

Women, Food and Consumption

Editor's Note: by Rhea Parsons, M.D.

Food is a hot topic. As I am writing this, 20 of the top 100 selling books on Amazon are about food. One-third are diet and weight loss plans, one-third focus on food theory and lifestyles, and the remaining one-third are cookbooks. There are also fourteen food-related books on the New York Times Bestsellers List (February 6, 2011).

Today, February 6, 2011, is also Super Bowl Sunday, a day which is as much about food as it is about football. While the professional players prepare to win a championship, millions of people are preparing indulgent feasts for their Super Bowl parties. According to Nielsen Media Research, 57% of women watch the Super Bowl compared to 73% of men¹, yet the traditional image of a Super Bowl party consists of men watching the game, drinking beer and eating chips while women hang out in the kitchen while talking, and preparing the food for the men. In fact, eHow.com offers advice on "how to involve women in the Super Bowl."²

Gender roles in regards to food have long been a topic of great debate and controversy. In 1982, Bruce Feirstein published the infamous "Real Men Don't Eat Quiche," a bestseller that satirized masculine stereotypes and popularized the already widespread beliefs that men devour steaks while women pick at salads. In a series of studies at Northwestern University, researchers found that when men had unlimited time and attentional resources, they were more likely to choose foods that conformed to a

masculine gender identity. Women, on the other hand, showed less concern about making gender-congruent food choices, regardless of time and attentional resources.³

David Katz, director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Centre, suggests that diet can be explained by evolution and physiology. Men are the protein-requiring hunters while women gather the produce. However, Yvonne Bishop-Weston, a nutritionist, looks at socialization instead. Males are encouraged to eat large quantities of food while women develop emotional attachments to food, including guilt and the familial responsibility to prepare healthy meals.⁴

The debate goes beyond what men and women are eating and to their styles of cooking, with some people suggesting the preparation and taste of the dish can give away whether it has been prepared by a man or a woman. To test this theory, an event was planned at the Astor Center in New York to discuss food and gender with professional chefs, mixologists, food magazine editors, restaurateurs, and academics. In an informal experiment, chefs were paired up and given a specific ingredient with which each had to prepare a dish for a blind panel. While the experiment was not taken seriously due to its unscientific nature, the event did make for a lively discussion about gender from some of the people who know food best.⁵ Gwen Hyman, one of the panel members, is a professor who teaches courses about food and gender and authored a book about appetites and gender in 19th century fiction. The event inspired her to start a blog, "Wordy Appetites: Ruminations on Food Culture in All of its Fabulous Forms." Hyman believes one cannot tell the difference between a dish prepared by a man or a woman and that cooking styles are not gender-specific. She does, however, state that

women still face many barriers when it comes to the kitchen as there are fewer female culinary instructors, restaurant owners, and professional chefs.⁶

Hyman suggests that it may be the diners and their expectations that influence gender in the kitchen, especially in this age of celebrity chefs. Indeed, food on television is even hotter than it is in books. There are now two cable channels dedicated solely to food as well as the many cooking and food-related shows on other channels including network and public television. There are definite gender differences when it comes to food-related television shows. Food Network divides its programming into daytime and evening schedules. Daytime is referred to as “Food Network in the Kitchen” and features mostly female cooks and chefs such as Paula Deen, Anne Burrell, and Sandra Lee standing in their home kitchens (or facsimiles of home kitchens) teaching recipes designed for the family dinner. “Food Network Nighttime,” on the other hand, features more male cooks and chefs in shows involving competitions and challenges: Robert Irvine in “Dinner Impossible,” Bobby Flay in “Throwdown” and “Iron Chef America,” and Michael Symon in “Food Feuds.” The distinction is clear– the women feed their families, the men must go out and do battle.

Another recent trend in food television that showcases gender differences are travel programs. On Food Network, Giada DeLaurentis takes us on her “Weekend Getaways” while Rachael Ray hosts “Rachael’s Vacation” and “Tasty Travels.” Both shows not only tell us where to eat when we travel but provide suggestions for couples’ and family activities including shopping and sightseeing. The biggest challenge is watching Rachael Ray battle her budget on “\$40 a Day.” On none of these shows does the host

ever eat more than three bites of her meal, saving room for the dessert that will also be mostly left over.

Gluttony seems to be a trait belonging to the men. Guy Fieri, host of “Diners, Drive-ins & Dives,” has no trouble eating huge portions of every food imaginable as he visits favorite greasy spoons all over the country. On the Travel Channel’s “Man v. Food,” Adam Richman seeks out restaurants that serve massive portions of food and engages in eating challenges such as trying to finish a 4-lb. steak with side dishes in under an hour.

The men also appear to be gluttons for adventure and the bizarre. On Food Network’s “Glutton for Punishment,” Bob Blumer faces a new challenge each episode, learning how to juggle knives or shuck oysters competitively. In “Outrageous Food,” Tom Pizzica travels the country to find bizarre foods whether they be extremely pricey, spicy, or just strange.

On the Travel Channel, Andrew Zimmern experiences the world’s different cultures by showing us what the locals eat on “Bizarre Foods.” Of course, one cannot think of bizarre foods without thinking of Anthony Bourdain who travels the world on his Emmy Award winning show “No Reservations,” eating raw eyeballs or still-beating reptile hearts. Would viewers prefer to watch a woman spend 30 minutes making dinner for the family or wolfing down a 7-lb. omelet made of brains and eyeballs? If, as Hyman suggested, consumers’ expectations influence what we get, then it seems we may be placing our orders from two very separate menus.

In this issue, we asked for submissions on the subject of women and consumption, with particular focus on women and food. We hope your minds, as well as your appetites, are stimulated. Bon Appetit!

Citations

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