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Fraught contexts and mediated culinary practices: Ontological practices and politics

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“The modern world is a ‘runaway world’: not only is the pace of social change much faster than in any prior system, so also is its scope, and the profoundness with which it affects pre-existing social practices and modes of behaviour.” (Giddens, 1991, p.16).

“Unable to slow the mind-boggling pace of change, let alone to predict and control its direction, we focus on things we can, or are assured that we can influence: we try to calculate and minimize the risk that we personally, or those nearest and dearest to us at that moment, might fall victim to the uncounted and uncountable dangers which the opaque world and its uncertain future are suspected to hold in store for us.” (Bauman, 2010, p.11).

“I’m so excited that you’re stepping into the world of 15-minute meals the promise of this book is simple: delicious, nutritious, super-fast food that’s a total joy to eat and perfect for busy people like you and me.” (Oliver, 2012, p.8)

Introduction

This paper stages anew a set of ideas made over a series of papers on the importance of food and cooking as a site for the understanding of contemporary practices (Brownlie and Hewer, 2007, 2010, 2011; Brownlie, Hewer & Horne, 2005). Practice theory is currently on trend, a ready-made staple to restate the importance of social theory for the understanding of contemporary contexts. A key theorist of practice is Pierre Bourdieu, but theories of practice transcend Bourdieu and can also be traced to alternative sources. This paper reviews the work of such alternative sources namely Giddens (1991) and de Certeau (1984, 1998) to explore the key insights which such works deliver. The paper seeks to explore the value of a turn to celebrity chefs to better understand the forms of worlding which they offer up. In this manner it considers celebrity chefs as cultural intermediaries which are worthy of analysis for the cultural tales and myths which they offer up for rethinking practices, routines and conventions. More so it suggests that part of their appeal lies within the cultural responses they articulate and make explicit to the shifting and troublesome contexts we inhabit.

The landscape of global culinary culture shifts and turns with rapid abandon; cooking has always been big business and a thoroughly mediated experience at that. A while back we wrote

of walking into a bookshop (Brownlie et al, 2005), now a tour of the mega-mall that is Amazon is more likely, or clicking on an app through which we can glimpse and buy into all manner of culinary delights brought to life through the efficiencies and affordances of technology. TV programming has moved on too, from the Food Network with its staple of *30 Minutes Meals* to *Quick Fix Meals* to the UK 8 O'clock slot with tales of *Masterchewing* to the domestic pleasures of the *Great British Bake Off*. Cooking is a screened spectacle at its most rhythmic; televisual, performed and choreographed to keep at bay and ameliorate the troubles of contemporary living: of emerging wars on the horizon, of civil unrest, racial tensions and the streets ablaze with disaffection and disbelief, of the squeezed middle, of class wars around culture, of pay freezes and food bank living, of poverty and domestic abuse on the rise. Food programming in such troubled contexts has a necessary predictability and familiar rhythm to its screened pleasures and fictions. *Bad News*, as the Glasgow group of media studies once termed this phenomenon, opens up a space for compensation and respite. To take seriously what Silverstone terms the *mediation of everyday life*: "...the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life" (2007, p.109). In this manner, if the cookbooks of yesteryear (Brownlie et al, 2005) were about stylization over substance, or what Cappellini and Parsons (2014) term 'stylish food for all', cookbooks and their multiple appeals must take on a number of emergent and compelling forms to stage anew audience appeal in increasingly fraught contexts. This chapter seeks to outline some of those appeals.

Screening the Practice of the Meal

The practice of the meal is thoroughly medialised (Halkier, 2012), to draw our attention to the importance of representations, images and their canned delights and to better understand them, not as mere froth or necessary distractions and fictions but as critical for understanding people's relations with themselves and each other. Perhaps the most obvious, is the cult of personality and celebrity that has always been paramount in the world of TV chefs. Think only of the machismo of Gordon Ramsay, the laddishness of early Jamie Oliver (Brownlie, Hewer & Horne 2005), or the beauty and allure of Nigella Lawson (Brownlie and Hewer 2010). The screen grants such mortals presence, charismatic authority and the promise of imagined worlds of consumption for us all to dwell within if only for an hour or less. But, in a world of austerity where the clamouring pressures of duty and responsibility reign supreme such baubles of affectation, such images of taste and status, can however quickly lose their appeal so tales must be rethought, respun and recrafted to take account of changing circumstance, import and context. Such changes hint at what Giddens refers to as "deeply structured changes in the tissue of everyday life" (1991, p.17). From the moment of stylized cheffing to a counter-world of provisioning; caught in this shift are the supermarkets that are quickly losing their appeal (e.g. Tesco, Sainsbury's), and the switch to price consciousness where the likes of Lidl, Aldi and

