Famous chefs have been around, more or less, for as long as there have been restaurants; but there’s something different about the twenty-first-century American kitchen star. It has to do with the strange relationship between American restaurants and American fame culture. Our celebrity chefs are strange animals: manual laborers in Gucci shoes; Page Six denizens who wear uniforms. Class, labor, gender, cash, fame, power: all of these create and complicate the celebrity chef’s identity. And because the story of the celebrity chef is the story of how we construct ourselves in public through food—because the making of the celebrity chef is, in some ways, an American dream tale—it is a story, inevitably, about our bodies and ourselves, an exposé of belly and brain that takes us to some dangerous places. If Jean- Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s famous pronouncement, “tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are,” is true of the twenty-first-century American diner—if the act of eating food in public is an act of revelation—what are we to make of the superstar chefs who cook up the goods?

Not very long ago, the term “chef” had a more or less stable meaning in America. Chefs were imagined as foreign—specifically French—in the style of Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe? or The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover; they were portrayed as haughty, overplayed, ridiculous fops or gorgeously debauched, dissolute, oversensual control freaks. And while the stereotypes about French chefs were, of course, just that, it was nonetheless true that high-echelon culinarians were actually French (Jacques Pepin, Jean-Louis Palladin, Jean-Jacques Rachaou), and that the culinary culture they promoted was pure Gallic. Their training, their aesthetics, their understanding of fine dining (from seatings to sauces) defined the upscale American culinary landscape. It was the old nineteenth-century formula: class came from France, as did beurre blanc, couture, good wine, modern table service, and all sorts of delicious, slightly transgressive indulgence. Those few haute chefs who happened to be born in the USA lived their public, professional lives as French chefs in quasi-colonial skins.

The key term for the most accomplished American chefs was “classically trained”—indicating, as a sort of certificate of value and authenticity, that the chef in question was the product of French or strongly French-influenced cooking schools, of French kitchens in France, or, at least, of French kitchens in America. Those who were not French in some way were low, abject. “American” kitchens were among the dark places of the earth: sweaty, slippery environs of dirt and noise, places of filthy physical labor where nothing gleamed. They were run not by chefs but by cooks: fat, sweaty chain-smokers in funny hats and undershirts (the exceptions were imagined as motherly “ethnic” women running low-price-point “ethnic” restaurants in “ethnic” neighborhoods). They were outside of the American success story.

But all of this has changed—and quickly—as American cooking has fundamentally transformed itself over the last fifteen years or so. This revolution in the kitchen came, in part, from “above”—from the haute foreign world—as a new generation of upscale chefs (Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Wolfgang Puck, Gray Kunz) looked to influences and flavors from around the globe, and “fusion” cooking was born. But the transformation was much more than a shift among the dark places of the earth: sweaty, slippery environs of dirt and noise, places of filthy physical labor where nothing gleamed. They were run not by chefs but by cooks: fat, sweaty chain-smokers in funny hats and undershirts (the exceptions were imagined as motherly “ethnic” women running low-price-point “ethnic” restaurants in “ethnic” neighborhoods). They were outside of the American success story.

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from French to French-Asian: the names on the menus and on the front doors were also changing, precisely as a result of the success of European chefs in galvanizing food culture in America. The nation’s fine-dining restaurants may have long been run by Frenchmen, but their kitchens were necessarily staffed, in large part, by American cooks. As these cooks came into their own, leaving the line to run their own kitchens, their backgrounds, sensibilities, and approaches began to reshape the nation’s culinary landscape.

Many of the new culinarians (Tom Colicchio, Charlie Palmer, Michael Romano, Todd English) were the aspirational children of the working and lower-middle classes, raised in optimistic postwar suburbs or in culturally mixed working-class city neighborhoods. The life of the kitchen afforded them a new kind of upward mobility, a career path and identity at once connected with their roots and offering expansive possibilities—a perfect American Dream tale. Unlike the classic career trajectory of the Horatio Alger-style American success story (the mailroom clerk who rises to the corner office; the street vendor who becomes the newspaper publisher), cooking was work of the hand that was also work of the mind: the job fused artisanal prowess, creativity, discipline, and professionalism. It required no advanced degrees or business suits, was the antithesis of nine to five. At the same time, it held out, for those who succeeded, the promise not only of financial reward but also of a patina of class—a shiny aura of authority and refinement predicated, perhaps ironically, on the very Frenchness of the new American chefs’ predecessors and mentors.

The new chefs brought their own vision of Americanness into the kitchen—a vision still shaped by French notions of excellence, but incorporating regionalism, local ingredients, the tastes and flavors of the street and the home kitchen. They brought new ideas about fine-dining cookery to their kitchens, borrowing from the immigrant and post-immigrant home cooking many had grown up with, from the “ethnic” restaurants of their cities, from regional American folk-cultural and street-cultural foodways. No longer was a fine-dining meal in America necessarily an act of gazing across the ocean. As the world of the plate became increasingly interesting and increasingly reflective of American experiences, diners turned their attention from restaurateurs and began to focus on the forces behind the swinging door. Chefs began to be people to whom attention was paid.

