Introduction

Crocobouche, blast chillers, and plating up—their terms have become normal to ordinary Australians despite Adriano Zumbo’s crocobouche recipe taking more than two hours to complete and blast chillers costing thousands of dollars. Network Ten’s reality talent quest MasterChef Australia (MCA) has brought fine dining and “foodies” culture to a mass audience who respond enthusiastically. Vicariously “tasting” this once niche lifestyle is empowering viewers to integrate aspects of “foodies” culture into their everyday lives. It helps them become “everyday foodies.” “Everyday foodies” are individuals who embrace and incorporate an appreciation of gourmet food culture into their existing lifestyles, but feel limited by time, money, health, or confidence. So while a crocobouche and blast chill are beyond a MCA viewer’s reach, these aspects of “foodies” culture can still be enjoyed via the program. The rise of the “everyday foodie” challenges criticisms of vicarious consumption and negative discourses about reality and lifestyle television.

Examining the very different and specific ways in which three MCA-viewing households vicariously experience gourmet food in their adoption of the “everyday foodie” lifestyle will demonstrate the positive value of vicarious consumption within the context of the reality television landscape. A brief background on the MCA-phenomenon will be provided before a review of existing literature regarding vicarious consumption and tensions in the reality and lifestyle television field. Three case studies of MCA-viewing households who use vicarious consumption to satisfy “foodies” cravings and broaden their cultural tastes will be presented.

Adapted from the United Kingdom’s MasterChef, which has aired since 1990, MCA has proven to be a catalyst for the “cheffing up” of the nation’s food culture. Twenty-odd amateur cooks compete in a series of challenges, guided and critiqued by judges George Calombaris, Gary Mehigan, and Matt Preston. Contestants are eliminated as they move through a series of challenges, until one cook remains and is crowned the Master Chef of that episode. Network Ten’s launch of MCA in 2009 capitalised on the popularity of reality talent that grew throughout the 2000s with programs such as PopStars (2000–2002), Australian Idol (2003–2006), X Factor (2005, 2010–) and Australia’s Got Talent (2007–). MCA also captures Australian viewers’ penchant for lifestyle shows including Better Homes and Gardens (1995–), Burke’s Backyard (1987–2004), The Living Room (2012–) and The Block (2003–2004, 2010–). The popularity of these shows, however, does not match the heights of MCA, which has transformed the normal cooking show audience of 200,000 into millions (Greenwood). MCA’s 2010 finale is Australia’s highest rating non-sporting program since OZtAM ratings were introduced in 2001 (Vickey). Anticipating this episode’s popularity, the 2010 Federal Election debate was moved to 6.30pm from its traditional Sunday 7.30pm timeslot (Coorey; Malkin).

As well as attracting extensive press coverage and attention in opinion pieces and blogs, the level of academic attention MCA has already received underscores the show’s significance. So far, Lewis (Labour) and Saile have critiqued the involvement of ordinary people as contestants on the show while Phillipov (Communicating, Mastering) explores tensions within the show from a public health angle. While de Soiler (TV Dinners: Making the Self, Foodie Makeovers) and Rousseau’s research does not focus on MCA itself, their investigation of Australian foodies and the impact of food media respectively provide relevant discussion about audience relationships with food media and food culture. This article focuses on how audiences use MCA and related programs.

Vicarious consumption is presented as a negative practice where the leisure class benefit from another’s productivity (Veblen). Belk presents the simple example that “if our friend lives in an extravagant house or drives an extravagant car, we feel just a bit more extravagant ourselves” (157). Therefore, consuming through another is viewed as a passive activity. In the context of vicariously consuming through MCA, it could be argued that audiences are gaining satisfaction from watching others develop culinary skills and produce gourmet meals. What this article will reveal is that while MCA viewers do gain this satisfaction, they use it in a productive way to discipline their own eating and spending habits, and to allow them to engage with “foodies” culture when it may not otherwise be possible.