the newly revamped Netto¹ speak of contrasting market solutions in a climate in which pressure drops are all too necessary. From appearances and the stylisation of tv chefs in culinary contexts to a renewed faith in necessity and austerity at all costs. Supermarket loyalty is therefore recalibrating and notions of loyalty on the wane; why be loyal in a world that lacks commitment; price comparisons are everywhere and now shopping around for whatever recipes life has to offer is on trend and encouraged by the supermarkets themselves. For as Giddens suggested: “Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question, ‘How shall I live?’ has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat – and many other things – as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity.” (1991, p.14). By this token, cultural intermediaries such as celebrity chefs while easy to dismiss as irrelevant to the rituals and conventions of food as lived (Marshall, 2005) might be worth revisiting for the cultural tales and myths which they offer up for rethinking practices, routines and conventions; for understanding, the shift in focus from the festive and celebratory to the everyday and mundane.

Save, Save, Save new routes for a saved life: Need for Money, Time & Speed

“Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one’s election.” (Weber, 2007, orig. 1930, p.104)

If price comparisons are everywhere, the second coming will also be better achieved with a need for speed and the holy grail of saving kitchen time. Grasping time, saving it, regaining it and losing it has always been an existential concern but also a device through which cookbooks can potentially stand out in cluttered markets of choice. For Weber (2007, orig. 1930), our relationship with time was a critical ingredient of the spirit of capitalism as expressed through our everyday conduct in modern culture. This was most clearly articulated in the writings of the puritans such as Benjamin Franklin where ‘Time was money’, so that saving time became a route to salvation and the sense of one’s own election. Money, time and kitchen life thus have a certain elective affinity.

The message that saving time is all important can also be gleaned from a quick tour of contemporary cookbooks. Think here of the cookbooks which advertise themselves on the basis of quick-and-easy solutions to tribulations and trials of the everyday. Austerity thus speaks of time paucity as much as financial fasting and the knowing feeling of indebtedness. Survival strategies for contemporary living thus centre on the home front and its ethos of time-space reorganization. The best starting place for such an argument to be staged is a return to the more recent books published by Jamie Oliver (2012, 2013). Brand Oliver is now worth an estimated £150 million and employing 7,000 people worldwide (Frith, 2014), with its own philosophy and ethos on contemporary life; and in his 2013 offering *Save with Jamie: Shopping Smart*,

¹ Lidl, Aldi and Netto are discount supermarkets in the UK whose fortunes have seen an upturn in the current economic climate. Celebrity TV Chef Nick Nairn has in this regard endorsed Lidl and its products (see <https://vimeo.com/29956735>).

Cooking Clever, Waste Less (2013) the ontological concerns of the everyday are updated and revised:

“Jamie gets the nation cooking clever, shopping smart and wasting less with his new cookbook, ‘Save with Jamie’. This year, I’ve got the message loud and clear that as everyone comes under bigger and bigger financial pressure, they want help to cook tasty, nutritious food on a budget, so this book was born completely out of public demand. Save with Jamie draws on knowledge and cooking skills to help you make better choices, showing you how to buy economically and efficiently, get the most out of your ingredients, save time and prevent food waste. And there’s no compromise - I’m talking big flavours, comfort food that makes you happy, and colourful, optimistic dishes. Our biggest luxury is knowledge, whether times are hard or not, so get kitchen smart and smash the recession.”(Oliver, 2013, backpage).