The life of the restaurant kitchen, too, became a hybrid of French and American, high and low. The famously autocratic style of European chefs—forged in the apprentice system, more or less unchanged since the nineteenth century—melded with the rough-and-tumble working norms of blue-collar America and the aspirational energy of the American striver. As kitchen lore and a spate of tell-all books (most notably, Anthony Bourdain’s Kitchen Confidential) recount, the world behind the swinging door was the last bastion of cowboy culture. To make it, you had to be tough, smart, crass, hot-tempered, strong-willed, and completely addicted to the rush of the kitchen—the pace, the heat, the violence of creating delicate and beautiful food. The kitchen became, in the popular imagination, a realm not of exhaustion and exploitation but of energy and power. It was a proving ground, and the ability to stand the heat, both literally and figuratively, was a marker of true grit. The idea that kitchen work was only for grubby workers, histrionic Europeans, and accent-ridden earth-mother types began to disappear.

Gender is not incidental to this story. Alice Waters may have been a highly visible pioneer in the fusion of French culinary technique with sustainable organic American agriculture, but her success did not exactly usher in a new era of gender equality in the kitchen. The overwhelmingly masculine identity of restaurant cooks was created in part by traditional French attitudes towards women chefs (one French pastry chef in New York City famously papered his kitchen with photographs of naked women dotted with chocolate and pastry cream). But the lack of change on this front also has something to do, perhaps, with American gender ambivalence towards cooking. If meaningful labor over the stoves had previously been limited, in the cultural imagination, to foppish Frenchmen and, on another register, mothers, the work of making cooking new was also the work of making it manly. This was essential to the transformation of cooking into a viable career path in line with the American dream: serious work of the hand must, in our cultural imagination, necessarily be disassociated with the home, with the feminine, with perceived amateurism. There was nothing homey and nurturing about the new cooking or the new kitchens. Instead, these chefs made themselves tough, rough-edged, sexy, in a very hetero, rebel-without-a-cause, cowboy-boots-and-blue-jeans kind of way.

It was at least in part this aspect of professional kitchen work that drew a new demographic to the cooking world. The new chefs were not all upwardly mobile strivers. There were also baby-boomer college boys, career changers, lawyers and Ph.D’s excited by the intellectual, creative, and physical challenges of cooking, and turned on by the chest-thumping play with fire that the kitchen promised, a more visceral high even than the thrills and chills of Wall Street culture in the go-go eighties. Members of a boomer generation
that rejected cultural imperatives, tired of the more ordinary grind of the nine-to-five working life, and accustomed to making—and getting—their own way in the world, this new order of self-proclaimed tastemakers abandoned the safety of the office for the adrenalin rush of the kitchen, the no-holds-barred cowboy culture that could be the chef's life. Barry Wine left the law to found The Quilted Giraffe; Anthony Bourdain abandoned Vassar for the Culinary Institute of America; Alfred Portale gave up jewelry design to wield a ladle. On a slightly different register, Charlie Trotter, with his eyeglasses and his gleaming clean-lined kitchen and his college degree, became the poster boy for intellectual chefdom, the celebrated ultramodernist, soft-spoken exception who proved the rule. The chefs who came up through the ranks might have been at the forefront of the transformation of American food culture, but it was these career-changers who brought chefs out of the kitchen and into the mainstream. They made cooking look like an attractive, exciting career choice, a profession, an avocation, instead of just a menial job. Food took on a patina of newness and transformation: it was a realm of creativity and risk-taking as, in the fat times of the go-go eighties, big spenders ruled and restaurant culture took center stage.

The advent, in 1993, of a twenty-four-hour cable channel devoted entirely to food and cooking changed the game completely. Suddenly, chefs were no longer insider stars, so to speak, their fame more or less limited to other industry types and committed foodies: they could become bona fide personalities, celebrities appearing weekly or even nightly in living rooms across the nation. Cooking, as Julia Child had long since discovered, could make great TV when it was done right. And the new breed of chefs—young, brash, exuberant, physical—made great TV stars. The conventions of food television helped, too: by inviting viewers into their kitchen sets, speaking directly to the camera, seeming to offer direct access to their true selves, chefs offered a (performed) sense of real identification and access. Suddenly, everyone was on a first-name basis with the nation’s biggest chef-stars.

