continued into the beginning of the twenty-first century, cooking shows became more committed to the passive, mediated viewer and expanded into
documentaries and film. These changes demonstrate the powerful influence of the audience in shaping the performances of cooking onscreen, and a closer examination of cooking show viewership illuminates the effect and motivations of audiences in the eventual development of artful performances of cooking.

**Audience Motivations**

Audiences are a powerful influence in shaping and sustaining cooking shows and in determining which types of shows are valued. Cooking programs are continually fine-tuned to maximize their interest to the audience, and entire shows are created and canceled based on their preferences. With this control in mind, it is important to explore the motivations of audiences and the aspects of cooking shows that keep them returning. As an immediate interest, the act of cooking itself functions as a point of entry for many viewers as it is a constitutive, accessible, and universal act for any individual. Whether or not a viewer has a higher level of interest is a matter of personal preference, but the universality of cooking, food, and its consumption raise the likelihood of its appeal. Food scholar Pauline Adema explains that “growing numbers of viewers are tuning in to and watching food television because it feeds a hunger for emotional and physical pleasures vicariously gratified by watching someone cook, talk about and eat food” (114). Individuals are also motivated to engage in cooking shows through the pleasures found in the ritual of viewing habits, escapism, entertainment, voyeurism, and productive leisure.

Habitually sitting down in front of the TV is a practice encouraged by the schedule and structure of television programming. Ritualized viewing is built into daily life through morning talk shows, the nightly news, weekly programs, or annual events, like New Year’s Eve in Times Square. Weekly and daily rituals provide a sense of comfort, similar to the embodied ritual of cooking during holidays or a weekly family dinner. However, watching a cooking show on
television can become a ritual of viewership that provides a scheduled time to escape and be entertained. According to Bob Tuschman, “cooking shows offer a lot of grounding and a sense of being at home, even if it’s not your home, and a sense of the pleasure and comforts of being home and having food cooked for you” (qtd. in Collins 235). Seeking comfort and indulging in the pleasures of escapism repeatedly lead viewers back to the act of cooking onscreen.

Voyeurism complements the escapism often sought through television, where the emphasis is on the screen rather than the self, and in which viewers can be “curious, invisible, silent, third-party voyeurs peeking into other people’s lives” (Abelman and Atkin 75). Martin Esslin, a drama scholar, has observed:

The appeal of television is, at the most basic level, an erotic appeal. TV brings other human beings into close proximity for detailed inspection. The people we view in close-ups on the television screen appear to be as near to us as our sexual partners during an embrace. And yet they are glimpsed behind a glass screen, through a window that cannot be opened…The world it shows us on its stage, behind that window through which we can see but cannot grasp or touch, is essentially a world of fantasy. (32)

In cooking shows, the voyeurism of the viewer is not necessarily the same as that in reality TV shows or fictional series. Rather, the appeal is in the “backstage” perspective provided by entertainment-based cooking shows and in the observation of the specialized, expert skill of cooking. In competitive shows, such as Hell’s Kitchen (2005-2017) or MasterChef (2010-2017), “the entertainment value lies in watching others sink or swim under circumstances similar to or worse than our own” (Abelman and Atkin 74). Being “backstage” in the kitchen offers viewers a safe intimacy with the onscreen chefs and with the act of cooking as they can gaze with abandon
at the visually stunning practice of techniques, expert skills, and the transformation of ingredients into gourmet dishes.

Finally, mediated audiences can be motivated to view cooking shows by a desire for productive leisure. Watching television in general provides individuals with “an immediate reward, an instant gratification in any or all of the forms—distraction, relaxation, information—within seconds of turning on the set” (Abelman and Atkin 75). Viewers are drawn to cooking shows for productive leisure, meaning they are able to learn through observation without any requirement to embody the information later. Audiences use cooking shows to satisfy the contrasting needs of relaxing and doing. In order to feel constantly productive, “we still watch cooking shows to learn new skills but increasingly—by virtue of the shows’ entertainment levels and our exhausted selves—more to let someone else do the work and entertain us while we put up our feet for a bit and order take-out” (Collins 235).

Conclusion: An Interest in Aesthetic Cooking

As a result of audience preferences and motivations, televised cooking shows continue to stress the importance of the entertained viewer rather than the potential performers of the embodied act of cooking. In the twenty-first century, the act of watching a chef cook has become so appealing that it is distinguished from previous roles and embodied performances of cooking in the past. Audiences of primetime cooking shows are enticed by entertainment that allows them to participant as viewers without being driven by a desire to cook. Collins points to the preference of viewing over embodying, writing, “If we have time to watch the show, don’t we have some down time? Apparently we choose to watch instead of cook” (203). Audiences are drawn to cooking because it is aesthetically pleasing, emotionally comforting, mentally engaging, and physically relaxing. We would prefer to watch the act of cooking even though
there is no sustenance provided for the viewer upon the show’s completion. Even without the nutritional benefits, the enjoyment experienced from viewing the act of cooking outweighs the time and energy that could otherwise be spent cooking in our own kitchens. Viewers of the Food Network and the network’s commitment to dynamic programming filled with entertainment, spectacle, and visual aesthetics has encouraged the act and habit of watching cooking. The existence of a burgeoning mediated audience has brought enough interest to simply watching cooking that artful performances would become a highlighted feature of cooking onscreen. Participating in cooking as viewers brings about pleasure and enforces the significance of aesthetic, artful cooking. Following the path initiated by entertainment-based and competitive cooking shows, the act of cooking has moved into onscreen spaces that furthers the emphasis on aesthetic perspectives of food and the artful performances of cooking, as can be seen in recent shows and new series.
CHAPTER IV.

