James Beard’s Early TV Work
A Report on Research

There he is, the consummate cooking instructor, combining professional poise (reflected in his confident manner and firmness of demonstration) with an air of whimsy and nonchalance (in one image a cigarette dangles insouciantly—even precariously—near the food he has prepared). These are rare, surviving publicity stills of James Beard in his 1946–1947 food program, *I Love to Eat*, one of the earliest regular cooking shows on American TV.¹ The historian scours their slight details for revelatory hints about this major culinary figure’s first forays into the new electronic mode of postwar popular culture. Given both Beard’s status as, in Betty Fussell’s phrase, one of the “Masters of American Cookery” (along with Julia Child, M.F.K. Fisher, and Craig Claiborne),² and television’s own status from the postwar moment on as the essential mass medium through which everyday Americans came increasingly to learn about cooking and culinary possibility, the history of Beard’s encounter with TV is worth ferreting out in the random traces that, tantalizingly for the researcher, remain.

Above: James Beard on the set of *I Love to Eat*, January 22, 1947.
Courtesy of NBC/Photofest © NBC

¹ There is no readily accessible reference to *I Love to Eat* on any of the major television history archives currently available online.°
² For a treatment of the cultural work performed by M.F.K. Fisher and Craig Claiborne, see san francisco journalist’s *Chez Nous: The Birth of American Food Writing* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998).
It was perhaps logical that, given his reputation among the New York culture crowd, James Beard would be sought out for the fledging medium of television. At some point in early 1946 the columnist and radio personality Charlotte Adams, some of whose recipes Beard had included with grateful acknowledgment in his 1941 book *Cook It Outdoors*, told him that WNBX, NBC’s television station in New York, wanted him to audition for on-air cooking demonstrations. These would be local broadcasts, as no stations had national reach at this time (WNBT did relay some of its programming to Schenectady and Philadelphia, but there is nothing to confirm whether Beard’s shows made it beyond the New York area). Beard’s successful tryout led to a series of televised cooking lessons, starting in 1946 as segments within broader home and lifestyle shows before turning into the stand-alone culinary offering *I Love to Eat*, which Beard hosted from late 1946 until its cancellation in 1947.

By the end of World War II Beard was already establishing for himself an important reputation in food circles in New York and beyond, and he might well have seemed a good personality for a local, urban, and urbane show about modern lifestyle. He had had a successful catering business that led to an influential network of well-placed contacts among appreciative customers and colleagues, and he had published three well-received cookbooks. In the books especially, Beard projects a distinctive and compelling voice in appreciating seasonal and regional food done well, without pretension, for pleasure as much as for sustenance.

That voice is on full display in the last cookbook Beard published before the war’s end, *Fowl & Game Cookery*. He declares that “It is with pleasure I look back on the experiences I have had with the simple regional foods, which are in reality functional foods, for they were the creations of limited larders and more limited supplies.” Here we witness both Beard’s emotional investment in the link between simple foods and good-tasting foods and his invocation of an authenticity of the local, which he embodies in appealing memories (“I look back on”) conveyed through folksy storytelling. The emphasis throughout is on a practice of
cookery in which general principles take backseat to the practical tasks at hand: preparing the meal and, just as important, enjoying it. In introducing a recipe for Creole Chicken from food columnist Anne Meredith, Beard boasts, “No theoretical recipes find their way into Anne’s column, no axes are ground about stupid fads that creep into the pleasant processes of eating and drinking and no pink and blue fussy things find their way there” (p.43). So much of Beard is in that one sentence: the assertion that the proof of gastronomy lies in the concrete rather than the conceptual (gastronomy is put to the test in the actual practices of cooking and pleasurable eating); the disdain for fads, dogmas, and fancy-schmancy doodads; the chatty matter-of-factness of style, which itself makes a claim for a vernacular cuisine and a vernacular way of talking about it. (Not that Beard wasn’t also capable of appreciating and propagandizing for a fancier gastronomy to give panache to American dishes. In Fowl & Game Cookery he recommends the proper French red wines to serve with indigenous American wild turkey.)

Can we venture any guesses as to how well Beard transferred his developing culinary voice to the then-new popular culture of television? While it has long been known that James Beard had some involvement in early television, it’s been assumed for almost as long that little to no historical traces remain of his efforts. Within the limits of the then-available sources, Beard biographer Robert Clark could do no more than say of Beard’s I Love to Eat that “Today there is no evidence that ‘I Love to Eat’ ever existed except for an index card in an NBC office at 30 Rockefeller Center…There are no kinescopes, scripts, or photos, and no one today recalls much about the program.”

