

THE CELEBRITY CHEF

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When we hear the word *chef*, we imagine a nameless Frenchman dressed in an all-white apron and a tall white hat with ownership rights to a fancy, upscale restaurant. However, today the chef at a well-known restaurant may no longer be hidden in the kitchen; well-known chefs can be seen every day on television. The celebrity chef is a recent addition to both the culinary and media worlds. Not too long ago, there were only a few: Julia Child was the most famous, and remains an icon today. Now, however, there are many more chefs to watch on the *Food Network*. Emeril Lagasse is the most popular, and demonstrates the role that celebrity chefs currently play in our lives. Although a recent addition, celebrity chefs have had a great influence on our culture: they have changed our ideas about celebrity and about the social status of the chef; they have redefined the kind of food ordinary people can have, and transformed the way men feel about cooking. However, the impact of the celebrity chef is one that most of us barely recognize.

Few students in a culinary institute expect to use their certification to become a “celebrity chef” or a *Food Network* television personality. There is far too much hard work involved in becoming a trained chef to have time to think about being a famous one. Tania Ralli, a student currently enrolled at the French Culinary Institute in New York City, explains: “[W]e were cooking five hours a night, three nights a week, after full days at our regular jobs. The cost, \$28,000 in tuition and fees, signaled the depth of our commitment” (Ralli 4). Because tuition and fees are so high, many students must work full time and attend school in addition to their jobs. In their classes, the students cook recipes over and over in preparation for a final exam in which they cook two recipes randomly-selected from among the hundreds that they have learned. However, Ralli claims, “cooking school was more than learning about technique. From developing heat-resistant hands to managing temperamental personalities, we developed the stamina necessary in a professional kitchen” (4). The students are critiqued based on their efficiency and speed, and on the taste and presentation of their food; they are not trained to be charismatic, friendly, or photogenic. Students focus on surviving in professional kitchens, not on cooking under studio lights. Becoming famous is not a priority for most would-be chefs: students enter the culinary world in hopes of having more practical things like job

security, benefits, and decent pay. By and large, they are too sensible to daydream about becoming the next Emeril, which is fortunate because becoming a celebrity chef is beyond their control: becoming a famous chef really depends on the media and the audience.

What makes a chef a “celebrity chef”? According to David Giles, an author who explored the psychology of fame and celebrity, “the defining characteristic of a celebrity is that there is essentially a media production” (2) on television, radio, or in the movies through which a personality is exposed to the public. Actors are celebrities because their media productions are the movies and television shows that they appear in. The celebrity chef receives wide exposure through the media and is well known because of the media; the celebrity chef’s own show, and frequent appearances on popular daytime talk shows are his media productions. Without media attention and publicity, a celebrity chef loses the defining characteristic that distinguishes him from a restaurant chef. In connection with celebrity, Giles discusses the differences between two groups of accomplished people, athletes and academics, one exposed to the public more than the other.

The priorities of the media or the dominant culture determines which spheres of activity are most likely to yield fame to the people within them. In Britain. . . there are huge numbers of footballers who are famous to the general public regardless of our interest in football. . . Generally speaking, academics are not likely to be as famous as sports people, unless we appear regularly on television, our activities simply aren’t visible enough, important enough, or as photogenic as the activities of people working in other fields. (6)

The celebrity chef, of course, corresponds to the famous athlete who is recognized even by people who may not follow sports, and the chef hidden away in a restaurant corresponds to the invisible and unphotogenic academic who receives little public recognition. Celebrity chefs have status because they are exposed to the general public, and are “visible enough” to keep the public’s attention directed towards them (6). Both a chef in a restaurant and a celebrity chef have had proper training in fine culinary schools and have worked for years alongside great chefs as their mentors. However, a celebrity chef is exposed to the public through the media, especially through television, constantly appearing outside the restaurant kitchen as a guest on popular talk shows and on packages of his own line of kitchenware. The public is

continuously exposed to what celebrity chefs have to offer, but we are exposed to the great restaurant chefs only when we are actually at their restaurant, or read about them (if we follow the culinary world) in publications like *Gourmet* and *Food and Wine*. The point is that celebrity chefs are exposed through mass media—we know of them because we have no control over when we will stumble upon them on our favorite morning talk show or at the kitchenware section of department stores.

The epitome of the celebrity chef is Emeril Lagasse. No other chefs on the *Food Network* have shows or audiences like he has, and his show is a true media production. First of all, the set of *Emeril Live* breaks away from traditional instructive cooking shows: instead of having Emeril demonstrating and speaking into the camera, the show has a talk-show format with a live audience and music provided by Doc Gibbs and the Emeril Live Band. The band defines Emeril as “essentially (part of) a media production” (Giles 2). On no other cooking show is the chef accompanied by a live band, which connects *Emeril Live* to entertainment shows like *The Tonight Show* rather than to other cooking shows (Emeril even has conversations with his bandleader Doc Gibbs just as Jay Leno does with his band leader, Kevin Eubanks). Moreover, Emeril’s show is unique in that it both serves to teach people how to cook and to entertain them, which is what makes him different from any other chef and what makes him a true celebrity.