The complete transformation of American notions of food culture—especially among upscale, educated Americans—has since become exceedingly familiar. Professional cooking and food studies programs are springing up in universities across the country. The Culinary Institute of America, no longer the equivalent of a technical college, now offers BA degrees alongside the AOS; restaurant schools are flooded with brash young turks seeking to become the next big gastronomic stars. Food writers, chefs, and wine experts make regular appearances on radio and television talk shows (and in publications like this one). The small children of ambitious parents eat soppressata and sushi and spend their weekend mornings in cooking-for-kids classes. Grown men spend their vacations learning to make pasta by hand or touring the vineyards of France or discovering the layered culinary pleasures of Singapore. Greenmarkets are trendy hotspots. The publishing juggernaut that is the Zagat Guides made everybody a critic; now
everyone is a food blogger, and online instacritics flock to new restaurants, cell-phone cameras in hand. And in a sign that the prodigal son has actually made good, the Michelin program has even made its way across the ocean. The kitchen has taken center stage.

And chefs are unquestionably bona fide celebrities: they are TV stars, scene-makers, gossip-page regulars with glamorous lives, fabulous home kitchens, and famous girlfriends. Chefs appear naked but for a blender in advertisements; on TV, they straddle motorcycles and savor fine Burgundies and taste fried-insect delicacies in remote corners of the world. The stratospheric incomes of rich and famous chefs are published in the Wall Street Journal; their apartments are profiled in the New York Times; they hawk cookbooks, pots, dishes, and knives, represent charities, and draw crowds and groupies. This ain’t your grandma’s Galloping Gourmet.

The restaurant world is the most exciting theater around, these days, and chefs are the coolest.

But this narrative is not the standard story of celebrity, in which the star comes from humble origins, struggles, gets a lucky break, has a chance to show his or her stuff, and lives happily ever after in a deluxe castle in the Hollywood/New York/London sky, occasionally emerging to shoot a movie or drink at a party or wave to the public at a premiere. In that story, labor of all kinds is, more or less, vanquished. The superstar may complain, on Jay Leno’s sofa, about the rigors of life on-set, but we all know that the travails of moviemaking are at once artificial and short-lived. The star may get up early to repeat lines or strike a pose for the camera, but she doesn’t do any real work. Isn’t that the point of the American dream?

The celebrity chef, on the other hand, is all about work. His fame, in fact, is predicated on labor, and his success does not obviate the need for him to do real work: the diner, the fan, expects the chef to go to the restaurant every day, to sweat in the kitchen, and to craft the food with his own hands. And in this way, the transformation of the cook from working grunt to superstar chef messes with the Horatio Alger success story. The chef does not leave working-class labor behind when he becomes a kitchen star: instead, he threatens to erase the invisible boundaries between classes that we at once ignore and reify. The chef, after all, is about high and low all at once. Though the revised image of superstar chefdom may be, on occasion, pristine (Jean-George Vongerichten’s Gucci kitchen shoes; those immaculate Top Chef kitchens), chefs, of course, still get their hands extremely dirty, laboring in the filth of food. They are servants, on call for diners, at the same time that they are artists, savants, gifted and famous creators who own their power. And this, in turn, creates a problem not only for the superstar chef but for the diners who fill their restaurants.

Theorists like Paul Youngquist claim that in liberal democratic capitalist societies, each individual’s body is not only a “self,” but also a post-Marxist factory, as it were: the body, that is, serves as a means of production in and of itself for its “owner.” This theory holds that the unproductive body has no value (so the person of leisure has no social value and is often vilified). But in a culture (like ours) that fetishizes distance from physical toil, in which clean hands and white-collar professionalization are prime markers of success in the rags-to-riches story, the body that labors physically, actually, rather than in the abstract (at a desk; through the brain) is even more problematic, because it is overly materialized, too much about itself, making its work apparent. This issue is particularly complicated in the case of the chef, because in his body, subsistence and accumulation of wealth, need and excess, laborer and possession and possessor come together.

Upscale cookery is at once an utterly anticapitalist pursuit in the purest Marxist sense—authentic, original, creating no distance between the producer and his product—and also all about simulation and simulacrum, repetition, the fast-paced endless reproduction of the hot line, an assembly line in the purest sense. Similarly, the chef is at once an artist (gifted producer of “original” work); an artisan (producer of hand-made products to be consumed); a laborer who sweats in the dirt; and a manager, a cracker of whips, a capitalist. His kitchen is a showroom, a
workshop, an artist’s studio, a factory, an abattoir. Never mind the romantic cookery of soft-focus movie-chefs. In the real kitchen, inspiration may be crucial, craft may be paramount, but there is no denying that hard physical work happens. Sweat drips in the pots; cooks lift and lug and pour and stir; the fare bears the secret flavors not of movie-style love and nurturing, but of aching muscles, searing heat, long hours, and low pay.