In the following pages I want to report on what to my mind are two very exciting research finds, both from archival material at the Library of Congress (hereafter, LOC) that enable us to learn more about James Beard’s early television work. First, the Motion Picture Division of the LOC contains microfilms of what are alternately known as the NBC Master Books or Master Logs, which offer extensive accounts of many sequences from NBC shows from the immediate post-war period on. Dozens of descriptions exist for James Beard’s first television appearances in the 1940s. The logs offer two kinds of documentation. On the one hand, they outline how transitions from one show to the next—or from one segment of a show to the next—were to be orchestrated (which cameras would be called into play, which studios or sets the action would switch into, and so on). In this respect they seem to have served as guides to the production staff in how to get from one on-air moment to the next in the fraught period of live television. On the other hand, the logs are particularly detailed about the transitions into, and the language employed directly within, the commercial plugs for the various products that had to be hawked on the air. Here, one function of the logs may have been to maintain records of the commercials for the FCC if ever a question about sponsorship arose. They may also have documented for the sponsors themselves how their products were being presented. Unfortunately for the food historian, for those parts of a show where an expert simply presented his or her special topic and was not plugging a sponsor’s product, the logs offer minimal detail. In other words, the commercial plugs were scripted or transcribed in the logs, but not the body of instruction or information that was the show’s nominal core. Beard himself noted in an interview, “I ad-libbed everything, except the commercials,” and the logs offer little to no transcription of his culinary patter as he prepared this or that dish. Typically, where the logs go into detail for the moments when Beard plugged products, in his actual cooking demonstration they simply say things like “Beard mixes etc.” Some even leave blank the ingredients and recipe of the day, as if that content was a matter of indifference to the station. Beard could cook as he wanted and talk about it as he wanted, as long as he used the sponsors’ products and followed the script for the commercially important moments devoted to plugging them. The logs at least offer confirmation of something that all of Beard’s biographers note: namely, his readiness to turn himself easily and frequently into a commercial spokesperson when financial reward was promised.

The I Love to Eat logs are particularly telling, as Beard not only extols the products of the sponsor (Borden) but acts in fictional sketches about them. He constantly interrupts his cooking demonstrations to act out, with his guests, skits involving the sponsor’s products. These scenarios in the service of product promotion show the extent to which Beard played at cornball shtick for the sponsor’s benefit. To take just a few examples, in promoting Borden dairy products, Beard interacts with an animated puppet, goes to a fortune teller, introduces a little girl to a giant, invites a song-and-dance team into his kitchen (and gets caught up singing with them), hosts a food-themed game show, and surveys the latest in fashion. The latter episode is particularly revealing of the network’s attempt to frame Beard as an all-American guy and thereby target a male viewership as well as a female one, an issue we will return to later in this essay. Beard begins the commercial spot by telling the representative of the fashion industry who has come to visit his kitchen that he doesn’t have time to look at clothes. But when three beautiful young women in fashionable outfits poke their heads in, he eagerly gives them his attention.
Likewise, in the fortune-teller episode, Beard is excited when the fortuneteller says she sees in her crystal ball a star in his future whose initials are L. B. or L. T., since he thinks she means Lauren Bacall or Lana Turner. When he discovers that the initials stand for Borden’s El-sie (The Cow), he grows even more animated.

If the logs are sparse on the content of Beard’s actual cooking, another research find at the LOC enables us to fill in a bit of the absent material and catch Beard at work in the television kitchen. Specifically, the Recorded Sound Division of the LOC has the audio (but, unfortunately, not the video) for four cooking demonstrations by Beard on television shows between 1946 and 1947. As real-time recordings with no gaps, they let us hear Beard explaining his cooking methods and demonstrate the extent to which he was able to impart much of his own personality to television cooking, even as he did his best to meet the sponsors’ commercial needs.

As aural records only, without any visual content, the Beard audios (which appear to have come from the personal collection of a veteran NBC technician) ended up not, as might be expected, in the LOC’s Motion Picture Division, where television shows normally are deposited. The actual archival disposition of the audio tapes has long led Beard researchers, including myself, astray. When an enthusiast of early television, Bob Shagawat (to whom deepest thanks!), listed I Love to Eat on his television history Web site as one of the rare shows reputed to survive from the period, I pushed the research further and, with Bob’s input, discovered that the material had been collected in Recorded Sound. Recorded Sound has its own on-line catalogue, Sonic, which is not (yet) incorporated into the LOC’s general catalogue, which explains why no one who went looking for specifically televisual material for James Beard in the Motion Picture Division had had any luck.