Aside from the elements of Emeril’s show that are a product of set designers, producers, and other creative television production executives, the response of the audience sets Emeril apart. Denis McQuail, a Professor Emeritus of Communication at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, describes what he calls an “audience-sender relationship” which can be broken down into three categories: the audience as a target, the audience as participants, and the audience as spectators (40). These categories can help us to understand the rapport that Emeril has with his audience which makes him a celebrity. Emeril enters from the back of the set, shakes everyone’s hands, and makes small-talk with some of the audience members before reaching his place behind the studio’s stove. From his entrance, we see how Emeril establishes a relationship with the audience; he could simply start his show by entering from backstage without greeting the audience members, but in doing so, he makes the audience what McQuail calls “participants.”

Communication is defined in terms of sharing and participation,
increasing the commonality between sender and receiver, rather than in

changing “receivers” in line with the purpose of the “sender” . . . communication is not instrumental or utilitarian, and the attitude of the audience is likely to be playful or personally . . . committed in one way or another. Audience members are essentially participants. (41)

When he makes contact with the audience, Emeril receives a response that is both “playful” and “personally committed”; he receives this type of feedback because he takes a relaxed and laid-back approach to instructive cooking, constantly including his audience so that they do not feel intimidated by the complicated dishes that he prepares. Furthermore, he gives the audience the opportunity to participate by echoing his notorious sound effect “BAM!” and by being able to taste the food that he has cooked before them. In the way he approaches the audience, he “increases the commonality between the sender [himself] and the receiver [the audience].” He makes himself approachable and down to earth, which makes the audience feel comfortable with him.

In addition to being participants, the audience of *Emeril Live* also functions as what McQuail calls the “audience as spectators.” Since Emeril has already established the audience as participants, this affects how his audience responds as spectators, which in turn affects Emeril’s status as a celebrity.

The [audience as spectator] arises in a model of communication in which the source . . . simply capture[s] the attention of the audience, regardless of communicative effect. Audience attention is what is measured by ratings and thus cashable in the form of subscriptions, box office receipts, and payments from advertisers. It is also cashable in terms of status and influence within the media and in society generally. Fame and celebrity are more likely to result from sheer amount of public exposure than from measured “effects” or from measures of audience “appreciation.” (41-42)

This model can be seen in the way that Emeril “captures” the attention of the audience by entertaining them with funny sound effects and facial expressions while he cooks. Because Emeril has already engaged his audience into his show as participants, he receives this loyalty of his audience as spectators as measured, by his ratings, and by the attendance at his sold-out *Emeril Live* personal appearances. Through these appearances, moreover, Emeril increases his “cashable” status of fame and celebrity through frequent “public exposure.”

We have to keep in mind that Emeril's character is a production of the media that is aimed toward a particular audience. McQuail's model of the "audience as a target" explains that "the communication process is considered primarily as the sending of signals or messages over time for the purposes of control or influence. The receiver, and thus the audience, is perceived as a *destination* or *target* for the purposeful transfer or meaning" (41). Emeril's production executives target a specific audience, and control his popularity by giving *Emeril Live* primetime spots on the *Food Network*, daily at 8 P.M. and 11 P.M., and Emeril's other show *The Essence of Emeril*, at 4 P.M., giving him constant visibility in terms of a specific audience. Emeril's "destination" or "target" seems to be working-class Americans, since the shows air at times when working Americans would be arriving home or settling down to watch television after dinner or at bedtime. This scheduling ensures that Emeril is able to gain the audience's loyalty by making his "media production" available at the times when most of his target audience is watching, and "control" the audience's attention by strategically choosing the most advantageous times to air his shows, which in turn increases his celebrity.

McQuail's audience-response models suggest that Emeril has a great responsibility to his audience in order to maintain his image as a celebrity chef. Although Emeril gains his audience by being charismatic, friendly, and approachable, at the same time, he is creating an illusion by having the audience believe that there is only one way in which he can behave. Richard Dyer, a lecturer in Film at the University of Warwick, writing about stars (we can use the terms "stars" and "celebrities" interchangeably since both refer to public figures), claims that

the roles and/or performance of a star in a film were taken as revealing the personality of the star . . . What was only sometimes glimpsed and seldom brought out by Hollywood or the stars was that personality was itself a construction known and expressed only through films, stories, publicity. (22-23)

The public sometimes has a difficult time separating the actor's true character from the character he plays, but is aware of the difference. However, with Emeril there is a different situation because Emeril is part of a media production: there is a constructed public persona that Emeril projects to the audience, and Emeril's funny character is designed to create an illusion that there is only one Emeril. His fans forget that as they watch this chef demonstrate how to prepare food, they are also

watching him “cook up” an appealing character, because the audience is unable to differentiate Emeril’s persona on television from his identity off camera. Since there is a media production and Emeril is the celebrity-product, the producers have to make sure that Emeril maintains his persona. Convincing the audience that Emeril has only one personality changes the traditional idea of celebrity, since with movie stars, for example, people identify with the characters who are being played rather than with the actors themselves. The audience does not see Emeril “acting” while he is cooking on his television show, and since Emeril projects only one persona, people feel that they are able to identify with him.