The dining room, on the other hand, is by its very nature a site of leisure for the diner, particularly in upscale restaurants. In the dining room, even business dealings (“lunch meetings,” “company dinners”) are undercut by the presence of wine, the absence of office paraphernalia, the foregrounding of bodily indulgence. The diner’s position of ease, of nonwork, is underlined by the presence of service, by the contrast between the seated diner and the rushing waiter. This relationship, of course, is all about class. As writers from Norbert Elias to Margaret Visser to Joanne Finkelstein have noted, the public space of the upscale restaurant is, for better or for worse, a realm of class production, a self-consciously hyper-mannered arena of behavior-constructing ceremonial elements (the careful lighting, the customs of service, Margaret Visser’s rituals of dinner). In the dining room, the patron at once demonstrates class—by his very presence, his choices, his knowledge of wines, his economic power—and publicly takes in class through the mouth, eating that which marks him as privileged and knowledgeable (fine wines, truffles, foie gras), in this way participating in a collective rite of discernment and definition. (The diner, in this imagining, is always male, since in the restaurant dining room, men retain outsized power—hence the legendary poor treatment received by groups of women, who are, still, often imagined as difficult customers who order little wine and tip poorly). In this construction, American chefs are classmakers in the most literal sense. The convergence of the unprecedented popularity of dining out and the advent of the star chef has led to more than just a sense that chefs are important: it has transformed culinary professionals into creators of culture, capable of bestowing knowledge and coolness on those who dine in their restaurants. Chefs are alchemists who transform the everyday act of eating into something greater, more transcendent, at once imbued with and productive of taste and class.

The celebrity-run restaurant also offers an opportunity rare in a culture obsessed with the famous: the diner has access, to a greater or lesser degree, to the chef himself. He refers to the chef by his first name; he may be a “regular”; the chef may even sit down at his table, voluntarily or by request. Since, in America, celebrity automatically confers class and desirability, the diner who basks in the reflected glory of a superstar chef, who shares a glass with a Food Network star, gains a little bit of that glory for himself.

Further, when the diner eats the food the chef has prepared, he is, in a sense, performing an act of power cannibalism. Celebrity chefhood echoes the long-established metaphorical alignment of human food with human flesh: whereas in the domestic sphere, food produced by a maternal figure may be read as mother’s milk, the transubstantiation of the restaurant—in which the chef’s hand must be evident in all that is consumed, in which the chef’s name, his renown, is the flavor the diner is really craving—is all about power. The diner may order the foie gras or the ravioli, but what he is imaginatively consuming, in a sense—what brings him to the celebrity restaurant in the first place, what he truly seeks out—is the chef himself. As Maggie Kilgour has noted, the act of anthropophagy is a means of taking in the power of the other, of consuming that which constitutes the self of the subject, and, thus, of reinventing or expanding oneself and one’s own strength. By swallowing the food of a famous chef, in his dining room—and, more importantly, by paying for that food, ordering it up on demand, sitting in judgment of it—the consumer, the diner, not only basks in the reflected fame of the chef, he takes it in and becomes, in tasting it, a creature of fame and power himself.

But the cannibal culture of celebrity also creates a problem for the diner, because though the clean white jacket may cover knife scars and burns and stains—the markers of the chef’s work of the hand—that work is evident on the very plate before him. If the diner seeks proximity, authenticity, the taste of celebrity and power and class from the chef, then the chef’s problematic class status must also infect the diner himself, threatening him with the low, with class abjection. If you are what you eat—and if what you eat is the fame, the identity, of the chef whose name is on the door—then how do you prevent yourself from also swallowing the laboring selfhood that is also, inevitably, the celebrity chef?

This problem is at once addressed and made more resonant by the nature of the much-vaunted New American Cooking. The chef in his guise as worker and as artisan offers the diner a taste of authenticity, catering to a neo-Romantic longing for a return to an illusory Garden of realness. He transforms low or waste food into fare that is at once “high,” redolent of class, and “real,” made in the style of his grandmother, of his roots, of the Old Country. Such fare reaffirms our “naturalness” in a Romantic, Rousseauian sense, allows us to take in the stuff that seems to make us “authentic” or “real” even as it naturalizes our reification of the sophisticated, of the world of the simulacrum, of the
never-real, of that which is highly artificial and constructed at great expense. We revel in the low in order to show how sophisticated we are, the distance we have traveled, as an immigrant nation, from our roots in one Old Country or another. Our grandmothers’ cookery is transformed by the chef from poverty-driven fuel for labor to refined, beautified, ultra-civilized Levi-Straussian well-cooked fare. At our haute cuisine tables, we celebrate our authenticity, our origins, even as we revel in our distance from them.