ARTFUL PERFORMANCES OF COOKING

*Summer has come with its cool breeze*
*I touch the salted water, and hold the shell against my ear*
*Like a little wildness swimming and leaving a beautiful reflection*
*Oceanic feeling and distilled and pure, love those black pearls*
*There came a wave of oceanic delicateness*
*Strolling on the beach, in its whimsically ebullient and red umami*
*Where the broad Ocean leans softly against the Spanish land*
*The rawness of those soft-footed creatures*
*With a twinkle in my eye, watching them gazing*
*Watching the beast rest beneath the leaves*
*Orange and long*
*A precious token*
*Walking deep in the woods, as the earth might have something to spare*
*Summer has come and is full of sweet surprises*
*Sweetness, bounty, thanks*

*(Chef’s Table, S2:E3, 00:04:28-00:04:42)*

Upon sitting down at Atelier Crenn in San Francisco, Chef Dominique Crenn’s carefully crafted menu is presented to each guest. She has created a menu from a poem she has written about her childhood and the nostalgia of her upbringing in Brittany, France. From this poem, guests order a single line of text, which Crenn then translates into a conceptual dish that evokes the essence of the line. Perhaps this moment of personal expression is shared best through its presentation onscreen to the viewers of *Chef’s Table* (2015-2017), a Netflix documentary series. The series is structured so that each forty-five minute episode follows a world-renown chef and his/her work, career, and personal life. In the episode, Crenn explains,

I’m not serving a menu; I’m serving a story. I’m serving my soul. I’m serving a conversation and I want you to talk back to me, I want you to dialogue with me.

I’m triggering something inside of you, the memories inside of you. And if I do this, I know that I’m doing the right thing. I’m fascinated with people that I don’t know. I wanna get a window into their life. You know, strangers adopted me, and
then, they gave me a different life that perhaps I shouldn’t have if I wasn’t. I think that’s something I crave, that moment where you connect. And that’s such an important moment. It’s not just my restaurant; it’s my house. And if you want to come to my house, allow me to talk to you. (*Chef’s Table* S2:E3, 00:04:53-00:06:24)

As one of the few featured women, Dominique Crenn is a refreshing addition to the series. Her episode in Season 2 is filled with stories of her family and the influences of her childhood, which are perhaps reflected best in the artful quality of her poem menu and the familial atmosphere of her restaurant. While the guests present at Atelier Crenn are able to experience the flavors, aroma, and atmosphere fully, the camera provides viewers with a privileged perspective that is unachievable by any other means. In the reveal of Crenn’s menu, the poem scrolls slowly, allowing viewers to absorb the mystery and beauty of her unique approach. Following the text, beautifully orchestrated shots of individual dishes grace the screen. The narrative of the poem unfolds as the camera brings each creation to life through short, close up shots. A frozen powder is sprinkled over a bright row of green vegetables sliced thin and set up onto their edge, and a soft fog flows over the dish and onto the table as the cold interacts with the restaurant air to illustrate “Summer has come with its cool breeze.” The wisps fade into a flame leaping up from the stove in slow motion before a cut to oysters being carefully turned and set back on the wire mesh over the fire. This image accompanies the line “And hold the shell against my ear.” A sea urchin is clipped open as it bathes in the sink under a stream of water, then strikingly plated in a small bowl with cracked gold edges and topped with an intriguing, clear gelatin as audiences hear, “There came a wave of oceanic delicateness.” Through its poetic menu and numerous other components, Atelier Crenn certainly takes the idea and structure of
cooking to a new, artistic level, but the performance of cooking onscreen is also taken to an artful state through Crenn’s presentation on *Chef’s Table*.

As I reflect on my own childhood experiences sitting on the countertop watching Rachael Ray bake delicious desserts or watching recorded episodes of *The French Chef* while Julia Child flitted around the kitchen, I am reminded of the changes in cooking shows over the last several decades. The familiar structures and signals within the Food Network shows are replaced with cinematic camera angles and an emphasis on aesthetics and technical skills through slow motion shots and close ups. The backstage perspective offered by recent cooking shows accentuates the artistic, masterful quality of cooking and enhances the desire for audiences to passively view the act. Although mediated audiences may be learning from these shows, the intent is no longer to teach. I discover I am learning new information about the act of cooking through my position as a viewer without the skill to embody the information. To use the example of *Chef’s Table*, I am brought to closely observe the subtle movements of the knife or the pair of tweezers sneaking into the frame in order to ever so slightly reposition an herb or a seed on the finished plate.