NBC considers itself proprietary for all its shows at the LOC and allows no lending or reproduction, only on-site consultation at the Library. So I played around a little bit more with Sonic to see if there were other things worth listening to on a research trip to Washington. Finding Sonic listing for two episodes of I Love to Eat encouraged me to look up other cooking shows from the period, whether starring Beard or not. This led to a further set of discoveries: one episode of For You and Yours, a show that James Beard was known to have worked on before I Love to Eat; and two episodes of NBC’s earliest regular postwar television program, Radio City Matinee. Given Radio City Matinee’s common reputation as one of the earliest postwar shows to offer a cooking demonstration, I included its surviving episodes in my research plans even though Beard was not assumed by historians to have participated in it. When I was finally able to listen to the show at the LOC, I was in for a big surprise. Although historical references to Radio City Matinee assert that its on-camera cooking lessons were conducted by New York chef George Rector (former owner of the high society haunt Rector’s)—and, indeed, one of the two episodes did have Rector as chef—the other episode had James Beard doing the job, with indications that he had been appearing repeatedly on the show! A closer look at the Master Logs confirmed that Beard appeared as a regular cooking instructor on Radio City Matinee. In fact, Rector and Beard may have overlapped, each appearing on different days and times. So, not only did Beard have the first stand-alone cooking show on American television with I Love to Eat, but he was a regular participant in an earlier, key television program, Radio City Matinee.

While it is impossible to draw too many conclusions from a few audio tapes and incomplete transcripts as to what James Beard’s early television pedagogy may have been like, and while the broader absence of many other shows from the period makes risky any generalization of just how representative of then-typical television subject and style his efforts might have been, the existing show transcripts and audios offer a unique and tantalizing look at the early media activity of one of America’s most important cooking teachers. We see how Beard’s contributions on several shows and not just I Love to Eat were central to the first attempts by one fledging network, NBC, to articulate programming content and structure appropriate to the pedagogical and leisure needs of the nation as it emerged into new understandings of consumerism and gender relations. The broadcasts offer an unprecedented glimpse of Beard at work as public propagandist. To fill in this important and hitherto missing episode from his biography, a quick summary of Beard’s television trajectory is helpful.

1. Radio City Matinee: daytime magazine show broadcast once or twice a week. Cooking segments by George Rector and James Beard, with the show increasingly turning into an evening offering, despite its name. Runs from approximately April to May 1946.

2. For You and Yours: a renaming of the nighttime Radio City Matinee with Beard as its regular cooking expert. Runs until Fall 1946 with one episode per week.

3. I Love to Eat: a half-hour evening show broadcast once a week and devoted exclusively to Beard’s cooking demonstrations. Runs until early Spring 1947 with sponsorship by Borden. Birds Eye comes on as sponsor for a month and a half starting in April 1947. Then the show is canceled.
Radio City Matinee, the first show on which Beard appeared regularly, was one of—if not the—earliest examples of a genre that took inspiration from prior radio format. This format would proliferate in commercial television, especially in morning and daytime scheduling, as what came to be called the “magazine show.” Either a half-hour or hour in length, the magazine show, as its name suggests, is made up of individual segments, each on a particular topic and each understandable and consumable in and of itself. As commercial television started up in the postwar moment (or, to be more precise, restarted, since there had been sporadic experimentation through at least 1941 when the coming of war put other priorities on the table for mass-media industries), there was great uncertainty as to who would actually watch the new medium, in what ways, and to what end. One common assumption was that television would be a daytime medium for women in the domestic sphere, and the magazine show initially was targeted at them. The magazine show could be held up by the television industry as a salutary form for daytime viewers: on the one hand, the segmentation of the show into discrete bits meant that if a viewer missed this or that segment in order to fulfill household obligations, she would still have something to watch; on the other hand, unlike lighter diversions, many magazine-show segments would be devoted to laudable pedagogy in the workings of everyday life (from household hints to success in the social world) in ways that made viewing useful both for the housewife and for the family (husband, children), who would benefit from the housewife’s newfound skills. Although magazine shows might include fictionalized, acted segments, or moments of pure entertainment (musical acts especially), for the most part they were geared to practical advice. Radio City Matinee included, for instance, segments on fashion and hat buying, cultural events worthy of note, and home decoration and household maintenance. (One notable segment showed how to cultivate one’s artistic talents through painting lessons from instructor John Gnagy, who eventually became quite a famous television icon of the 1950s for his calm, quiet, do-it-yourself pedagogy.) While each segment of Radio City Matinee had its individual expert in charge, the flow of segments was handled by an announcer, Warren Hull, who was in proximity to the action and actually participated in some of the cooking demonstrations as a commentator and even taster.10

Radio City Matinee debuted as an afternoon offering on WNBT in early May 1946. The LOC has audio for an episode from May 31, 1946, with George Rector doing the cooking demonstration. But by the following week James Beard had fully replaced Rector. Significantly, during this time WNBT had been moving away from daytime programming to the evening, with the clear intent of appealing to male viewers as much as females. Some of Rector’s episodes but all of Beard’s were nighttime broadcasts.