This complicated act involves both descent and ascent: the chef makes low food high, but he must also allow us safe transit to the world of the low. Tongue, fricasseed feet, innards, head cheese become the stuff that natural, uncivilized dreams are made of, become sacrificial, cannibalistic, guttural, nature red in tooth and claw: the magical mystery substance, the Levi-Straussian, anthropological stuff that demonstrates our realness, our brave natural selves, uncorrupted by the soft world of cities and desk jobs. Such fare facilitates our descent into animal, even as it marks our worth through wealth, in a Bourdieuian act of refinement only the cultural elite know enough, can afford enough to eat such “real” stuff, in our age of McDonald’s and prepackaged foods. Like the Romantics of two centuries ago, we demonstrate both our fearless naturalness and our sophistication through this single act of eating. The chef is our Virgil to these dark places. He lends us his own earthy authenticity, lets the trace of the worker show through, a tang of sweat, when he offers such fare up on the plate. In his hands, we let the trace of the worker show through, a tang of sweat, through this single act of eating.

But taking such food in also presents the diner, once again, with the fundamental problem of incorporation: if one swallows raw food, low food, snouts or feet or innards, how does one prevent oneself from becoming low, abject? Haute cuisine is problematic precisely because its putatively innards, head cheese become the stuff that natural, uncivilized dreams are made of, become sacrificial, cannibalistic, guttural, nature red in tooth and claw: the magical mystery substance, the Levi-Straussian, anthropological stuff that demonstrates our realness, our brave natural selves, uncorrupted by the soft world of cities and desk jobs. Such fare facilitates our descent into animal, even as it marks our worth through wealth, in a Bourdieuian act of refinement only the cultural elite know enough, can afford enough to eat such “real” stuff, in our age of McDonald’s and prepackaged foods. Like the Romantics of two centuries ago, we demonstrate both our fearless naturalness and our sophistication through this single act of eating. The chef is our Virgil to these dark places. He lends us his own earthy authenticity, lets the trace of the worker show through, a tang of sweat, when he offers such fare up on the plate. In his hands, we let the trace of the worker show through, a tang of sweat, through this single act of eating.

But taking such food in also presents the diner, once again, with the fundamental problem of incorporation: if one swallows raw food, low food, snouts or feet or innards, how does one prevent oneself from becoming low, abject? Haute cuisine is problematic precisely because its putatively disgusting, or at least liminal, unknowable nature is also what makes it desirable. The truly highly classed diner, the dining room narrative implies, knows enough to trust the chef, eats otorlans and sweetbreads, never turns away at a strong-smelling cheese or an offering of offal, exquisitely prepared. His ability to eat such food is a marker of his discernment, of his difference from the McDonald’s-swallowing masses. But as William Ian Miller writes, the impulse of disgust is inextricably linked to notions of pollution and its refusal. “Disgust,” he asserts, “evaluates (negatively) what it touches, proclaims the meanness and inferiority of its object. And by so doing it presents a nervous claim of right to be free of the dangers imposed by the proximity of the inferior. It is thus an assertion of a claim to superiority that at the same time recognizes the vulnerability of that superiority to the defiling powers of the low.” If this is the case, then the diner must always fear taking in that which is disgusting: that which is insufficiently defined or bounded, proximate, too close to the human (feet, snouts); food which can be anthropomorphized (otorlans, rabbits); food made from the dirty bits (sweetbreads, innards); food with questionable, indefinable, in-between textures, particularly anything slimy or sticky.

If such food marks you as an American success story, culturally and economically rich, it also marks you as untouchable, like those Fear Factor contestants eating doughnuts filled with bugs for cash. The Bourdieuian act of making class, of rendering the low as high through the practice of discernment, is insufficient. The safety of the dining room is not enough to protect the diner: the swinging door, the dark realm of origins, that unknown country, always threaten to engulf the unwary eater.

The kitchen, the mysterious realm behind the swinging door, synthesizes this problem. The chef’s domain is the scrabble in the dirt of food. This is not an aesthetically pleasing showcase for the pure product we like to read about (“organics,” “locally grown,” “greenmarket”); nor is the visually fitting cradle of the acculturated, value-based product that appears on our plates (disgusted by nomenclature, by sauces, by presentation). It is that other, in-between land: of giblets, of hanging meats, of stocks and stews and slippery floors and slimy uncooked bits. The kitchen is a place of odd smells and strange-colored, bubbling brews; of blood and guts, of dead animals, of knives and hooks, of butchering and skinning and disembowelment and boiling alive.

Chefs plunge their hands into the dirty, the unnamable, the disgusting—and they do so to create perfectly sculpted, apparently immaculate fare for our tables. The Levi-Straussian qualities that make cooked food safe and civilized also make restaurant fare always already inscrutable, its origins hidden, its contents cut and cooked and arranged beyond recognition. Anxiety about the pollution possibly entailed by this process creates a singular ambivalence in the relationship between chef and diner. The chef’s role in the production not only of himself but of those whom he feeds through his engagement with and transformation of such materials creates rich boundary confusion and adrenalin-charged, sexualized fear and loathing among those who swallow his fare.