Cooking shows and performances of cooking have become saturated with new, visual elements that can take precedence over flavor. Due to the types and roles of audiences encouraged by the Food Network’s fostering of entertainment-based cooking shows and an interest in competition and celebrity chefs in the 1990s and early 2000s, an opening appeared for a new type of cooking show, one that would fully embrace the aesthetic quality of cooking, turning the pedagogical aspects into an opportunity for more cinematic programming. In the last several years, new series have focused primarily on cooking as an artful performance and the more passive relationship of audiences, a relationship nurtured by competitive cooking. Performing the act of cooking onscreen has transitioned into a focus on watching the act of
cooking, especially with an eye toward examining the expert at work. With its encouragement of spectacle, innovative techniques, and plating aesthetics, the Food Network has solidified a vocabulary and interest amongst their viewers for artful performances of cooking. In this chapter, the primary focus is on the artful performances of cooking and how they gained an interest through programming, a path demonstrated by using close readings from Chef’s Table.

Before considering these additional performances of cooking, it is beneficial to work through the definition and limitations of “artful performance.” By no means do artful performances of cooking replace or transform social performances, as these continue to exist in domestic settings and in more traditional, pedagogical cooking shows. Yet artful performances provide an additional type of expression for the act of cooking. As noted in the introduction, in “Street Fairs: Social Space, Social Performance,” theatre scholar Jeffrey Mason discusses a similar idea in his explanation of performance as existing on a continuum between social performance and artful performance. Mason writes,

Typically, social performance involves “everyday” or “ordinary” behavior by people who may deny or qualify any awareness of their performative strategies and qualities, while artful performance involves what is typical of “the theatre,” where the participants work in terms of intent, craft and artistic convention. (303)

Within the essay, he also explains the differences between definitions of social and artful performances. For Mason, a social performance is transactional and more random, balanced “in that those involved seem to have the potential for equal access to participation,” and it does not imply representation (Mason 304). In turn, artful performances are structured. They “typically confer most of the initiative on the ‘performer’ and relegate the ‘spectator’ to a comparatively reactive role,” thus implying representation (Mason 304).
Mason’s definitions presume a present audience, but adapting the concept of a social and artful performance continuum can stretch these ideas into new areas. If performances of cooking are pre-recorded, as is the case in the examples of artful performances, the interactive nature and expectations for that interactivity are drastically changed. Without a live audience or opportunities for viewers to write-in with questions, a practice more readily provided by early cooking shows on the Food Network, artful performances support engagement in the performance solely through observation. Artful performances could be representationally interactive, meaning the chef could speak directly to the camera as if including the viewer in dialogue or sharing an intimate experience without expecting to receive a response, but in general, artful performances of cooking exist onscreen purely for the viewer and without their direct influence. Adapting Mason’s continuum of social to artful performance provides an opportunity to draw connections between early cooking shows and their approximation of social performances of cooking to artful performances without dismissing them as entirely separate events. A continuum allows for grey area, in which there is a connecting path leading from the social to the artful while also having space for the two to co-exist.

Artful performances of onscreen cooking can be examined and explored through close readings of specific moments within various episodes of the series. The importance of the backstage gaze is illuminated by changes in the performance of cooking in physical, public spaces, such as restaurants and display kitchens. Earlier cooking shows played an important role in bringing the backstage areas of cooking into the spotlight, grabbing the audience’s attention. From these portrayals, artful performances of cooking onscreen increased in popularity and frequency and can be examined through three major areas: aesthetics, spectacle, and storytelling.
Artful Performances Off-Screen

Off-screen, the physical spaces within restaurants and kitchens became subject to more artful performances of cooking, especially as the restaurant business peaked in the 1980s. According to Kathleen Collins, “Rather than learning to cook at home from the likes of Julia Child on the small screen, a chef’s work was admired and tasted up close and in person” (134). During the 1980s, display kitchens, exhibition cooking, and dishes served tableside often characterized public performances of cooking in the professional kitchen.

Performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses how these aspects affect the spaces in which the act of cooking can occur. She explains that in tableside cooking, “the waiter finishes the dish in the dining room—chefs are also moving out of the kitchen to cook in the dining room. What they call ‘exhibition cooking’ expands the dining experience to include the sensory pleasures associated with cooking by exhibiting it” (“Making Sense” 7). By bringing the hidden activities of cooking into the spotlight and making them a priority in dining experiences, restaurants have played into the theatrical craving, curiosity, and voyeuristic tendency of their audience. In these instances, the backstage area of the kitchen is on display rather than its earlier, private function protected from the public gaze. In this way, “theatrical restaurants heighten the already staged nature of public eating places” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Making Sense” 5).

