

“Reality television”

Top Chef: Is real drama so hard to find?

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“Winning and elimination decisions were made by the judges in consultation with producers. Some elimination decisions were discussed with *Bravo*.”

—Disclaimer at the end of each episode of *Top Chef*

Top Chef D.C. is the seventh installment of the *Top Chef* reality television series on the US cable television network *Bravo*, which features chefs competing for various prizes and avoiding the weekly elimination, roughly following the format of *American Idol*. Each season has been filmed in a different US city.

The program belongs to the subgenre of elimination-style “reality shows” restricted to a certain occupation or industry, in this case, the culinary arts. The basic contrivance of such shows is broadly, and perhaps absurdly, applied, as the genre now includes not only Magical Elves Productions’ *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, and new spinoff *Just Desserts*, but also *Shear Genius* (about hair styling), Animal Planet’s *Groomer Has It* (which might be called America’s Next Top Dog Groomer), and Home and Garden TV’s *Design Star*.

To get an idea of the level at which *Top Chef* functions, you only have to consider some of this season’s challenges, which include a freeze dried dish challenge (featuring astronaut Buzz Aldrin), a food idioms challenge where contestants offered culinary interpretations of phrases such as “the big cheese,” “spill the beans,” “bring home the bacon,” etc., and a challenge requiring chefs to add new and obscure ingredients while already in the process of preparing dishes.

In an unpleasant episode entitled “Covert Cuisine,” Hostess Padma Lakshmi, former model and one-time wife of author Salman Rushdie, announced that the elimination challenge was to prepare a traditional food in a manner that concealed its flavor, for CIA director

Leon Panetta and his entourage.

Inevitably, Panetta quipped that the Beef Wellington wore a poor disguise and would be caught and hung as a spy. In his own boorish way, Panetta fit right in with the rest of the usual judges. The judging and elimination are essentially done in the spirit of real estate mogul Donald Trump’s infamous tagline, “You’re fired!,” on his horrible show *The Apprentice*. The judges in these programs are the mouthpieces for the Donald Trumps of the world, reminding contestants and spectators alike that they (the moneyed, the powerful) deserve respect and everyone else merits contempt.

Much of so-called “reality television” is either scripted or encouraged to proceed along entirely clichéd lines. The creators manage to simplify human behavior and personality and direct them into the safest channels. This helps to explain why, over the various seasons of *Top Chef*, *Project Runway* and the others, one feels that the same cast of characters appears again and again.

One of the contestants on *Top Chef D.C.* this year, Kenny Gilbert, was advertised as being arrogant after the first episode, when viewers were allowed to text in their response to the question, “Is Kenny too cocky?” The desired result was obvious, part of the effort to whip up contrived drama and “controversy.”

The explosion in “reality television” is a product of several factors. First of all, the empty-headedness of television executives, who lack the imagination and commitment to do anything more serious. Drama or comedy that makes an impact requires hard work, thought and talent. In particular, the elimination type of program, consciously or not, fits in with the worship of ruthlessness and individualism that has been one of the hallmarks of official American ideology for the past

several decades.

Perhaps most importantly, producing “reality television” is a matter of economics. Such programs in general cost a fraction of the budgets required for situation comedies and dramas. One doesn’t need a calculator to see how the savings add up quickly: the sets are cheaper, there are fewer paid actors and writers, camera crews are smaller and use cheaper equipment.

The writers are grossly undercompensated and overworked. According to a 2007 study by the Writers’ Guild of America (WGA), 91 percent of reality television writers received no overtime pay, despite an average work week of 55 hours. Some 86 percent were not offered health insurance by their employers and 18 percent had no health insurance at all.

According to WGA figures, the proportion of prime-time television hours devoted to reality programs exploded following contract negotiations in 2001. The 1999-2000 season featured 250 hours of reality programming out of 4,100 total hours. The 2002-2003 season saw this figure double. The 2004-2005 season marked the first time that reality series outnumbered situation comedies in prime-time hours.

Cable television networks such as Bravo and VH-1 now stock their original lineups with nothing but reality programming. The Learning Channel now boasts some 13 reality series, including such gems as *Sister Wives*, about a polygamist family, and two separate shows following one family and one couple affected by dwarfism.

Part of the savings comes at the expense of contestants’ living and working conditions. An August 2009 article in the *New York Times*, headlined “TV Contestants: Tired, Tipsy and Pushed to the Brink,” noted that participants in reality shows faced difficult working conditions. *Project Runway* contestants revealed that designers went to bed between 1 and 3 a.m., only to wake again at 6 or 7 a.m. Contestants were routinely denied contact with friends and family, while alcohol was always at hand.

Producers of *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* defended themselves to the *Times*, claiming “We always give contestants the best conditions we can” and “Our budgets are less than half what a similar network show would have, and that means very long days for cast and crew, but our contestants are fed at least every six hours, and there are always snacks and water

available.” These words could just as easily have come from operators of a sweatshop.

Programs such as *Top Chef* are more than simply cheap pseudo-dramas. In their fashion, they help to perpetuate ideas about life and human nature held by the people at the top of the heap in America. According to their self-serving conceptions, only the most brazen and self-centered people can achieve success; everyone else is so insignificant that they might as well be invisible. To these layers, real life is its own Social Darwinist elimination process, and should continue to be.

Top Chef received the 2010 Emmy for outstanding reality series: in fact, the show and those like it do not reflect life, they concoct it.



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