Rather than embrace the opportunity to understand a new culture or lifestyle, critics of reality and lifestyle television dismiss the empowering qualities of these programs for two reasons. The practice of “advertainment” (Deery 1)—fusing selling and entertainment—puts pressure on, or excludes, the aspirational classes who want, but lack the resources to adopt, the depicted lifestyle (Ouellette and Hay). Furthermore, such programs are criticised for fostering bourgeois consumption habits on its viewers (Lewis, Smart Living) Both arguments have been directed at British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. Oliver’s latest cookbook Save with Jamie has been criticised as it promotes austerity cooking, but costs £26 (approx. 48AUD) and encourages readers to purchase staple ingredients and equipment that total more than £50 (approx. 91AUD) (Ellis-Petersen). Ellis-Petersen adds that the £50 cost uses the cheapest available options, not Oliver’s line of Tefal cooking equipment, “which come at a hefty premium” (7). In 2005, Oliver’s television series Jamie’s School Dinners, which follows his campaign for policy reform in the provision of food to students was met with resistance. 2008 reports claim students preferred chips and burgers (Lewis, Smart Living). In cases like Emmi Live where the host and chef, Emmi Lagasse favors “favors [sic] showmanship over instruction” (Adema 115–116) the vicarious consumption of viewing a cooking show is more satisfying than cooking and eating. Another reason vicarious consumption provides pleasure is because “culinary television aestheticises food,” transforming it “into a delectable image, a form of ‘gastro-porn’” (157). Therefore, consuming through another is viewed as a passive activity. In the context of vicariously consuming through MCA, it could be argued that audiences are gaining satisfaction from watching others develop culinary skills and produce gourmet meals. What this article will reveal is that while MCA viewers do gain this satisfaction, they use it in a productive way to discipline their own eating and spending habits, and to allow them to engage with “foodies” culture when it may not otherwise be possible.

These arguments do not recognise audiences as active media consumers who use programs like MCA to enhance their lifestyles through the acquisition of cultural capital (Ouellette and Hay). Viewers are simply able to enjoy the fantasy and spectacle of food shows as escapes from everyday routines (Lewis, Smart Living). In cases like Emmi Live where the host and chef, Emmi Lagasse “favors [sic] showmanship over instruction” (Adema 115–116) the vicarious consumption of viewing a cooking show is more satisfying than cooking and eating. Another reason vicarious consumption provides pleasure is because “culinary television aestheticises food,” transforming it “into a delectable image, a form of ‘gastro-porn’” (157). Therefore, consuming through another is viewed as a passive activity. In the context of vicariously consuming through MCA, it could be argued that audiences are gaining satisfaction from watching others develop culinary skills and produce gourmet meals. What this article will reveal is that while MCA viewers do gain this satisfaction, they use it in a productive way to discipline their own eating and spending habits, and to allow them to engage with “foodies” culture when it may not otherwise be possible.
MCA and food media for Melanie serves a double purpose in that she uses it to restrict, but also aid in her consumption of gourmet food. In choosing a chef or restaurant for the occasions where Melanie wants to enjoy a "fancy" dining experience, she claims food media serves as an educational resource to influence her consumption of gourmet food:

"I looked up when I was in Sydney where Adriano Zumbo's shop was to go and try macarons there [...] it [MCA] makes me aware of chefs that I may not have been aware of and I may go and ... seek that [their restaurants/establishments] out [...] Would Adriano Zumbo be as big as he is without MasterChef? No. And I'm a sucker, I want to go and try, I want to know what everyone's talking about.

Melanie's attitudes and behaviour with regards to food media and consumption illustrates audiences' selective nature. MCA and other food media influence her to consume, but also control, her consumption.

**Curtis and Samantha—Broadening Horizons**

Time and money is a key concern for many "everyday foodies" including Curtis' family. Along with his wife Samantha they are raising a one-year-old daughter, Amelia. Curtis expressed a fondness for food that he ate while on holiday in the United States:

"I would watch a lot more variety than I would actually try. There's a lot of things that I would happily watch, but if it was put in front of me I probably wouldn't eat it. Like with MasterChef, I'm quite interested in cooking and stuff, but the range of things [ingredients and cuisines] [...] I wouldn't go there.

His wife Samantha does not consider herself an adventurous eater. While she is interested in food, her passion lies in cakes and desserts and she jokes that ordering Nando's with the medium basting is adventurous for her. Vicarious consumption through food media allows Samantha to experience a wider range of cuisines without consuming these foods herself:

"I know that probably sounds like a lame excuse, but yeah, it's probably the confidence thing I think. I often even buy the things [ingredients] to do it and then don't make it. I'm not confident with my stovetop either.

**Rose and Andrew—Set in Their Ways**

Rose and her husband Andrew are a "basically retired" couple and the parents of Samantha. While they both enjoy MCA and feel it has given them a new insight on food, they find it easier to have a mediated engagement with gourmet food in some instances. Andrew believes MCA is:

"Taking food out of this sort of very conservative, meat, and three vegetables thing into [...] something that is more exotic, for the want of a better word. And I guess that's where we're—we follow it, I follow it. And saying, 'Oh, geez it'd be nice to do that or to be able to do that,' and enjoy a bit of creativity in that, but I think it's just we're probably pretty set in our ways probably and it's a bit hard to put that into action sometimes.

Andrew goes on to suggest that a generational gap makes their daughters, Samantha and Elle more likely to cook MCA-inspired meals than they are:

"See Samantha and Elle probably cook with that sort of thing [herbs] more and I always enjoy when they do it, but we probably don't [...] We don't think about it when we go shopping. We probably shop and buy the basic things and don't think about the nicer things.