The ethos of saving time is on the rise with shopping that is smart and convenient the only way forward. Saving time or what Miller (2009) refers to as ‘buying time’ is that most ontological of concerns, reminding us as Giddens (1991) suggested that identity work ‘unfolds temporally’ so that nobody can remain immune to its pressures, exigencies and passing. Brand Oliver and its characteristic brand imaginary does not fail in this regard with two recent offerings which address and speak to such doubts over time-scarcity and the lack of time we continue to experience. Here the USP of a celebrity brand can often be understood in relation to its ability to ameliorate, if only symbolically and in the final instance, the contradictions and tensions of contemporary living: or as Brand Oliver prefers: “15-Minute Meals is a frame of mind...It’s fun, dynamic, non-nonsense cooking.” (2012, p.10). Here the difference between market failure or market success is best marked by the ability to disturb and unsettle the culinary everyday. The dialectic of the celebrity chef brandscape speaks of and through macro forces, changing contexts of austerity and the practices of *shopping smart* and *cooking clever* to hail an audience as ‘busy people’. Fast food is the not the only game in town, but the importance of cooking time proves that Brewis and Jack hit the nail on the head when they suggested that the motto of ‘faster, faster’ (2005, p.64), or as I prefer the *need for speed* ethic, was emerging as a key cultural sensibility². Life is now lived in metered terms, the metrics of performance surround us all so that merely drifting, simply doing nothing, or wasting time are unsustainable in the short-term for the long haul. Take *Jamie’s 15 minute meals* (2012) or *Jamie’s 30 minute meals* (2010) which tackle these issues head on, or as the blurb for 30 minutes reveals:

“The 50 brand-new meal ideas in this book are exciting, varied and seasonal. They include main course recipes with side dishes as well as puddings and drinks, and are all meals you’ll be proud to serve your family and friends. Jamie has written the recipes in a way that will help you make the most of every single minute in the kitchen. This book is as practical as it is beautiful, showing that with a bit of preparation, the right equipment and some organization, hearty, delicious, quick meals are less than half an hour away. With the help

² A tour (22.06.2015) of UK retailer WHSMITH’s, also reveals that other (male) celebrity chefs have also responded to this call for speed and time-shifting through fast food. For example: Gordon Ramsay’s *Fast Food: Recipes from the ‘F’ Word* (2009); James Martin *Fast Cooking: Really exciting recipes in 20 minutes* (2013); Nigel Slater *Eat: The little book of fast food* (2013).

of Jamie Oliver and Jamie's 30-Minute Meals, you'll be amazed by what you're able to achieve."

The art of organization, preparation and reorganization thus come to the fore in our efforts to save those most scarce of commodities in contemporary living: time and money. Brownlie, Hewer & Horne (2005) hinted at this dynamic within the Brand Oliver narrative when they glimpsed the forms of calculative rationality at work to argue that a particular form of lifestyling and stylisation of life was being practiced and offered up in the early incarnation of the *Naked Chef*. But times change, cultural moods shift and a celebrity chef looking for continued market success over market failure in *Liquid Times* (Bauman, 2010) must always be alert to such changes, ready to rethink its positioning, ready to reimagine itself and its recipes for living if it is to stay relevant and on trend. For as sociologists, have revealed the 'harried' consumer confronting a 'time squeeze' are often looking for 'time-shifting devices' (Warde, 1999, p.522; see also Southerton 2003).

Celebrity chefs appear to answer this call. In this regard, recipes for time-shifting come in a range of shapes and sizes but easy solutions for tricky dilemmas and the erasure of ontological insecurities will always resonate. For as Giddens suggested: "The maintaining of habits and routines is a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties, yet by that very token it is a tensionful phenomenon in and of itself." (1991, p.39). The screening of the practice of the meal and its associated cooking practices thus speaks to forms of 'emotional inoculation against existential anxieties – a protection against future threats and dangers which allows the individual to sustain hope and courage' (Giddens, 1991, *ibid*). That is how practices, routines and conventions while appearing fixed and timeless, resistant and immutable remain open to the exigencies of shifting contexts, especially when those contexts speak of new forms of vulnerability and poverty and the necessity for forms of pressured release. For, as Cappellini and Parsons suggest, such texts remain critical for identity projects so that their performative and transformative potential must alert us to their functions as 'living things' (2014, p.93).

For Simmel, the sociological significance of the meal expresses itself through the social interactions it offers up, that is: "the meal becomes a sociological matter, [when] it arranges itself in a more aesthetic, stylized and supra-individually regulated form...specifically with regard to the *form* of its consumption." (1997, p.131). Celebrity chefs by this reckoning stylise and aestheticize the mundane and the everyday, market success resides in their ability to re-enchant mundane consumption through the cultural forms they bring to reshaping markets in their own image. To valorise everyday practices and routines remains their goal, to anchor and make meaningful such practices and routines. In this respect it is no coincidence that *saving money and time* and *buying time* are embedded in their logic and market appeal as these remain essential ingredients to the spirit of capitalism in its modern form. For, as Giddens suggested: "creativity as a routine phenomenon is a basic prop to a sense of personal worth and therefore to psychological health." (1991, p.41). Well-being and personal transformation in the domestic space of the kitchen are part and parcel of this new recipe for living, and such forms of *hoping* and *feeling* converge with the will for market and brand success.