As a teacher, Emeril also changes the traditional idea of celebrity. Usually, celebrities are admired for being photogenic or skillful; however, these qualities are not something that people can learn or apply to their own lives. Observing the audience at the show, we see the audience waiting attentively, ready to learn, as if they are waiting for a miracle to happen before their eyes. But that’s the thing. Emeril emphasizes how “EASY” it is to prepare these dishes. He constantly uses phrases such as “it’s as simple as that” and “it’s not rocket science” to encourage the audience to try to cook the dishes themselves. By introducing a recipe as “easy to make,” Emeril instills the desire to cook, and the confidence to cook, the kind of food that is usually only served in expensive and intimidating restaurants. Consequently, Emeril’s instruction helps to democratize fine food. People may not be able to dine in upscale restaurants because they lack the time or the money, but Emeril changes the idea that fine food is only available at expensive restaurants. By making great food available, Emeril reaches out to those who ordinarily would not experience exquisitely-prepared food, and emphasizes that it is not hard for people to cook well themselves. This shows us the difference between a “celebrity” and a “celebrity chef”: where celebrities are usually simply entertainers, celebrity chefs are inspirations, teachers, and leaders. The audience is able to connect with the celebrity chef because each show has a lesson that the audience can take home and use. The audiences of movies and television can only watch and admire what the actors do; they can not take home instructions on how to act; however, the celebrity chef can give the audience the knowledge necessary to cook an elaborate meal at home, which ultimately has a greater impact than a movie has on a person’s life.

The celebrity chef also challenges our gender stereotypes. For many years, food in the home has been associated with the women of the household.

Traditionally, women have cooked for the family and taken charge of the food served at every meal. Ironically, however, men dominate the culinary world—professional cooking is and *haute cuisine* is mostly associated with male chefs and restaurateurs, and industrial kitchens are filled with male chefs. Susan Gregory, a researcher in the sociology of food and the sociology of the family attributes women’s dominance of the kitchens at home and the household in general to the nurture factor (Bowlby *et al* 62): cooking at home is part of care and nurturing, and therefore associated with women. That Emeril changes this idea is evident in the people who attend the tapings of *Emeril Live*. Emeril’s show attracts men to his audience because in many ways he makes cooking both masculine and possible for them. Recently, when he taped an episode of *Emeril Live* at an Air Force base, the audience that was predominately male, and this is, in turn, seen by his television audience. Whenever he sprinkles a spice or garnishes a dish, he utters his notorious sound effect, “BAM!” which seems to appeal to the noisy little boy in the men in his audience. The fact that Emeril is a *male* celebrity chef is what gives him the power to redefine the cooking boundaries in the American household. Emeril is a celebrity, accomplished and qualified, but above all, he helps men feel more comfortable with cooking because he presents himself as someone that guys can relate to, and makes men “participants” in the show.

With the growing popularity of food in the media, celebrity chefs have had an enormous impact on food in our lives. However, not everyone feels that chefs deserve all this media attention. Stephen Bayley, a British media journalist, concludes that it is

[t]ime, I think, to bury the celebrity chef in all his annoying forms . . .

Chefs are artisans who should be confined to their workplace: what they should have in their hands is a spatula and a skillet, not a media schedule. They should be sweating brutally over hot stoves, not perspiring elegantly under the television lights . . . There he goes, preening and strutting, discommoding the credulous gluttons who pay his salary. (82)

Bayley sums up certain class-based objections to celebrity chefs—that chefs are artisans, not stars, and should stay in the kitchen and serve us, not perform for us. However, as a celebrity chef, Emeril Lagasse has used his status as a chef *and* a

celebrity to encourage his audiences to cook food that is usually reserved for the famous and wealthy, and by instilling in them the confidence to go home and cook his dishes themselves. Most important, Emeril is able to reach out to ordinary men and reassure them that his kind of cooking is not just for the women of the household, or the chefs of the wealthy. By providing entertainment with cooking, Emeril gives the men of his audience the confidence to approach cooking with a different perspective. Moreover, he has changed the culinary and media worlds by fusing them together and adding "BAM!"

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