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Making change in the kitchen? A study of celebrity cookbooks, culinary personas, and inequality



Josée Johnston*, Alexandra Rodney, Phillipa Chong

University of Toronto, Department of Sociology, 725 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2J4, Canada

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate how cultural ideals of race, class and gender are revealed and reproduced through celebrity chefs' public identities. Celebrity-chef status appears attainable by diverse voices including self-trained cooks like Rachael Ray, prisoner turned high-end-chef Jeff Henderson, and Nascar-fan Guy Fieri. This paper investigates how food celebrities' self-presentations – their culinary *personas* – relate to social hierarchies. Drawing from literature on the sociology of culture, personas, food, and gender, we carry out an inductive qualitative analysis of celebrity chef cookbooks written by stars with a significant multi-media presence. We identify seven distinct culinary personas: *homebody*, *home stylist*, *pin-up*, *chef-artisan*, *maverick*, *gastrosexual*, and *self-made man*. We find that culinary personas are highly gendered, but also classed and racialized. Relating these findings to the broader culinary field, we suggest that celebrity chef personas may serve to naturalize status inequities, and our findings contribute to theories of cultural, culinary and gender stratification. This paper supports the use of “persona” as an analytical tool that can aid understanding of cultural inequalities, as well as the limited opportunities for new entrants to gain authority in their respective fields.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 905 569 4282; fax: +1 416 978 3963.

E-mail addresses: josee.johnston@utoronto.ca (J. Johnston), ali.rodney@mail.utoronto.ca (A. Rodney), phillipa.chong@utoronto.ca (P. Chong).

1. Introduction

In 2012, *Forbes* magazine published its list of top-earning chefs, and it included a range of voices: white men like Gordon Ramsay (#1), Wolfgang Puck (#3), and Bobby Flay (#9) overpopulated the list, but two self-trained, white women were notably present – Rachael Ray (#2) and Paula Dean (#4). Esteemed Japanese chef, Nobu Matsuhisa (#8), also made the list, as did the working-class champion of diner food and greasy-spoons, Guy Fieri (#10) (Vorasarun, 2008). The presence of female, working class, and ethno-racial minority figures seems significant, even though we know that fame and wealth cannot be simply equated with high status in the food world. Emeril Lagasse's and Guy Fieri's populist appeal may have made them a lot of money, but has also made them clear targets for food critics (e.g., Salkin, 2013, pp. 192–93; Wells, 2012). Still, the highbrow/lowbrow, male/female convergence on the *Fortune* list suggests the continued importance of investigating the range of cultural inequality and hierarchy in the realm of food culture. Along with other scholars, we question whether we are witnessing a new area of culinary (and cultural) democracy in which the stereotypical white male French-trained chef no longer dominates, and new voices (e.g., fans of streetfood) gain culinary authority in the field (Johnston and Baumann, 2007, 2010; Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). Sociological research suggests that although the traditional boundary between high- and low-brow culture is weakening, status hierarchies persist (Johnston and Baumann, 2007, 2010; Ollivier, 2008; Peterson, 2005). We know that even in an omnivorous era, the cultural products of some groups are valued more than others, reflecting hierarchies of class, race and gender. Certain cultural producers continue to be disadvantaged by the fact that critics, peers, and other key agents evaluate work based on race and gender characteristics, thereby creating inequality in cultural fields (e.g., Binder, 1993; Donze, 2011; Hyman, 2008; Li, 1994; Schmutz, 2009; Schmutz and Faupel, 2010).

Food celebrities – also known as celebrity chefs¹ – are relevant to a study of cultural personas and status inequality for several reasons. *First*, food celebrities have gained tremendous cultural influence (e.g., Bell and Hollows, 2011; Rousseau, 2012; Powell and Prasad, 2010), and persona-based brands dominate the food market. The number of persona-based culinary brands, including cooking personalities like Nigella Lawson and Gordon Ramsay who have achieved celebrity status, has doubled since 2008 and produces upwards of \$4 billion in annual revenue (Hale, 2010; Hewer and Brownlie, 2009). *Second*, although food celebrities have varied culinary expertise, virtually all of them adapt recipes for the home cooking market through their cookbooks and television shows. This constancy across platforms allows us to take a look at more nuanced expressions of status distinctions between personalities. *Third*, the boundaries of the food world are marked by permeability: between high and low cuisine, between professional chef denizens and home-cooking experts, and between men and women (Swinbank, 2002; Powell and Prasad, 2010). More women are entering the world of professional cooking and, at least on the media stage, some men have entered home-kitchens (Hollows, 2003b; Swinbank, 2002). Although food television has been critiqued for its whiteness (e.g., Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012, p. 42), other work suggests that the depiction of racialized personalities is an important new development, although not beyond reproach (e.g., Cruz, 2013). As culinary boundaries shift, one might question the extent to which food celebrities are evolving to reflect equitable – or perhaps, essentialized – opportunities for participation.

To understand the significance of food celebrities, we begin the paper by theorizing the culinary persona and provide a brief accounting of relevant trends in the culinary field. We then report on the findings of our systemic interpretive analysis of persona-driven cookbooks, and identify seven distinct culinary personas: *homebody*, *home stylist*, *pin-up*, *chef-artisan*, *maverick*, *gastrosexual*, and *self-made man*. To foreshadow our findings, we argue that (1) culinary personas are highly gendered and organized around the traditional sexual division of labor and a split into market and nonmarket work; (2) feminine personas circumscribe their culinary expertise to the domestic sphere, effectively feminizing their cultural authority as devolved from unpaid foodwork; (3) masculine personas employ a wider range of discourses to legitimize their value as cultural producers both inside and outside of the professional kitchen; and (4) class and race-based distinctions intersect with gender to further

¹ The term “celebrity chef” is often used to refer to both professional (credentialed) and amateur chefs who have become both a resource and a source of entertainment for everyday homecooks (Rousseau, 2012).

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