Capitalizing on the interest of display kitchens or a behind-the-scenes experience of cooking, new cooking shows and documentaries were developed in the early 2000s that highlighted these areas of the kitchen. Through these shows, mediated audiences were given similar experiences to be up close and intimate with chefs and the act of cooking. Of course, any cooking show places the kitchen in a public arena, but artful performances of cooking on
television do so differently. In the case of the former, entertainment-based and competitive cooking shows like *Iron Chef America* or *MasterChef* are centered on a presentational kitchen. These kitchens are designed specifically for the full access of the camera, including crane shots and space between workstations for cameramen. In artful performances of cooking, the voyeuristic presentation of the backstage kitchen area seems to become a violation of its privacy.

*Chef’s Table* reveals various kitchens that are not normally intended for the public eye or the camera. The physical reality of these spaces demands they operate as a restaurant kitchen or function as a personal space within an individual’s home. For example, in *Chef’s Table*, the kitchen would not normally be seen, as opposed to the *MasterChef* kitchen, which has a part of its inherent utility the purpose of being displayed and used as a television set. Yet, suddenly, in artful performances of cooking, the private kitchen is a subject for the camera’s eye, providing the viewer with a backstage gaze. The pleasures of voyeurism and the experience of uncovering hidden information previously unavailable to the eye appeal to viewers and demonstrate the importance of perspective and appearance in cooking shows. Collins writes, “Today’s camera angles, lighting, colors and sounds are a world away…Though the recipes might often be the same then as now, presentation trumps content” (189).

**A New Style of Show**

Moving beyond standard cooking shows, one of the first serious, modern food shows was produced by PBS in 1982. It was called *Great Chefs of...*, and the unfinished title was completed with the home city of a specific chef. The show was structured as a master class, taught by various well-known professional chefs. In 1991, PBS aired another show entitled *Cooking at the Academy*. Again, this was a serious show with established chefs who “expected a certain level of viewer proficiency, implying that audiences were more sophisticated and ready to take
cooking—or at least food—more seriously” (Collins 136). *Cooking at the Academy* was groundbreaking in its commitment to “put the spotlight on technique demonstrated by academy instructors or veteran chefs” by removing hosts, celebrity chefs, and an emphasis on specific recipes (Collins 136). Both of these shows are early examples of the widespread interest in artful and professional performances of cooking that were to follow a few decades later.

These types of onscreen performances gained valued as the prestige of the culinary world increased. Individual acclaim and awards for restaurants and chefs pushed their restaurants into a less attainable realm for middle class Americans. On a global scale, specifically in Europe, the Michelin guide set standards and status for excellence and innovation in cuisine. In the fall of 2005, the first American Michelin guide was released, bringing the importance of Michelin stars to restaurants across the nations, though the 2005 guide focused on New York. The fully booked reservations, travel expenses, and high prices of these Michelin star restaurants created a sense of longing and heightened the appeal of such high-end performances of cooking and dining.

As an indirect response, the experience one could have at these restaurants was translated into television shows to satisfy that sense of longing. Through mediated methods, audiences were able to visually devour the aesthetics, techniques, and expertise of the chefs. This new level of professional cooking led to artful performances onscreen, as they were the best method of capturing such unique and innovative performances of cooking. The visual “taste” of artful performances onscreen provided opportunities for a chef’s work to be admired up-close without being physically present for the act of cooking.

Similar to *Great Chefs of...* (1982-2017) and *Cooking at the Academy* (1991), new cooking shows were developed partially in response to the variety of culinary experiences and the prestige or mystery of Michelin star dishes. One of the most recent shows is *Chef’s Table*, a
Netflix original series devoted to a cinematic style of filming, but there are glimpses of artful performances of cooking among many Food Network shows. This style, in addition to the biographical and nostalgic aspects of its narratives, emphasizes aesthetics, which reestablishes the expectation of visual perfection within the kitchen, in the physical space of the kitchen, ingredient selection, cooking abilities, and presentation.

One of Chef’s Table’s intentions is to depict cooking as an aesthetic and cultural object through its cinematic style, the artistic nature of developing menus and restaurants, and the skill of each professional chef. In these aims, Chef’s Table is often reviewed positively for its stunning depictions of cooking, nature, and the chefs. At times, the series faces criticism for being elitist and for portraying cooking in an idealistic, unobtainable manner. However, these reactions help confirm an idea presented by Kathleen Collin, that “people love to watch cooking, but it does not mean they love to cook or that they even do it at all” (136). Although chefs throughout Chef’s Table may encourage viewers to embody the act of cooking, the series’ structure and emphasis on aesthetics seem to communicate a different message.

The cinematic cooking show, a style often used to depict artful performances of cooking, can be examined through three major aspects: storytelling, aesthetics, and spectacle. These components function as identifiers within artful performances of cooking and mark how the act of cooking has truly transformed itself onscreen, especially from the early, pedagogical shows of the 1950s and 60s.

**Storytelling and Social Performance Roots**

The act of cooking has the ability to tell a narrative, whether environmental, personal or social. Within that narrative, there is a larger, intentional conversation occurring within cooking, and a chef attempts to engage the viewer or customer in a dialogue. Like any work of art, the act
of cooking can speak with a specific purpose while being artfully crafted and prepared by a chef who is passionate about the conversation and message. As designer Jordan Mozer said, “What better metaphor for a restaurateur than the magician—or the playwright—who uses his art to transform other people’s lives in the span of three hours?” (qtd. in Henderson 70). Artful performances of cooking onscreen can effectively convey stories through careful camerawork and the intentional performances by the chef.