Doubly alienated from the source of his food and from the site of its production, the restaurant diner must trust the chef to feed him only that which is appropriately constructive of class and selfhood, that which is not defiling,
disgusting. And on this front, the chef and the diner may actually be at odds: the diner wants to take in that which will make him ever more elevated, ever more refined, possessing as much class as possible; the chef, though he is aligned with the diner in his search for fame, is also a businessman looking to make a buck. Waste is the enemy in the kitchen: when profit margins are tight, everything must be used. The gastronomically educated diner knows this, of course. He is aware that his beautiful food hides the unnameable cuttings from the butcher's table, the stuff lingering at the back of the walk-in, the detritus. Disguising the disgusting may be business, but how to reconcile this with the construction of class through haute dining? This difficulty, in turn, is concerned, at bottom, with the notion of the chef not as artist but as entrepreneur—a notion which again troubles the diner's identification with the famous chef, inviting the diner to share not in the glamour and ease of celebrity but, rather, in the defilement of filthy lucre.

Gail Houston, writing on Dickens, notes the confusion of aliment and excrement in the capitalist system. In the diner’s nightmare version of the restaurant kitchen, that confusion is at once metaphorical and literal, as the chef, the capitalist masquerading as artist and servant, secretly poisons the capitalist-consumer with shit.

The power and horror of the kitchen is, for the diner, a potent brew, an adrenalin aphrodisiac precisely because it evokes threats of taboo-defying contamination and disgust, of anxiety about controlling the bounds of the body when some other man is making the food: we take in what we cannot name or control. The chef’s power lies in his ability to deal with contaminating substances and yet defy defilement. He is Prospero, an alchemist, turning waste into gold, creating from the abject power and horror of the kitchen, the lower depths, beauty and refinement on a plate. This ability makes him at once an object of reverence and a creature of fear and loathing, an overdetermined, magical monster-magician who crosses boundaries with the flourish of a whisk. The chef in these circumstances becomes not only mediator but snake, tempter, source of danger: the purveyor of blowfish, the offerer of offal, the man who can take you down.

To protect himself from all this liminality, the diner needs to put the chef in his place. Beneath the calm of the dining room a testosterone-fueled battle rages, a masculine slugfest of power. The ever-present, unavoidable threat begets an anxious, endless dining room discourse of control: This fish smells funny. This isn’t done right: take it back. You gave me food poisoning. Their meat isn’t the best. Stay away from the shellfish. In this way, the diner shows the chef who’s boss—he showcases his knowledge and his economic superiority, demonstrates that he controls the boundaries of his own body, that the chef can’t put anything past him, in him, can’t remake him. He shows the girlfriend, the client, the table full of supplicants, the public at other tables that he is the stronger, that he will not be browbeaten, that he is at once more civilized and more powerful than the man behind the swinging door. This isn’t hot enough, he insists. It’s not cooked correctly. It smells off. Bring me a steak. Bring me more salt. Bring me ketchup. This is inedible. I will not be broken, he insists. He invokes the language of the marketplace: this place is so expensive; they’re always trying to pass off last night’s fish; this portion isn’t big enough for what you’re charging. And in this way, the diner reasserts his freedom, his individuality in the exchange economy; and, at the same time, makes clear the chef’s subservience, his lack of proper participation. A Hand, the chef is. Not primitive, not powerful. And the diner, the leisured consumer of goods, is made safe from the labor he employs through the reassertion of the chef’s lower-class status.

But in the dining room, in the face of that swinging door, this superiority can never be complete. The chef, after all, remains in power: it is his food that the diner eats. The rituals of the formal dinner reinforce the sanctity, the magic, of the chef’s food; and where those rituals are less strongly enforced, in upscale restaurants where casual American culture is making itself felt, the boundaries between self and other, between the diner and the chef, the safe place of the economic power and the subservient artisan, only become more confused. The diner is, it seems, always at the mercy
of the danger and horror of the restaurant—and the more he seeks out the celebrity power of the chef, the greater the abjection he risks. Under these circumstances, it is imperative that the diner find a way to reassert his power—that the invisible class system realign itself around the problematic body of the chef. This realignment is made possible, ironically, by the machinery of celebrity itself.

When the media details Britney’s bad parenting or Paris’s jailhouse stint or Mel’s anti-Semitic rants, catches an Olsen twin without makeup, exposes Lindsay in rehab, it brings stars down to earth, and in doing so, helps ordinary folk indulge in the fantasy of knowing, of being just like the celebs. But in the case of the chef, the voyeur’s-eye view affords the diner/watcher the power that he so craves by at once making the chef less powerful, making the nature of his magic known, and making the diner different from, separate from and, thus, safe from the chef, no matter what he eats or where he eats it. (I am speaking here specifically of the sort of shows that make the cut on “Food Network Nighttime” and other primetime venues: Nigella, Giada, Paula, and Rachael Ray may dominate the daylight hours, but their demographic is not the diners of whom I write here. They are, by turns, comfort food and cheesecake—they are emphatically not the power competition. Hence, their daytime slots.) Look, for instance, to Emeril Lagasse, the pioneer who literally turned the kitchen into dinner theater, with his dining room setup, his passing of plates, his audience participation. Lagasse offers a frisson of danger: his brow sweats; he talks serious spice. But he also makes the culinary world utterly safe: he turns himself into a clown, yelling “BAM” at every opportunity, as though he were a magician at a children’s birthday party. The power of the alchemist chef becomes rabbits emerging harmlessly from hats.