Given the paucity of the surviving material, it is somewhat risky to make guesses as to why Beard replaced Rector. Was Rector showing signs of the illness that would lead to his death a year and a half later? Or was Beard deemed better for the broadening of audience that the switch to evening broadcasts was intended to encourage? Two of Beard’s three cookbooks from the period, Cook It Outdoors (1941) and Fowl & Game Cookery (1944), bore titles that spoke of a manly cooking, distinct from the feminized domesticity that the daytime Radio City Matinee had participated in. Perhaps the author of books with such manly titles was felt to be best for reaching an evening audience imagined to be primarily male in composition.

One particularly risky hypothesis is that Rector simply was judged to be not that good a television teacher. Not merely do we not have enough evidence to evaluate his performance (and, remember, the primary surviving record offers no visual traces), but in postwar television’s first years stations were pretty much lucky to have anything to put on at all (in fact, the scarcity of available content meant that many stations were off the air for much of the day). In general, quality of content or form was rarely an operative concept in the continuance or cancellation of a show.

In particular, as archivist and television historian Mike Mashon trenchantly argues in an essay on early NBC postwar television programming, parent company RCA saw its venture into television as an alibi to sell television sets and needed something—anything—to show on them. Mashon notes in passing that NBC did not even have a programming office or an established programming policy until 1947—a year after Rector and Beard’s efforts on Radio City Matinee. Prior to 1947 WNBT programming decisions were, as Mashon puts it, in “chaos,” and there were no clear-cut standards for what would make it on the air or not, what might get canceled or not.11

For what it’s worth, in listening to the one extant LOC recording of Rector’s television cooking on Radio City Matinee, I came across nothing that made me feel he wasn’t up to the task. Rector’s segment chronicles the making of Welsh Rarebit. He presents that dish as serving needs that many stations were off the air for much of the day). In general, quality of content or form was rarely an operative concept in the continuance or cancellation of a show.

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for the family, Radio City Matinee was participating as much in the soon-to-be-common postwar rhetoric of cooking as an activity of social advancement and status-building. For guests, Rector explains, not just any meal will do. There must be something special, something distinctive—and for that, the turn to things French is a logical recourse. Thus, the cheese Rector most recommends is Camembert. He notes how he had long been planning a cheese tour of Europe, which the war interrupted (France as the deferred dream of culinary excellence), and how he had won his wife-to-be’s heart when he served her Camembert and strawberries on their first date (France as the embodiment of an exoticized romanticism).

The one surviving James Beard episode of Radio City Matinee does not allow us to generalize too much, but it is safe to say that his appearance was clearly being demarcated from Rector’s earlier contribution. For example, Beard’s version had a jaunty musical theme all its own that remained with him through both For You and Yours and I Love to Eat. A branding of Beard was already at work. In Radio City Matinee he even uses the phrase that became his trademark expression for his later stand-alone show: “Yes,” he says as he introduces the culinary evening’s fare, “I love to eat.”

In the surviving episode of Radio City Matinee, dated June 5, 1946, Beard reminds viewers that in the previous broadcast he made a first course, then announces that he will now prepare the fish course, baked striped bass. He lists the ingredients (onions, parsley, lemon, olive oil, butter, white wine, salt, and pepper) and their amounts and then, as he says, gets to work. The pedagogy is direct, straightforward, and generally unfussy and functional: a process needs to be demonstrated, so his commentary is synched to the chronology of the recipe (although, already anticipating the ways in which later cooking programs up to the present use editing and preprepared dishes to cheat time’s inexorable unfolding, Beard mentions at one point that he took care to turn on the stove before the show started: “You didn’t see that little trick,” he brags).