As a connecting point for audiences, many aspects of storytelling within artful performances of cooking rely on nostalgic childhood memories. Chefs offer relatable points of contact by sharing aspects of their relationships with family and the childhood wonder of discovering their passion for cooking. *Chef’s Table* presents a myriad of examples, illustrating the importance of social performances of cooking as the root and foundation for artful performances onscreen. Massimo Bottura recalls the protection he was given by his grandmother as he hid under the table from his older brothers and the freshly made pasta she snuck him while he waited for a window of safety (*Chef’s Table*, S1:E1, 00:09:05-00:10:08). French chef Adeline Grattard relates moments from her childhood, where she would perform cooking for make-believe television audiences. She says, “When I was young, we lived in the countryside. I used to pretend I was cooking on TV. Not really a star, but doing recipes on TV. I liked to organize herbs, products, on the table. I have memories of the checkered tablecloth and the little blue and pink Tupperware containers” (*Chef’s Table France*, S1:E3, 00:13:08-00:13:30). Laughing, Grattard remembers the details and gestures as the pleasure of remembering such nuances spreads throughout her body. Her memories perhaps evoke the memories of her viewers, reminding them of their connection to cooking and family, extending their associations with the
act of cooking and encouraging an understanding that artful performances are born from social performances of cooking.

Dominique Crenn also reflects on having a special dinner with her father at a Michelin star restaurant when she was only nine years old. She explains, “I was fascinated by the way people were moving, the way people were talking to each other, the elegance of it, the detail of it, and I loved it. And I told my mom I wanted to be a chef” (Chef’s Table S2:E3, 00:09:02-00:09:34). The bond between Crenn and her father entices the audience to invest emotionally in her artful performance of cooking, and it invites them to connect her past with her restaurant Atelier Crenn, named after her father. She continues to return to the period of time when she was young, living in Brittany, and constantly surrounded by her family. As she tastes a ripened fig freshly plucked from a tree in her restaurant’s garden, she pauses. Her eyebrows raise, surprised by the flavors, and she vividly describes her first taste of a tomato at age four. She says,

You can eat something and you can remember that forever…. I went to the garden, and I put it in my mouth, and I remember… it was soft and juicy, but there was something about it that I just couldn’t stop eating it. The tomato is gone, but the moment is forever. The experience is forever. (Chef’s Table S2:E3, 00:11:24-00:12:15)

Then, in the Chef’s Table episode, a new line from her menu appears: “Nature rejoice, chasing childhood memories.” In Crenn’s cooking, her past informs her present and future acts of cooking and positively affects her ability to communicate through artful performances. In the series, this is portrayed multiple times as chefs tell stories and reveal their inspirations, techniques, artistic process, and ultimately the creation of the dish.
An artful performance of cooking often pairs the act with experiences outside the kitchen, thus extending the performance and blending areas of public and private for professional chefs on screen. The camera provides an artistic and expanded view by using various locations and perspectives edited together into one narrative.

Brazilian chef Alex Atala elevates simple Amazonian ingredients and introduces familiar flavors or dishes in an upscale manner. He draws inspiration from his life in the Amazon and the sustainable ingredients he hunts and gathers there. Atala says, “I do believe that I need to keep my eyes open, ears open, heart open, mind open, learning from nature, local people, the natives” *(Chef’s Table*, S2:E2, 00:34:49-00:35:02). He is particularly inspired by one of the most common ingredients, a root called manioc. The use of manioc spans every social class in Brazil and is used throughout their cuisine. After the root is peeled, grated, pressed, and roasted, the resulting manioc flour is cooked into incredibly large flatbreads.

Atala’s journey with this ingredient is framed artfully in his performance of cooking with manioc flour. After showing Atala in a hut with a woman processing the manioc root, the episode cuts to Atala as he performs the act of cooking manioc flour. The ingredient is cooked using the same technique in both Atala’s restaurant and the native woman’s hut, but the visual cuts between the two locations illustrate the contrasting social and artful ways it is used. The woman packs flour into a three foot metal ring as it sits on her large stove while Atala carefully presses flour into a ring several inches wide as it rests in a skillet. Back and forth, the camera compares their gestures and utensils and confirms Atala’s native technique as he flips and cuts and moves the manioc flour. Although Atala’s dish is highly technical and refined for the restaurant setting, the storytelling of the camera while the act of cooking is simultaneously shown creates an understanding of the cultural influences of his cuisine.
At the same time, artful performances of cooking can be inspired by the mistakes or events that occur within the kitchen. In Chef’s Table episodes, accepting mistakes and welcoming the evolving nature of a live performance provide Massimo Bottura and Alexandre Couillon with opportunities to further their art. One of Bottura’s dishes, “Oops, I Dropped the Lemon Tart,” is a result of a mistake in which the last lemon tart crust was dropped as it was plated (Chef’s Table, S1:E1, 00:28:02-00:29:42). Seeing the dropped tart, Bottura quickly decides to break the remaining crusts, splatter the lemon filling on the plate, and place the pieces of the crust back onto plate as if they had been beautifully dropped. For Alexandre Couillon, the happy accident occurred after he asked an intern to make a stock for bouillabaisse with squid. Without fully understanding the task, the intern used the whole squid, including its ink, resulting in a strong, very opaque, black sauce. Using his artistic eye, Couillon was able to use the sauce to make a stronger statement about the environment and the recent oil spills near his restaurant, a topic in which he is particularly passionate. “Erika oyster” reflects the spills in a stunning manner; the oyster is dipped in the black sauce and placed in the center of a clean white plate with ripples spreading out from the center as if the oyster had been dropped back into the sea (Chef’s Table France, S1:E2, 00:37:12-00:38:38). The contrast highlights the grotesque nature of the blackened oyster and demonstrates the importance of aesthetics in communicating a story or message to audiences.