It was Erving Goffman who in *Gender Advertisements* (1979) best captured this spirit and logic, when he suggested that: “Advertisers conventionalise our conventions, stylise what is already stylisation, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual contours. Their hype is hyper-ritualisation” (1979, p.84). The logic of hyper-ritualisation appears to be at work when we seek to explain the logic and appeal of celebrity brands, easy to discount as trivial, easy to dismiss as illusions and fantasy beyond the real stuff of everyday life and ritual, but significant perhaps in explaining the culinary imaginary at work through representations and performance. That is how practice demands a *modus operandum*, a recipe for living, if it is to make sense and become common sense widely distributed and available for all. More so, as Schatzki (2001) revealed practices are best understood as a set of actions, so that folded within practices are states of one’s life as expressed as “one’s ongoing involvement in the world” and contained with this orientating are notions of “desiring, hoping, feeling, believing, expecting, seeing”. (2001, p.48).

It is perhaps in this manner that we should understand such shifting representations around cooking practices for nestled within such images and culinary tales lies a shifting politics of ontology. Law and Benschop (1997) when discussing *ideas of difference* are more explicit on this performative quality when they suggest: “To represent is to perform. To represent is to generate distributions...To represent is to narrate, or to refuse to narrate. It is to perform, or to refuse to perform, a world of spatial assumptions populated by subjects and objects. To represent thus renders other possibilities impossible, unimaginable. It is in other words, to perform a politics. A politics of ontology.” (1997, p.158). The politics of ontology which Brand Oliver awakens reveals how celebrity brands converge and speak to popular mythologies of the everyday offering up new forms of practical and collective magic, especially geared around *desiring, hoping and feeling*. Brand Oliver in this regard looks like a simple tale of heroic masculinity, a storying of the celebrity brand and its distribution through all manner of forms of talk, be they those encapsulated in the images, the recipes, the social media posts, the updates, the apps.

The performativity of celebrity brands such as Brand Oliver must be reckoned in terms of their potential for changing and disturbing practices and conventions, not simply to affirm or to absorb the status quo but as “the gap, the rupture, the spacing that unfolds the next moment allowing change to happen.” (Dewsbury, 2000, p.475). Perhaps in this way we witness how they might offer up inspiration and new forms of innovation. Domestic culinary tales as I have sought to argue speak to troubled and fraught contexts for market success. Here we enter novel territory, how practices such as those around *identity work* and the *idea of difference* may lose their appeal and demand to be recast. How *taste* and *distinction* are sometimes not enough for ontological security and how practices and routines may emerge for an audience looking for solutions for new dilemmas in troubled contexts. Necessities and fictions – sayings and the things we tell ourselves to get by - much like their associated practices and ways of doing are not fixed or merely static but open to change. A perspective which brings us neatly to the labours of the kitchen and the market opportunities therein.

Labours of love and Market Opportunities

“*Good cooks are never sad or idle – they work at fashioning the world, at giving birth to the joy of the ephemeral.*” (de Certeau et al, 1998, p.222).

Theories of practice are many, and theorists of practice come in a range of shapes and hues. So far we have encountered Giddens (1991) but other options remain on the culinary academic menu. Bourdieu (1984) reads the kitchen for *difference*, for symbolic struggle and as a site for classification and *Distinction*. In this telling the habitus occupies a central place as *the space of life-styles*:

“*The habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application – beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt – of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions.*” (1984, p.170).

