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Whet your appetite with these tasty food TV offerings

With a full menu of 'food stories' available, it's time to savour some screen cuisine

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Home for the holidays? 'Tis the perfect time for relaxing between festivities to savour some screen cuisine.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Inimitable bad boy Gordon Ramsay, left, will sate your holiday cravings for salty language, while Toronto chef Mark McEwan turns up The Heat.

Happily, there's no shortage of tasty offerings on several channels.

In particular, our appetite for food TV is unstoppably fed by Food Network Canada's eclectic 24-hour menu, one that has attracted an ever-burgeoning, increasingly varied audience since it was launched in the fall of 2000.

"Food TV has grown 20 per cent since last year," says Emily Morgan, the network's vice-president for content. Viewers, she notes, have changed over the years and so has programming.

"Originally, we were a pure foodie service," she explains. "Now, we're also satisfying those who want entertainment-driven shows about the food world."

These include what she calls "docu-soaps" like Gemini-winner *Chef School* featuring the lively, sometimes shocking behaviour of students and instructors at the Stratford Chefs School in rural Ontario as they master knife and life skills in a professional kitchen.

People want "food stories," Morgan claims, and few tell these better than the Brits.

Hence the continuing popularity of inimitable bad boy Gordon Ramsay, whose shows *Hell's Kitchen*, *Kitchen Nightmares* and *The F Word* fall into this category.

Deborah Reid, professor and co-ordinator of the French culinary arts program at George Brown Chef School in Toronto, has lots to say about food TV in general and Ramsay in particular.

She watches food shows for at least an hour a day "to be informed, entertained and sometimes inspired." She also discusses them with students.

"They like shows with a reality hook," Reid explains, adding that British shows of this ilk are among her favourites.

"I've used examples from the British version of *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* – not the American series which is sensationalist and stupid – to teach how to fix things in a restaurant that have gone wrong," she says.

"I can talk theoretically about food costing," she continues, "but he goes in and makes it real by showing people who are cutting corners and not being able to pay their bills."

Reid concedes she wishes Ramsay, prone to rants and rage, didn't have "such a potty mouth" but gives him credit for teaching the realities of a restaurant kitchen.

Toronto chef Mark McEwan knows those realities well. He's been a working chef for 26 years and owns three restaurants: North 44, Bymark and One.

His busy catering division is the focus of a fast-paced, brilliant docu-drama called *The Heat* now in re-runs on Food Network and for which he is currently filming a third series.

The plus side of being a TV celebrity, he says, "is more public awareness." He can't walk down the street without being recognized and loves it when "a truck driver, mechanic or businessman says they love my show."

However, filming in the midst of a hectic restaurant opening or a big wedding can be "a bit of a monkey on your back," he adds. "Being on TV is another element to balance and can add a big stress level."

As for the use of expletives Ramsay-style, McEwan tries to minimize swearing, noting: "If I'm going to say that, I'll fire the person first."

Some shows are popular for being warm and friendly. Reid cites *Chef at Home*, *Chef at Large* and *Chef Abroad* hosted by P.E.I. chef Michael Smith as student favourites. "He's very approachable and appealing," she explains.

Among competitive shows that pit chefs against each other without that often-upsetting "pack up your knives" climax, she names the long-standing, still-cooking *Iron Chef* as educational and fun.

Fun is also key for Mary Luz Mejia, an associate producer with Firvalley Productions and a director of excellent series *At the Table With ...* now airing on Food Network.

It appeals, she says, "not only to people interested in chefs and food but also those who enjoy a well-put-together biography."

Viewers of food TV, she feels, are "vicarious eaters, armchair travellers, celebrity hounds and those interested to see what famous chefs are cooking up."

In addition to learning new techniques, how a dish is made and what makes a good ingredient, she feels people now want to know: "Where's the drama?" The result: A growing number of shows that are reality TV.

One she loves is the British-made *The Hairy Bikers' Cookbook* currently airing on BBC Canada. These unkempt mates travel the world on motor bikes exploring the cuisines of cities they visit.

"You wish you could have dinner with them and pick their brains," Mejia says. "You know you'd have a good time."

So what screen cuisine can we look forward to relishing in 2009?

Ramsay will have plenty on his plate in the New Year putting out fires caused by alleged affairs, including one with Jeffrey Archer's ex-mistress Sarah Symonds, as wife Tana stands staunchly by his side. Still, his never-dull kitchen antics continue to be must-sees for many.

Morgan is excited about a new series: *100-Mile Challenge*. In it, authors of

The 100-Mile Diet, Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon, lead a B.C. community through a social experiment she describes as a mission "to change lives, lessen their environmental footprint and eat better."

Happily, classic standbys Nigella Lawson, the Barefoot Contessa and Jamie Oliver keep on cookin'. Here is a typically simple dish of Oliver's that's tried, true and delicious.

Jamie's Roast Chicken

About **4-pound/2-kilogram** chicken

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

1 lemon, washed

1 garlic bulb, broken into unpeeled cloves

Handful of fresh thyme

Olive oil

3/4 cup dry white wine or chicken stock

Rub chicken with salt and pepper inside and out. (Do this in the morning, if possible, then cover and refrigerate until ready to roast.)

Preheat oven to 350F.

Bring medium saucepan of salted water to boil. Add lemon and garlic. Reduce heat to low; simmer 12 minutes. While lemon is still hot, poke holes in it with skewer.

Pat chicken dry with paper towels; rub with olive oil. Stuff lemon, garlic and thyme into cavity. Place on wire rack in roasting pan. Roast in oven about 1 to 1 1/2 hours or until meat is cooked through. Near end of roasting time, pour wine or chicken stock into roasting pan around chicken; continue to roast.

Remove lemon, garlic and thyme from chicken. Squeeze garlic all over it; discard skins. Serve with pan juices.

Makes about 4 to 6 servings.