**Aesthetics: Visual Style, Ingredients, and Cooking Technique**

In Chef’s Table, another aspect of artful performances of cooking is the prominence of consistent visual aesthetics throughout the show. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett situates the importance of visual elements within cooking, as she writes; “While not unique to the experience of food, visual aspects of food are no less essential to it…Visual interest can be sustained long after the
desire to taste and smell has abated and appetite has been sated” (“Playing to the Senses” 3).

Onscreen, various creative camera angles show aesthetic depictions of ingredients and techniques. Rather than being included for informative purposes, these are included for the sake of their aesthetic beauty and sensual qualities. In most cooking shows, “episodes are full of money shots—not just the cascading cherries, but maybe the flipping of the seared tuna steak or the frosting of the cake” (Collins 189). In artful performances, the “money shot” is no longer an element of the show but becomes the show’s overall aesthetic and style. Specifically within Chef’s Table, the visual aspects of cooking are the driving force behind each episode, and artful performances of cooking rely on the highlighting of aesthetics.

On television, the act of cooking can be situated as an artful performance through this use of creative, cinematic, and aesthetically pleasing camera angles, edited together to create a coherent experience of cooking. Through this, the viewer is given an impression of omniscience about the act of cooking through his/her access to the optimum angles on the performance. While early cooking shows focused on the process of cooking, artful performances onscreen are not concerned with the process in its entirety. The selection of the most aesthetic and artful aspects of cooking creates a unique, edited gaze for the viewer and offers a new perspective unavailable to the unassisted human eye. In Season 1, Episode 4 of Chef’s Table, Niki Nakayama carefully paints organic curves onto a plate. As the angle changes, the camera drops below the plane of the plate to reveal Nakayama has begun plating on glass, as if the lens itself is her canvas. Viewers are treated to a view of Nakayama through the glass as she works, and they can examine her artful performance through an artful perspective of the camera.

The artful performance’s emphasis on aesthetics highlights the purity of the raw ingredients along with its manipulation by expert hands, capturing subtle movements of both the
technique and the ways in which ingredients move while being cooked. The chef’s expert
gestures are detailed through complex movements that appear to be expertly choreographed in
their flawless repetition. In a *Chef’s Table* episode, Francis Mallman’s extremely physical
methods of cooking lend themselves well to this, and the camera captures the tactile quality of
his performance. The camera follows Mallmann as he hikes down to the river, scoops the grey
clay from the riverbed, and carries a filled bucket back to the shore. The shot tightens on
Mallmann’s hands as he covers a freshly caught fish, which has already been given a protective
wrapping. Sliding beneath his hands, the clay collects under his fingernails, connecting the visual
elements to a highly sensorial experience. The scene evokes a desire to touch and feel the
experience alongside Mallmann, and yet there is complete satisfaction in the comfort of the
aesthetic viewing experience.

Other cooking shows may provide brief examples of these sensory demonstrations, but
the moments are not heavily emphasized. On *MasterChef*, Gordon Ramsay fillets a salmon in
front of the remaining contestants, but his expertise and smooth gestures are fleeting. They are
meant only to set a standard for the competitors to mimic in the following challenge. In the artful
performances of cooking, the use of slow motion, tight framing, and artistic perspectives are the
rule rather than the exception. The use of slow motion, in particular, decelerates the rate in which
the act of cooking usually occurs onscreen. In professional kitchens especially, the act of cooking
is a fast and furious performance orchestrated by multiple chefs simultaneously. Slow motion
stretches time and allows viewers to closely observe and appreciate nuances of skills that are
often missed. Expanding these moments also provides time for additional angles so that the
viewer is watching the chef’s hands effortlessly manipulate an ingredient while the screen
occasionally highlights their furrowed brow and determined eyes. Expert gestures, such as
kneading dough, pulling noodles by hand, and even casually stoking a fire, can all become specific artful moments within the larger performance of cooking.