Bobby Flay makes the world safe for foodies in a different way. Host of a slew of Food Network shows, from Boy Meets Grill to Throwdown with Bobby Flay, he is irreverent, funny, a bit hot-headed, an insistent expert on his casual, down-home all-American topics (especially, of course, barbecue). Here the haute-cuisine chef becomes one of the boys, not so haute after all—just another dude obsessing over coals and gas with a beer in hand. He is an entirely knowable commodity. He would never put one over on us.

Mario Batali, chef-owner of numerous now-famous New York City restaurants, plays a more unstable, more dangerous character in TV chef culture, but ultimately he makes the restaurant an even safer place for the viewer who imagines himself as the diner. In his shorts and his ponytail, his long red hair falling in his face, he is a gentle culinary giant, his belly, bumping over his apron, giving him an emasculating aura of pregnant domesticity. On Molto Mario, balanced precariously on his scooter, he roams Italy, harvesting authenticity, offering us a taste of old-world naturalism. Batali takes us to the risky stuff, the dirt and slime and potential living-ness of food. But then he takes it home and—humbly, humorously—transforms it in his spotless, uber-professional kitchens into something gloriously refined. In his hands, the dirt disappears, not disguised but, apparently, actually transubstantiated. The kitchen becomes safe again. No wonder, years into its run, a reservation at Babbo is still harder to score than the latest must-have handbag—not to mention del Posto.

Anthony Bourdain offers, perhaps, a more dangerous access. A cooker of raw meat, an infamous snorter of coke in walk-ins who details sex with brides over the garbage bins, Bourdain now travels the world as our stand-in, facing down the terrors of culinary dragons with his East Coast accent and his unflappable air on Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations. He tastes innards for us, samples bugs for us. When he leaves the kitchen with camera in tow, he takes us to the dark places of the earth from the safety of our living rooms: the liminal monster of the kitchen becomes a tour guide. Instead of facing down his own anxiety at the unknown nature of the stuff on the plate and the problematic class status of the celebrity chef, then, the viewer gets to watch the chef eat the nasty stuff, at once reveling, by proxy, in Bourdain’s fearlessness and separating himself from the disgusting. The chef eats the bugs for us. By doing so, he makes the steaks and frites...
we eat at his restaurant so much more delicious—flavored with a frisson of danger, yet completely removed from the utterly foreign stuff that Bourdais faces down on television. American eating becomes at once sophisticated and completely safe.

The new crop of competition shows—Top Chef, The Next Food Network Star, the Gordon Ramsay trifecta—undercuts the notion of the chef as savant, as gifted artist capable of creating gold from dross. We watch the contestants struggle, bicker, weep; we take sides; we focus on the psychodrama, the personality conflicts, the disasters. Cooking becomes little more than an obstacle course, the contestants’ often-ridiculous tasks a sort of flavored Survivor marathon. These shows demystify the kitchen more effectively than any behind-the-scenes narrative, demonstrating that cooks (like businesspeople, academics, competitive homemakers, and others) need just a little bit of knowledge, a little bit of training, a little bit of creativity, and a whole lot of self-confidence, backstabbing skills, and attitude in order to succeed. An ability to cry on camera also comes in handy; a pretty face is the best asset of all.

But the hottest TV chef offering of all doesn’t obviate or distance the power and horror of the kitchen—not does it focus on roommate bickering or Quickfire Challenge humiliations, though it does bring the appeal of competition shows into focus. On Iron Chef America, the culinary realm is a testosterone-laden land of toughness, gamesmanship, cheap thrills, and adrenalin rushes. It is rough-and-tumble, highly competitive, not a place for the faint of heart. But in engaging with this dangerous world, making the battle evident, such programming also gives the viewer a displaced power of culinary life and death over the chef, lets him win the battle for supremacy and clarity.

In adrenalin-charged Kitchen Stadium, innards and dirt are literally transformed before our eyes. “Lobster battle!” cries the announcer, and we watch, safe in our living rooms, as big men wrestle with live lobsters, rip their heads off, plunge them into boiling, viscous liquid. It is the definitive peek behind the swinging door, the ultimate culinary thrill-seekers’ realm; but it is also the safest place for those threatened by the power and horror of chefs. In Kitchen Stadium, after all, chefs may be ceremonial masters at the start of things, bathed in cool light, standing like collectable dolls on platforms; they may get down and dirty and sweaty, and the camera may linger on their hands, their hair flopping in their faces, on the viscera cooking in their pans; but in the end, these double masters of absolute culture and absolute dirt must become supplicants. The gong sounds; the chefs stop cheffing; it is time to be judged.