But within the utilitarian demonstration of the cooking process, Beard is already stamping some of his own perspective and personality onto the food preparation. First, the recipe has somewhat French accents: Beard’s striped bass is not just a local foodstuff but one inflected by flavor enhancers (garlic and white wine) and by techniques (rubbing the skin and putting the enhancers under it) that are all about adding extra panache to a regional American cuisine that might offer the tasty simplicity of local foodstuffs but also ran the risk of blandness and regularity. Not for nothing had Fowl & Game Cookery devoted many of its recipes to offering variations on basic kinds of bird and game. Certainly, one needed to start with good, basic ingredients—and here Americans were blessed with the fundamental tastiness of their fowl and game—but one also needed to learn to create distinctiveness for these ingredients through a variety of methods and enhancements, often French in inspiration.

Beard valorizes local ingredients as imparting authentic flavor to a dish, and his vernacular pedagogy considers how distinctiveness of taste can be achieved through common ingredients and the use of everyday tools and kitchen items. (At one point Beard wryly instructs the viewer to close up the fish’s ventral cavity with “those delightful little kitchen gadgets called toothpicks.”) But even as Beard explains how to manipulate ordinary items in ways that add something extraordinary to anodyne table fare, he uses his television pedagogy as a means to introduce the audience to less well-known ingredients that can make American cuisine soar with gustatory delight. He recommends that viewers use not just any oil in the roasting pan but olive oil, which he has to present in the immediate postwar context as a foreign matter that “takes a little searching around town, under the Brooklyn Bridge and into Bleecker Street and other little crannies…but [is] worth the search.” That “into” speaks volumes: it makes the foray to this part of Greenwich Village an adventure, a voyage into an exotic locale. (Personally, as someone who currently lives on Bleecker Street and experiences its combination of older mom-and-pop stores, tourist traps offering ersatz renditions of the old Village, and gentrified boutiques—including one that sells high-end specialty olive oil—I find Beard’s construction of culinary exoticism waiting to be ferreted out particularly endearing.)

Beard also injects his own personality into the cooking lessons through his sheer command of the instruction. Ever the good teacher, he takes care to explain both the rationale behind the various steps of the recipe and the contribution each foodstuff makes to the dish overall (for example, onions stuffed into the chest cavity of the fish will impart a special flavor; any excess onion smell can be absorbed by parsley). He also makes typically Beardian declarations in favor of authenticity, as when he announces himself in favor of cooking the fish with its head on, since “the people who cook better than any other people, the Chinese and the French, always serve their fishes like this, and why not follow their example?”

Right: James Beard enjoys a smoke during the filming of I Love to Eat, September 1946.

 COURTESY OF NBC/PHOTOFEST © NBC
Most important, Beard adds a whimsy and affable jokiness of a sort that stayed with him throughout his life and that sometimes issues here in corny jokes and puns. When he stuffs an herb mix under chicken skin, he says that the recipe’s name should be “Chicken, I’ve got you under my skin.” As silly as some of his joking might be, it is of a piece with a deeply felt commitment to an idea and ideal of food—both its preparation and its consumption—as a source of pleasure. For all the functionality of his cooking demonstrations, Beard emphasizes that any concern with efficiency and expediency in the kitchen can never take place at the expense of gustatory joy: cooking is always about the delights of taste to be had. For instance, if butter is functionally important in lubricating the fish as it cooks, the “nuggets” are also about adding a luscious richness to the dish. Beard declares that although upcoming guest Charlotte Adams—who, remember, had originally found Beard for NBC and who had a famed interest in healthy cuisine—might “criticize me for using butter…I’ll still go on using it if I have go out and milk the cow and churn the butter myself.”

Ever the socialite man-about-town, Beard ends his Radio City Matinee episode about baked fish by saying that he can’t stick around. He instructs announcer Warren Hull on how to keep basting the dish with white wine until it is done. After Beard signs off, Hull brings the show to a close by reminding viewers that the following week Radio City Matinee will move back to a daytime schedule: “So get your girlfriends around the television and look for some new items on the Matinee,” he exhorts, suggesting that NBC still had a sense of television’s daytime role and was targeting a female demographic.

Although Radio City Matinee was already airing in the evening in the last sessions that George Rector participated in, Rector’s language still privileged the female viewer. His surviving episode opens with the somewhat contradictory salutation “Good evening, ladies, and lovers of good food and aren’t we all?” He later offers to send “any one of you ladies” a copy of the recipes from the show and signs off his segment by cheerfully boasting “This is to the ladies.”

In contrast, For You and Yours, the evening show’s new manifestation, was emphatically billed as “a program for the whole family,” and Beard engaged in an explicitly more-manly mode of cooking. While this new incarnation of Radio City Matinee was still a magazine show with virtually the same sorts of household hints and glimpses into the rich world of urban modernity that had defined its predecessor (and Warren Hull was still the announcer), Beard’s contribution was, significantly, singled out by Hull (who referred to him as “Jimmy Beard”) as the one segment that would offer “tips for men as well as women.” The masculine motif was carried over into Hull’s mention that the following week the show would not be aired, since WNET would be covering a Joe Louis boxing match at Yankee Stadium.