**Spectacle: Unconventional Cooking Processes and Innovative Techniques**

In addition to the illumination of the aesthetic nature of ingredients and technique, artful performances of cooking onscreen also portray large scale cooking techniques, generally resulting in a spectacle-driven cooking process or finished dish. The theatricality of the dining room table itself is often highlighted on more conventional cooking shows, but rarely are the more grand performances of professional chefs captured. As an episode of *Chef’s Table* reveals, Argentine chef Francis Mallmann prides himself on his personal performances of cooking in nature, the results of which often resemble edible art installations, especially in their onscreen depictions. Acclaimed author Peter Kaminsky explains Mallmann’s unique perspective towards cooking, saying,

> A meal by Francis Mallmann whether it’s a special event that he does in the countryside or is in one of his restaurants, starts with visual. You enter it, and you know you’re in someplace that’s been orchestrated with a sensual eye. You’re set up with this beautiful art-directed scene, and then bam. Really powerful, strong flavors. He really has perfect pitch when it comes to taste and ambiance and how people want to be made to feel. He’s extremely romantic. He likes color, he likes lushness, he likes strong, sensual experiences. Francis is quite different in that he’s not defined by a restaurant. (*Chef’s Table*, S1:E2, 00:03:05-00:03:47)

These stylistic preferences can be seen throughout the episode as Mallmann expertly cooks using large fire pits dug behind his home or a small grill on his rowboat as it sways in the shallow water off the coast of Patagonia. Mallmann’s simple style of cooking when outside his
restaurants is unaltered and natural, influenced heavily by earthly flavors from cooking with many types of fire.

Perhaps the most captivating example of Mallmann’s cooking on Chef’s Table is his creation of Patagonia Lambs Al Asador (Crucified lambs), which is prepared and consumed in the snow on his beloved island near Patagonia. Onscreen, the raw lambs are stretched out onto expertly assembled, hand crafted wooden spits and carefully wired to the structure for roasting. In slow motion, Mallmann lifts a lamb and spit onto his shoulder and carries it up a slight hill, trudging through picturesque snow. He adjusts the lamb after placing it vertically into the snow, ending with three cross-like structures stuck into the snow before a fire. The whole carcasses are bare, but as they cook, the camera pans their lengths, highlighting the tender meat and dripping juices that flow easily from each. A final, slow pan reveals the three lambs, fully cooked, standing by the fire that transformed them as its smoke gently traces through the air.

In addition to large-scale cooking methods that can be categorized as spectacle, artful performances of cooking also boast smaller displays of spectacle. The chef’s skills can act as a spectacle due to their development of new cooking techniques and culinary creations. Chefs perform acts of imagination through their cooking, defying expectations and inventing new dishes, flavors, and techniques, usually with an element of spectacle. On Chef’s Table, for example, Indian chef Gaggan Anand creates an edible plastic bag he can fill with a variety of flavors and have consumed in its entirety, in one bite. Italian chef Massimo Bottura dreams of a way to make mozzarella invisible and how to infuse its flavor into beverages.

A master of spectacle and innovative technique, Grant Achatz is inspired by a desire to curate a consistently surprising and spectacular experience at his restaurant. For example, Achatz transforms a tomato into an imitation of a strawberry by mixing gelatin into tomato puree and
letting it solidify in a mold of a strawberry. He plates a tomato and strawberry side-by-side, hoping to bring his guests to a new level of awareness in their palates. He sends floating balloons to tables that are inhaled and eaten. He plates on pillows filled with lavender to evoke different memories and flavors through its scent. These techniques surprise viewers and customers alike, and the depictions of the creations onscreen demonstrate the appeal of spectacle. Additionally, the portrayal of the culinary innovations as they are made in the kitchen provides a new layer to the backstage gaze, through which the viewers are allowed to see the creative process in the hands of an expert chef.

**Conclusion: Mixing Social and Artful Performances**

While Jeffrey Mason’s articulation of Richard Schechner’s concept of a performance continuum spans between social and artful performances and can polarize the two functions, Mason’s idea also allows for areas between the two extremes. *Chef’s Table* demonstrates the interconnectedness between social and artful performances, yet tends to illuminate the path from social to artful rather than displaying a direct combination. However, as artful performances of cooking onscreen have become popular, the appeal to embody the act of cooking has also found a renewed interest. Recently, MasterClass, a company that creates online courses taught by well-known professionals in specialized areas, released a new show: *Gordon Ramsay Teaches Cooking* (2017). The trailer’s content pitches the need for viewers to transform their cooking by paying the subscription fee to learn from Gordon’s thorough educational classes. The trailer exemplifies a new type of intersection of social and artful performances in cooking shows.