And here is where the viewer, the would-be consumer of cheffy fare, gets his greatest sense of wish fulfillment: unlike the diner, who is wrestling with the unknown and with the weight of culture in his attempts to pronounce on or to refuse the chef’s fare, the judges decide, publicly, ringingly, right in front of the chefs, what is good and what is bad. The chef stands to the side while the panel samples his dishes. The judges are uncompromising; they are unsympathetic; they are expert, cultured, unassailable. The chef folds his hands, looks on nervously, babbles explanations and thank-yous, nods meekly at the most cutting criticism. He is no longer a treacherous god: just another contestant on another reality show, no better than the would-be designers on Project Runway or the wanna-be stars on American Idol or even the weepers on Hell’s Kitchen. His kitchen, the realm of his power and horror, disappears. There is only this judgment. He is criticized, lambasted, joked at, his work alternately praised and denigrated. And often, he fails. In this way, the viewer, the diner, is made safe again. The panel become his contingent of royal tasters; his voyeur’s-eye view of the ingredients gives him power over food and chef both; nothing is unknown, all is revealed.

Celebrity, then, works at once to create class for the chef and to fundamentally undermine it. Through the mechanism of looking, the viewer/diner at once celebrates the chef as a genius, an artist, a genuinely famous guy, and undermines him, puts him in his place. The camera, which brings the chef fame and fortune, removes the mystique of the swinging door; the chefly persona onscreen strips the chef of his putative class status, returns him to the realm of the people; and the unblinking eye of the media reveals the ordinary beneath the unknowable, untrustable stuff of haute cuisine, peers behind the curtain, reveals, Oz-like, the wizard behind the gears. And best of all, the cannibal act of celebrity is an act of immaculate consumption, leaving no funny taste in the mouth of the power and horror of the chef, the restaurant, the public act of eating.

Gwen Hyman and a panel of celebrity chefs will appear at the next Gastronomica Forum on October 28 at the Astor Center in New York City to discuss the issues raised in this article. See www.astorcenternyc.com or www.gastronomica.org for details.

NOTES


2. See Paul Youngquist, Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).


7. A goodly number of Romantic writers, in their work on food, vegetarianism, and eating—(John Frank Newton’s The Return to Nature (1811); William Lambe’s A Medical and Experimental Inquiry, into the Origin, Symptoms, and Cure of Constitutional Diseases. Particularly Sphatula, Consumption, Cancer, and Gout (1805); Percy Bysshe Shelley’s A Vindication of Natural Diet (1823); Joseph Ritson’s An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food, as a Moral Duty (1802); George Nicholson’s On Food (1803)—associated the eating of “low” peasant food, raw vegetables, and other rarities to the gentlemanly table not only with the politics of revolution and anticolonialism, but also with the search for a purer self, closer to nature, less corrupted by the world of business, industrialism, sophistication. This differentiation, of course, only reinforced the exalted status of the eaters. The introduction to Nicholson’s book, for example, is concerned with the distinction between “simple” and “complex” foods (simple being natural and, thus, much better). And this discussion is carefully calibrated in terms of social and economic structures. The author declares the ability to distinguish between these two dietary categories to be dependent on the class status of the potential consumer: as Timothy Morton explains, according to Nicholson, “[b]read, for example, saps ‘the nutritious properties of the gluten’….the desire for simplicity is not shared by the working class: ‘the vulgar’ have ‘prejudices’ for bread and ‘farinacea’ rather than whole-grain uses of the same plants” (p.17). It goes almost without saying that these poets and revolutionaries were men of wealth and privilege. See Morton’s Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) for an extended discussion of this issue.


9. In Food, the Body and the Self (London: Sage, 1996), Deborah Lupton notes, “[t]he sticky and the slimy are substances…that particularly threaten bodily integrity because of their ambiguity, their half-life between solids and fluids, the threat they pose of incorporating the self and dissolving boundaries…Substances of such consistency are too redolent of bodily fluids deemed polluting, such as saliva, semen, feces, pus, phlegm and vomit. Such bodily fluids create anxiety because of the threat they pose to self-integrity and autonomy. Body fluids threaten to engulf, to defile; they are difficult to be rid of, they seep and infiltrate. They challenge our desire to be self-contained and self-controlled…. So, too, foods that are of ambiguous texture or appearance evoke disgust” (pp.114–115).

10. In her reading of the character of Merdle in Dickens’s Little Dorrit, Houston aligns excrement with money in a capitalist system, asserting that capitalists “[confuse]…the alimental with the excremental” (p.134). See Houston’s Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens’s Novels (Champaign: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).