For all the gendered stereotypes of the kitchen in a period that we now think of as the burgeoning of “the Feminine Mystique,” there was a concerted attempt to imagine that cooking could be a man’s job as well. The cliché of the Sunday barbecue in which men would reunite with the primitive power of fire was only the extreme version of this mythologizing of the male cook and, as Kathleen Collins shows in her comprehensive history of cooking shows on television, the 1950s would offer up many male culinary teachers along with the female home economists.11 James Beard, two of whose 1940s books had extolled manly arts of grilling, game cooking, and butchering, was well poised to enter into this movement, even to be one of its progenitors. His patter for the surviving episode of For You and Yours is peppered with comments on the ostensible superiority of men in the kitchen. Beard’s address to the men presented them as not fussy or fastidious or afraid to get physical with food. When he tells how to make a herb-and-butter blend to go on and under the skin of chicken, he recommends mixing it all up and slathering it with the hands, noting that “the female contingent is always afraid to get the fingers into the slurp as it were,” whereas “the male cook will get in and push the flesh from the skin with fingers.” Likewise, when offering suggestions on how to plate the chicken for serving, Beard notes that “men are a much better bunch of decorators than women” (perhaps some of Beard’s queer identity does manage to get through NBC’s attempt to frame Beard’s show as manly offerings for a manly audience!), since men decorate tastefully and in expeditious fashion. Beard concludes, men “always manage to do things faster and they don’t put little slices of lemon with little bits of slurt [sic], this and that on them.”

One interesting conceit in the surviving James Beard episode of For You and Yours involves a fictionalized frame story for his cooking demonstration. Beard feigns the arrival of guests, whom he refers to as the “hurry-up people,” and thereby invests in a mythic narrative that was to become ever more recurrent in postwar American culture: the unexpected or last-minute dining drop-in, whose impending intrusion into the space of domesticity confirms that postwar cookery was not just a family affair but an act of socializing, and how much that socializing reflected societal pressures of social status and advancement. The extreme version of this mythology is the motif of the boss brought home.
at the last minute by an employee who needs his spouse to make a great meal that will land him a raise. It is doubtful that there were many career paths actually decided in this fashion, but the widespread and persistent nature of the motif (see, for instance, Bewitched from the 1960s, where Samantha has to decide whether or not to use magic each time Darren brings boss Larry over) suggests that, however frivolous it seems, this narrative caught something symptomatic about middle-class insecurity in the long postwar period.

The Master Logs reveal that fictional frames within which Beard’s cooking demonstrations took place became even more pronounced in the surviving episodes of I Love to Eat. In both surviving audios of the show other actors appear as characters who interact with Beard in imagined contexts: in an episode dated October 25, 1946, Beard is visited by a deliveryman, George, who watches Beard’s dessert demonstration and takes a phone call for him; in an episode dated January 24, 1947, Beard pretends to be cooking at a ski chalet for friends Gloria and Ray, who return from the slopes wanting a good hearty meal (another version of the “hurry-up” people). The ski chalet episode goes so far as to segue from a reportage of current, actual snow conditions, so that Beard’s fictionalized cooking demonstration pretends to flow naturally from the nonfictional segment that precedes it.

Most immediately, the presence of the other characters transforms the cooking demonstrations into direct dramatizations of pedagogy. As Beard moves through his steps, his fellow characters ask questions of varying degrees of ignorance, thereby enabling him to become all the more an instructor in the fine art of culinary preparation (and also enabling a personified intimacy, as he doesn’t have to talk just to the impersonal lens of the camera). The male characters in both episodes also add a degree of comic relief: George the deliveryman by taking on the role of New York wisenheimer complete with Brooklyn accent, and Ray by being both a kitchen naif and by assuming the stock image of the energetic male hungry for hearty fare.

Perhaps, too, the dramatizations allowed Beard to find a new venue for talents he had hoped to exploit in the stage career that he had obsessed about in previous decades. From early on Beard had wanted to be an actor, and he always infused theatricality into his public modes of being. While it is hard to offer an objective vocabulary to analyze as well as assess acting, and while the absence of visuals makes any evaluation tentative, my own sense is that what Beard offers in his culinary dramatizations is very much a performance, explicitly rendered with willfully exaggerated asides, overly meticulous enunciation, intonational flourishes, pregnant pauses, and melodramatic declamations. If bad puns are one way for Beard to make cooking pedagogy fun, so too is the rendition of the kitchen set as a theater for his enthusiastic verbal and physical performance.