In the trailer’s opening image, Gordon gently tips a bottle of liquor into a skillet, sending an effortless flambé into the bright, minimalist kitchen. The perspective immediately shifts to a birds-eye view over the stove, the flame continuing to leap up towards the camera as Gordon
breathe a genuine, “Beautiful. So beautiful.” He sits across from the camera and frankly announces,

> It’s easy to cook on TV. There’s talented producers, there’s editors, and there’s all sort of things that make you look good. You know, before any TV came anywhere near my career, I’d mastered my craft. You’ll see a side to me across this class that I don’t think has ever been shown before. (“Gordon Ramsay Teaches Cooking | Official Trailer” 00:00:01-00:00:24)

From this starting point, the tone is set, and in the brief minute and a half of the trailer, Ramsay quickly hints at the techniques he will teach, and the filmmakers introduce the cinematic, artful style of the show. In slow motion, he dusts the cutting board with flour and presses his palm into a perfect sphere of pasta dough. During a voiceover set to gentle music, short clips of effortless chef gestures appear—sharpening a knife, forming tortellini, and plating with finesse—implying the skill level one would also achieve through this class.

Amidst the aesthetic shots is ample instruction; it is, after all, a master class intended to teach its subscribers how to improve their cooking skills. As Gordon states while explaining the “secret” to the perfectly cooked fish skin, “You can’t pick up the ‘World’s Best Cookbook’ and understand it, you need to do it” (“Gordon Ramsay Teaches…” 00:00:43-00:00:47). In this moment, the intimate camera angles serve the purpose of a secondary teacher, giving subscribers up-close footage of new techniques and the results they strive to mimic.

Many early cooking show techniques are referenced as Ramsay tastes his cooking in process, commenting on the flavors, and as he invites his students to write in questions and encourages them to communicate with one another. *Gordon Ramsay Teaches Cooking* is
particularly unique when compared to other cooking shows or series due to its direct combination of social or pedagogical performances of cooking and the artful performance in technique, camera use, and overall aesthetic. In the short trailer, Ramsay performs the identity of an instructional cooking show host well. His relaxed demeanor contrasts with the harsh, masculine performance he portrays on many of his cooking shows and gives the impression that the “real” Gordon is approachable and able to teach even novice cooks with patience and grace. As Ramsay concludes the trailer, he reminds and exhorts potential subscribers—potential performers—to embody the act of cooking to “Watch. But watch carefully” (“Gordon Ramsay Teaches…” 00:01:07-00:01:11).

Artful performances of cooking onscreen can encourage a return to the humanity found within the act of cooking and foster a desire to embody the act. Through the beauty onscreen, the viewer is reminded that the act of cooking is striking at its very core, and not just in an upscale kitchen or in the hands of professional, Michelin star chefs. Mediated audiences can be drawn into the performances of cooking, connecting it to their universal need for nourishment and locating themselves with an intimate perspective with nature, skill, and the act of cooking.

Returning again to the Chef’s Table episode with Chef Francis Mallmann, in one scene he gently sets a log on a healthy fire. He warms his hands, caressing the warmth of the flames as the camera pans up to his face as he looks toward the mountains nearly covered in darkness, the darkest of blues still holding their contour. The fire flickers, bringing a glow to Mallman’s face, and audiences are able to sense the connection of fire to his cooking and ingredients. The scene cuts to morning, the light streaming into his house as he strikes a match and lights a cigar while sitting in the kitchen. He immediately reaches toward the wood-burning stove and stokes the fire. Having decided the temperature is right, he clatters a kettle into place, pours coffee grounds into
a metal filter, and follows with the heated water. Artful performances onscreen can recall within viewers the nostalgia for a simple existence: back to the fire, to true selves, and to connecting with one another. As much as audiences can be entertained or pleased by cooking shows, perhaps a balance between social and artful performances of cooking onscreen, most clearly executed by *Gordon Ramsay Teaches Cooking*, will be pursued. After all, as Collins writes,

> Why does knowing and learning about food matter? It matters because it brings us to a fuller understanding of ourselves. Cooking and knowing about food does more than help us get dates or keep pace with the times. Because they touch on the physical and the psychological, on pleasure, work, and creativity, they allow us to be fully engaged in life. Cooking and eating are positive life forces. (Collins 251)

Although the act of cooking has expanded far beyond the social performances of nourishment through televised cooking shows and series, artful performances can still offer a call for audiences to connect with food and cooking. Artful performances of cooking within series such as *Chef’s Table* expand the pleasures of cooking from our stomachs to a visually and mentally stimulating experience that reminds its viewers why cooking matters. Given its essential nature, cooking expresses a part of what it means to be human. Perhaps it is through the spectacle and entertainment-driven performances that the attention of viewers can be redirected and called to return to embodied, social performances of cooking. As in series like *Chef’s Table*, the artful performances of cooking can speak to audiences through an established and familiar medium in order to remind viewers that cooking can be a beautiful, rewarding, and visceral experience, which functions far beyond the obvious need for sustenance and expresses the very core of what it means to be human.
WORKS CITED


“Alexandre Couillon.” *Chef’s Table France*, season 1, episode 2, Netflix, 2 September 2016. *Netflix*, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80075158?trkid=14170287&tctx=0%2C0%62C4ab06d7d-1f0c-4446-815a6c0750378f9f15630641#MovieId=80128096&EpisodeMovieId=80075159.


“Dominique Crenn.” *Chef's Table*, season 2, episode 3, Netflix, 27 May 2016. Netflix,


---. *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.