Andrew describes himself as "an extremely lazy reader" who finds following a recipe "boring." Andrew says if he were tempted to cook an MCA-inspired dish, it is unlikely that the required ingredients would be on-hand and that he would not shop for one meal. Rose says she does buy the herbs, or "nicer things" as Andrew refers to them, but is hesitant to use them. She says the primary barrier is lacking confidence in her cooking ability, but also that she finds cooking tiring and is not used to cooking with the gas stove in her new home:

"I looked up when I was in Sydney where Adriano Zumbo's shop was to go and try macarons there [...] it [MCA] makes me aware of chefs that I may not have been aware of and I may go and ... seek that [their restaurants/establishments] out [...] Would Adriano Zumbo be as big as he is without MasterChef? No. And I'm a sucker, I want to go and try, I want to know what everyone's talking about.

Rose, in particular, does not let her lack of confidence and time stop her from engaging with gourmet food. Cookbooks and cooking shows like MCA are a valuable channel for her to appreciate "foodie" culture. Rose talks about her interest in MCA:
Rose: I’m not a keen cook, but I do enjoy buying recipe books and looking at lovely food and watching—and I enjoyed watching how they did these beautiful dishes. As for the desserts, yes they probably were very fancy, but it was sort of nice to think if you had a really special occasion, you know [...] and I would actually get on the computer afterwards and look for some of the recipes. I did subscribe to their magazine [...] because I’m a bit of a magazine junkie.

Researcher: What do you get out of the recipe books and magazines if you say you’re not a keen cook?

Rose: I’d just dream about cooking them probably. That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? But, and also probably inspire my daughters [...] I like to show them ‘oh, look at this and this’ or, you know, and probably quite often they will try it—or and one day I think I will try it, but whether I ever do or not, I don’t know.

Rose’s response also treats the generation gap as a perceived barrier to actual consumption. But while the couple feel unable to use the knowledge they have gained through MCA in their kitchen, they credit the show with broadening the range of cuisines they would eat when dining out:

Andrew: You know, even when we’ve been to—I like Asian food in Australia, you know, Chinese, Thai, any of those sorts of foods.

Rose: Indian.

Andrew: Indian, yeah I like that in Australia.

Rose: Which we have probably tried more of since the likes of MasterChef.

Andrew: Yeah.

Rose: You know, you—and even sushi, like you would never have ever [...] and I’ve seen it when she was doing it. Um [...] but I did not enjoy Chinese food in places like Hong Kong or Singapore.

Andrew: Gone to sushi previously. And I won’t eat sashimi, but the sushi bar is all right. Um [...] but I did not enjoy Chinese food in places like Hong Kong or Singapore.

As the couple does not seek educational information from the show in terms of cooking demonstration, they appear more invested in the progress of the contestants of the show and how they respond to challenges set by the judges. The involvement of amateur cooks makes the show relatable as they identify with contestants who see as potential extensions of themselves. Rose identifies with season one winner, Julie Goodwin who entered the program as a 38-year-old mother of three and owner of an IT consulting business:

Rose: Well Julie of course is a—[I don’t like to use the word square, but she’s sort of like a bit of an old fashioned lady, but you know, more like basic grandma cooking. But [...] and she probably—she progressed dramatically, you know, from the comments when she first started [...] to winning. In how she presented, how she did things. She must have learnt a lot in the process is the way I would look at it anyway.

Rose: And I’ve seen her sort of on things since then and she is very good at like [...] talking about and telling you what she’s doing and—for basic sort of cook—you know what I mean, not basic, but [...] for a basic person like me.

Andrew: And she, she probably—she progressed dramatically, you know, from the comments when she first started [...] to winning. In how she presented, how she did things. She must have learnt a lot in the process is the way I would look at it anyway.

Rose: Yes, yeah.

Andrew: Yeah.

Although Rose and Andrew feel that their life stage prevents them from changing long established consumption habits in relation to food, their choices while dining out coupled with a keen interest in food and food media still exemplifies the ‘everyday foodie’ lifestyle. Programs like MCA, especially with its focus on the development of amateur cooks, have allowed Rose and Andrew to experience gourmet food more than they would have otherwise.

Conclusion

Each viewer is empowered to live their version of the ‘everyday foodie’ lifestyle through adopting a balance of actual and vicarious consumption practices. Vicariously tasting “foodies” culture has broadened these viewers’ culinary knowledge and to some extent has broadened their actual tastes. This is evident in Melanie’s visit to Adriano Zumbo’s patisserie, and Rose and Andrew’s sampling of various Asian cuisines while dining out, for example. It also provides pleasure in lieu of actual consumption in instances like Melanie using food images as a disciplinary mechanism or Curtis watching Man v. Food instead of travelling overseas. The attitudes and behaviours of these MCA viewers illustrate that vicarious consumption through food media is a productive and empowering practice that aids audiences to adopt an ‘everyday foodie’ lifestyle.

References


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