The presence of the other characters in dramatized scenarios additionally naturalizes the many commercial plugs for Borden products by making them seem to emerge logically from the story. Indeed, the fictionalized sketches may have been intended to counter some of the more direct plugs for Borden, which seem awkward, to say the least. For instance, in discussing peach melba in a segment on fruit desserts, Beard pedagogically clarifies the invention of the dish (Escoffier made it in honor of famed singer Madame Melba) but then, anachronistically, declares it “a pity Madame Melba never knew about Borden’s Ice Cream.” More generally, virtually every mention of a dairy item has “Borden’s” inserted before it.

Alongside these more jarring intrusions of the commercial imperative into the show, the episodes of I Love to Eat use acted scenes as another means by which commercial messages entered into the flow of the story in somewhat more integrated fashion. Here, the strategy was to exploit the fictional framework of characters naturally interacting with one another by having the sponsor’s products show up in their supposedly everyday conversation. I Love to Eat’s manner of doing this still seems forced and suggests that, in the case of this show at least, early television had not fully worked out the relation of salesmanship to showmanship. Thus, in the episode with deliveryman George, the phone rings. Beard, busy with food prep, asks George to get it. Elmer the Bull (husband to mascot Elsie) turns out to be on the line, with marketing ideas for the series—such as a juggler juggling the full line of Borden products, each enumerated with loving attention! At this point Beard gets on the phone to talk to Elsie, who introduces an Andrews Sisters–like song about the wonders of Borden products, a mode of advertising that Beard much prefers to the juggler. In the episode with Ray and Gloria, Beard takes Ray aside to recount a dream in which he began hearing strange voices, including that of Elsie herself, who seemed unhappy perhaps because, as Beard recounts, he may have not mentioned “her Borden family of fine foods,” a lapse he was now making up for by that very mention. (The Master Log for the episode indicates that all the product names were to appear one by one over Beard’s pensive image.) A thanks you then appeared in the form of a note from Elsie that came crashing through the chalet window: “Sorry to break your window but I wanted to be sure you get this. Your
show, Mr. Beard, rates five bells. Here’s what it obviously tells. Why with one great big look, we could tell you’re a cook and like Borden’s you’re good, Mr. Beard.”

But even such constant plugging apparently did not do the trick: Borden eventually decided to stop its sponsorship of the series, and Birds Eye Frozen Foods took over briefly as sponsor before the show (now renamed Birds Eye Open House after a radio show of the same name, and turned back into a magazine show with Beard hosting one segment alone) ended up being canceled sometime in 1947. General television viewership was quite low before the TV-set buying boom that started in 1948, and national sponsors were capricious advertisers, since they were not yet convinced that television got their message across to the right number of potential buyers.

Biographer Robert Clark claims that the problem for I Love to Eat was that James Beard did not take well to the medium of television: “Despite his theatrical bent, Beard was never totally at ease on television; his bald head lit badly, and the practiced geniality of his usual demeanor seemed somehow tense and aloof.” But is impossible to know if this assertion can be credited (although it is amusing to note that one NBC staffer from the early television days, famed makeup artist Dick Smith, claims that one of his assigned tasks was to pencil in hair impressions on James Beard's scalp!). As I indicated earlier, quality (or lack thereof) in a show was not generally a determining factor in what was put on or yanked off the air.

What we can say is that at their best, the James Beard audios are a fascinating glimpse into a curious, halting moment in the history of television. They offer new, admittedly sketchy yet tantalizing insights about Beard’s own pioneering participation in the medium. Their discovery confirms that there can still be consequential finds in television history; it is my hope that the present essay will spur further forays into the archives.

NOTES

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1. Questions of “first-ness” are quite vexed for the early history of television. Records are sparse, documentation and scholarship are inconsistent and even contradictory, memories are fuzzy and fleeting. I Love to Eat has been claimed as television’s first cooking show, but there is some evidence that other, vanished series preceded it. During the war, for instance, programming that offered instruction in occupational therapy was piped into VA hospitals. It likely included cooking shows, since some journalists mentioned these as examples of programming that they hoped would not fill up the airwaves in the promising postwar moment. Similarly, a book on television published in 1945 in the transition to postwar conditions, makes explicit reference to several cooking demonstrations that aired on General Electric’s local Schenectady station, WGBH, during the war, including a series of four installments in which Consuelia Kelly “prepared a full meal right in front of the cameras.” See Judy Dupuy, Television Show Business (Schenectady, NY: G.S., 1945), 74.


