

Food

Selling The Sizzle, Not The Steak

By [JAMES PONIEWOZIK](#)

Jan. 15, 2001

There is a point when, if a cable channel becomes successful enough, it ceases to be about what it is about. You knew MTV was big, for instance, when you were able to turn it on at just about any hour of the day and watch a music video. For some of us beyond the tween demographic, who lost our symbiotic connection with the music scene around the time Kurt Cobain lost his life, the Food Network in the mid-'90s became our MTV. And its equivalent of the single was the recipe. Some of us cooked, some didn't--it didn't really matter. Seeing a cassoulet executed by a master was like hearing a perfect three-minute pop song, satisfying whether or not you could play the chords.

Then the Food Network went platinum. It started with Emeril Lagasse, who turned into a Cajun cartoon on his popular, superanimated Emeril Live, but the trend solidified with shows like the campy and overexposed Japanese game show Iron Chef, which proved you can never underestimate the American appetite for laughing at those funny Asians.

The good news was that Americans, long accused of ushering in the culinary apocalypse with their love of supersizing and Shake 'n Bake, were watching TV about real food. But as the network focused on attracting noncooks and stoking its chefs' celebrity, it became harder and harder to find actual cooking on the network. There was Gordon Elliott, doing his version of Tom Green's ambush comedy on Door Knock Dinners; cute Brit Jamie Oliver having dinner with his girlfriend on The Naked Chef; and Jill Cordes and [Marc Silverstein](#) **doing roving-food-reporter segments on The Best Of**. When someone did manage a recipe on air, it was likely to be Isaac Hayes on B. Smith with Style dousing an omelet with maple syrup. (The man who voices South Park's Chef could have at least whipped up chocolate salty balls.)

The Food Network has always been a paradox, delivering the A to Z of cuisine to a population that lives on the canned sauces and Boston Market meals touted in its commercial breaks. It's an audience that, as Ming Tsai points out on the phone from his restaurant Blue Ginger, spends thousands on Viking stoves, then uses them to heat takeout.

So half the time, on East Meets West, Tsai cooks expert fusion fare. The other half, on his new food-adventure show Ming's Quest, he's diving for sea urchins, falling off horses or staring down alligators like the Crocodile Hunter. Likewise, Bobby Flay and Mario Batali have taken their chef stars on the road in their own travel series. As Tsai puts it, "The network wanted to get us out of the kitchen." The few remaining hard-core cooking shows succeed because they have a gimmick, like Sara Moulton's stump-the-chef call-in show Cooking Live. "If I were doing a straight cooking show," says Moulton, "I don't think I'd still be on."

The new shows, say execs, are about "context" and "stories." It's food as lifestyle accessory. The recipes are still there, but like the video fragments on MTV's live request show TRL, they're abridged or buried amid chat. Take the newest potential hit, the eponymous show of chef to the stars Wolfgang Puck of L.A.'s Spago (Fridays, 9 p.m. E.T.). In the cooking portion, Puck, the quintessential celebrity chef, shows the range that made him a one-man empire. But the clear selling points are the long, taped segments of him hobnobbing with Hollywood big shots. "I want to show not just what I do in my kitchen but what I do in my life," he says. That that life involves Michael Eisner and Kelsey Grammer, of course, doesn't hurt.

You can't blame the Food Network for going this route. In the past two years, its availability has almost doubled, to more than 52 million cable homes. Had it stayed narrowly authentic, it might have been doomed. We longtime viewers may grumble like purist fans of a cult band that has sold out. But apparently it's better to broil out with celebrity chefs than fade away.

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