Bourdieu reads the kitchen like a true social theorist for classification. For Bourdieu: “Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste.” (1984, p.190). Whereas de Certeau (1984) and de Certeau et al (1998) read the kitchen as would a poet or kitchen dweller (Hewer & Brownlie 2011) for poetics and aesthetic solutions. The practicing of the meal must address the kitchen as practiced, lived and a techno-saturated space, but also increasingly a marketized space. Here the kitchen is revealed as a prime site for *feeding the family* for provisioning and what Marjorie DeVault (1994) terms the *social organization of caring*. In this time-space, familiar exploitations (Delphy and Leonard 1992) of the division and unequal division of labours are harboured. Kitchens by this account are labouring spaces where the washing up and the wall of ‘to-do’s’ remains. A labouring space for the production of the family and the home; a working space for jobs aplenty; a contradictory space; a space from which to anchor oneself and others as much as it is a space to escape from. Kitchens are also techno saturated spaces (see also Hand and Shove 2007). Kitchens remain a technological realm par excellence. If you are lucky enough the kitchen is home to a plethora of such devices from the mixers, blenders, coffee makers, kettles, to the heavy duty of washing machines and dishwashers and fridges. And now kitchens come equipped with televisions, radios, or homes to the mobile laptop and phone. By this reckoning, the kitchen houses all manner of techno devices which speak of its organizing capacities allied with a range of everyday kitchen practices from cooking to cleaning and caring to organize and reorganize one’s life around.

The kitchen then exists as a laboured, temporal and practiced space for anchorage in turbulent times. Think only of the devices which capture and visualise the shifting of time, the fridge that needs defrosting, the oven that demands setting, the egg timer with its familiar beat and rhythm, the kettle which never boils, the clamouring duties of breakfast, lunch, dinner and

evening snacks. Marking time and the passage of time are thus endemic to kitchen living. Kitchens are perhaps the most punctuated domestic time-spaces, their timing and rhythm not as pronounced as work spaces but still measured and metered in their use of time, with the spirit of timing as a constant presence within such lived spaces. Not difficult to see then how such a conventionalised and practiced space may be in need of a little livening up, a sprinkling of *hyper-ritualisation* as per Goffman (1978) or blatant celebrity brand merchandising if we are to reimagine its contours and redefine its boundaries. Here lies the market opportunity: that is, how the materials, competences and troubles of kitchen life might offer a point of purchase for a little celebrity marketization to be at work and find a home for an alternative domestic culinary imaginary. Not a sealed off hermetic space but porous and open to change and possibility; a space where branded celebrity merchandise - be this in the form of pots, pans, or funky knives – become ‘touch points’ for brand building and strategizing (see <http://ukbrandstrategy.com/2013/06/16/brand-touch-points-get-your-hands-dirty/>). A kitchen space in other words where pots, pans and all manner of techno devices might be enlivened through tools, gadgets and rethinking practices. The penultimate chapter of Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* is tellingly titled: ‘Ways of Believing: Believing and Making People Believe’. For de Certeau (1984), modern times are perhaps best captured through this spirit of waning belief: “Believing is being exhausted. Or at least it takes refuge in the area of the media and leisure activities. It goes on vacation; but even then it does not cease to be an object captured and processed by advertising, commerce and fashion.” (1984, p.180). Celebrity chefs and their associated brand merchandising thus trade in practiced solutions – forms of practical magic to reawaken belief - offering up inspiration and innovation as emergent forms of belief and believing in troubled times.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to understand the shifting brandscape of the celebrity chef brand that is Brand Oliver in terms of reimagining practices, routines and conventions. It has turned to the contexts of uncertainty that now surround us to unpack the contexts which such brands now operate within. Turning to Brand Oliver we witness its emergent celebrity appeals around innovative solutions for rethinking everyday practices. Saving time and money while sounding contemporary and on trend were revealed to be associated with the ordering and organizational practices of modernity. Celebrity brands like Brand Oliver spin culinary tales of saving time and money for continued market success, and those simple tales speak to ontological anxieties and everyday solutions, what Bauman (2010) termed the ‘displacement of fears – from the cracks and fissures in the human condition’ (2010, p.13). Understanding practices, routines and conventions in such terms thus takes us to the terrain of ontological politics wherein practices are contextualised as a form of cultural politics embedded within the everyday. Here practices of transformation, salvation and well-being trade in and seek to perform renewed forms of believing in fraught contexts of disaffection. Culture as screened and practiced thus becomes as Bhabha (1994) intones: “an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often

composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival. Culture reaches out to create a symbolic textuality, to give the alienating everyday an aura of selfhood, a promise of pleasure.” (Bhabha, 1994, p.172). Herein culture, its labours and forms of consuming, becomes akin to “a strategy of survival”. It is such survival strategies which we glimpse when we witness the forms of magic and practical belief practiced by celebrity chefs: commercial success and personal salvation entangled and prescient for the *here and now* of consumption.

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