3. James Beard, Fowl & Game Cookery (New York: M. Barrows and Co., 1944), 78. Further references in text.

4. Robert Clark, The Solace of Food: A Life of James Beard (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 122. In fact, supposed details about the show do creep into this or that account of Beard’s life, although their source is rarely given, so it is easy to harbor doubts about their reliability. The accounts begin with Beard’s own autobiography, which offers several anecdotes about the show: that on one episode, dripping grease set a barbecuing turkey on fire; that twenty-six men from Peekskill, New York, wrote in to say that they had been regular viewers of the boxing matches that aired just before I Love to Eat and had become so enamored of the cooking show that it had become a regular part of their communal viewing; that 22 Club co-proprietor Clint shows him in a flannel shirt filmed against a wood-paneled and somewhat rustic-looking background.

5. Significantly, the logs indicate that Beard’s cooking demonstrations were filmed with two cameras, which enables us to make some guesses about the look of his programs, based on the typical visual style of later, probably comparable, cooking shows. Generally, the first of the two on-set cameras would be devoted primarily to views of the overall scene and to full-bodied shots, while the second was intended to be available to catch details, partial views, and close-ups. While either camera was filming, the other could be jockeyed into a new position, or the lens on it changed for a different view of the action.

Even though the multi-camera method was typical of much television production at this time and had to do primarily with a perceived need for visual diversity, this system seems particularly appropriate for a cooking show. The content of the cooking show has to do, after all, with a human agent interacting with foodstuffs that will undergo dramatic transformations. It therefore seems logical to have a shooting style that in real time and respecting chronology can alternate full-body images of the cook in all his or her personality with closer shots of manual technique. In the case of Beard’s shows there would be increasing emphasis on guest appearances and on cutaways from the cooking demonstration to act commercials for the sponsor’s products. These shifts from the culinary action itself to new business going on around it would be facilitated by cutting from one camera to the other. Sometimes a third camera, used also to film titles, was brought in for cutaways from the cooking itself.

6. Before 1948, when television really began to take off as a mass medium, the interactions of stations with sponsors were sporadic and irregular. There was great uncertainty as to the future of the medium—who would watch it and to what extent and to what effect—which translated into hesitation and inconsistency on the part of all interested parties. In an oft-cited essay in television studies, James Hay examines Sponsorship for Sponsors’ Products on early television and argues that what would become the dominant mode in the achieved age of the
big networks—namely, commercials inserted between segments of a show but clearly demarcated from them—was preceded by attempts to blur the boundaries between program content and its commercials by weaving products into the body of the show itself. See James Hay, “Rereading Early Television Advertising,” *Journal of Film and Video* 41:1 (Spring 1989): 4–20. Beard’s demonstrations often directly interweave product plugs into the culinary content, with no clear demarcation between pedagogy and advertising. But Hay’s examples are all drawn from slightly later years, so it is impossible to determine whether the mode of blended commercialism that Beard came to adopt was typical of other programs in 1946–1947. In fact, before food companies came to single out his cooking demonstrations for sponsorship, the earliest shows on which Beard appeared seem to have had no commercials within the show but only during the breaks from one show to the next on the day’s schedule.

7. Interview in *Gastronome*, 18.

8. I owe the lead to the Master Logs to media historian James L. Baughman, who offered advice based on his own groundbreaking research on television in the postwar period.


12. Over the first decades of the twentieth century Greenwich Village had garnered a widespread reputation, promulgated in large part through mainstream media, as the ultimate incarnation of a bohemian lifestyle in America. As a tourist destination the Village beckoned ordinary citizens into urban otherness. For useful historical studies see, for instance, Jan Seidler Ramirez, “The Tourist Trade Takes Hold,” in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, ed. Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz (New Brunswick, Nj: Rutgers University Press, 1997): 371–391; and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 227–244. As Chauncey notes, Italian food outlets were key to the elaboration of the Greenwich Village mythology (hence, it makes sense that Beard would have referred to it as the place for olive oil). We can see the investment of 1940s popular imagination and mass culture in this exoticizing mythology in such films as the eponymous 1944 musical *Greenwich Village*, or the horror-thriller *The Seventh Victim*, in which the heroine takes lodging with an Italian couple who own a red-sauce restaurant frequented by the Greenwich Village bohemian crowd. Interestingly, the husband-owner of the restaurant is played by Chef Giuseppe Milani, who would go on to have his own, very successful TV cooking show in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

