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DEBBIE DOES SALAD

The Food Network at the frontiers of pornography

By Fred Kaufman

*Greedily she ingorg'd
without restraint,
And knew not eating
Death...*

John Milton

They would shoot the beauties at the end, as if the food were the rapture, or the apocalypse. In the meantime, there was choreography. "I will add butter and shortening," said Sara Moulton, who has hosted dump-and-stir television shows for nine years and taped more than a thousand segments. She stood in the middle of her *mise en scene*, a setup very much like the classic stove and counter of her mentor, Julia Child. "I will give a few pulses of the food processor," Moulton continued, "add cheese, give four more pulses. I will then go to the fridge. I will get apples..."

More than a dozen people huddled around the star. There were the executive, assistant, associate, and culinary producers; the director and technical director; and the camera operators, production assistants, and food stylists. And there was Sara Moulton's guest, southern-food scholar John T. Edge, in blue jeans and a chartreuse shirt, who could hardly wait to get on camera and show the world his apple pie.

Early this morning the team had gathered at the Food Network's new 13,000-square-foot studios on Manhattan's West Side and proceeded to shoot three episodes of Moulton's show, *Sara's Secrets*. Now it was late in the day, and fatigue had set in. No one was listening to Moulton. "Folks," said Jeff Kay, the director. "One more show. Let's keep it quiet and get home safely."

Kay knew he could not afford to waste time on this soundstage. He had two weeks to tape twenty-seven episodes, after which Moulton's cutting boards and burners would head to storage, someone else's kitchen would arise, and an entirely new stream of roasted and broiled evanescence would materialize.

When the huddle around Sara Moulton broke, the stylists buffed plush white buns and molded mustard while someone from makeup touched up the star's face and repainted her lips. Moulton's hair, which hung straight and blonde, had been sprayed into compliance. Behind Moulton, kitchen windows opened to a faux outdoors, and a side door had been left ajar to reveal the overburdened shelves of glowing pantry. No matter how much Moulton cooked, the pantry stayed full.

"Cameras, please!" called Jeff Kay. Before he was a director, Kay worked with a succession of CBS bigs – Walter Cronkite, Mike Wallace, Don Hewitt, Diane Sawyer. He got his food-media break directing remotes for a CBS correspondent named Martha Stewart.

While Kay pragmatically assessed cheese-grating and onion-cutting contingencies, a more spiritual presence hovered upstairs. Bob Tuschman, the Food Network's senior vice president for programming and production, sat in his office, contemplating a dry-erase-board calendar on which he had filled in the shooting schedule for every hour of every day for the upcoming year. Even as they aligned the ground chuck downstairs, Sara Moulton and Jeff Kay and everyone else knew that Tuschman was monitoring ratings, watching videos of new talent, and obsessing over the recondite desires of that choice prime-time demographic, the eighteen-to thirty-five-year-old male can't-cook-won't-cook crowd – the men who like to watch. As people cook less and less, they ogle cooking shows more and more. ("Watching food TV is like taking an Ativan," Kay said to me later.)

Alone onstage, Sara Moulton rehearsed by mumbling into the cameras, which around the set are known by their numbers. One and two are pedestal cams with TelePrompTers in front. Ped two, devoted to very tight shots, is what food TV insiders call "the hands camera," whereas three is a Steadicam. "It can get closer into Sara," explained one of the associate producers. "When you zoom a camera, the shot gets bumpier. This one you can walk in, get closer, get right up to her." The last camera, four, hung from a jib ten feet in the air, the better to focus on the depths of pots and pans. "The jib is great for overhead shots of processing," the associate producer said. "It lets us get inside the bowl."

"We're bumping in at three," Jeff Kay told Moulton, "and you're talking to two the whole way." She nodded, the camera operators nodded, Kay headed upstairs to the soundproof booth, and Food Network staff in Food Network shirts stenciled with the Food Network's orange logo scrubbed the graters and the peelers and the whisks and the serrated knives. Unlike home cooking, TV cooking builds to an unending succession of physical ecstasies, never a pile of dirty dishes.

“Stand by,” announced Jen, the stage manager in charge of minutes and seconds. The Steadicam approached Moulton, who was sipping herbal tea through a straw so as not to smudge her lipstick. “Thirty seconds!” called Jen, glaring at an over-diligent food stylist who was still pomading the mustard. “Clear the set!”

“Okay,” Jeff Kay’s amplified voice boomed from the control room through the public-address system. “Here we go, folks. Tight shot. Rolling tape.”

“Go ahead,” the Steadicam operator murmured to Moulton. “Cook.”

“Ten seconds...”

Kay’s voice engulfed the soundstage. “Quiet on the set!”

Theme music welled up, the monitors flashed to life, and everything else receded into darkness and silence, all except the flat, sweet, Midwestern accent of a solitary voice.

“Hi. I’m Sara Moulton, executive chef of *Gourmet* magazine. Today we’ll explore the great American hamburger...”

Barbara Nitke began her career as a porn still photographer in 1982 on the set of *The Devil in Miss Jones, Part II*, which had a crew of twenty-five and a budget of \$100,000 and took ten days to shoot. That was the longest shoot she ever worked on. These days a typical porn director can create a feature-length video in a day, for as little as \$13,000.

Since *Devil*, Barbara Nitke has worked on the sets of more than 300 porn films, which she said is not a huge number, considering that 10,000 new releases enter the market each year. Her most recent gig was with famed feminist porn director Candida Royalle. Nitke shot the stills for *Stud Hunters*, images that ended up on the backs of video boxes, DVDs, and in the magazines. Over the years, her work has appeared in *Swank*, *High Society*, *Leg Show*, *Climax*, and *Nugget*.

I had come to Nitke’s studio in midtown Manhattan, near the United Nations, to watch food television with her, and to compare the histories of sex porn and gastroporn. Nitke, fifty-four, dressed in black from T-shirt to Ferragamos, had set up a card table between the foot of her bed and a bookshelf, and ordered Mexican takeout. As we ate lunch she told me about her pending contract with HarperCollins for *American Ecstasy*, a coffee-table book of her porn-set stills, and I began to examine her library, which included copies of *Leathersex*, *The Correct Sadist*, and *It’s not About the Whip*. “I know most of the authors,” she said. “It’s a small world.”

For the past several weeks, Nitke had been running porn films side by side with Food Network shows, studying the parallels. She had also been analyzing the in-house ads, like a recent one for the network’s “Chocolate Obsession Weekend,” which promised to “tantalize your tastebuds.” In this spot a gorgeous model pushes a chocolate strawberry past parted lips as she luxuriates in a bubblebath. The suds shot dissolves into Food network superstar Emeril Lagasse, who shakes his “Essence” – a trademarked blend of salt, paprika, black pepper, granulated garlic, and onion powder – into a pan of frothing pink goo. The camera moves into the frying pan and stays there. There’s something

very visceral about watching the food," said Nitke. "It's very tissue-y. It's hard not to think of flesh when you're looking at these close-ups."

Like sex porn, gastroporn addresses the most basic human needs and functions, idealizing and degrading them at the same time. "You watch porn saying, Yes, I could do that," explained Nitke. "You dream that you're there, but you know you couldn't. The guy you're watching on the screen, his sex life is effortless. He didn't have to negotiate, entertain her, take her out to dinner. He walked in with the pizza. She was waiting and eager and hot for him."

Which reminded me of my conversation with Food Network programming VP Bob Tuschman. "We create this sensual, lush world, begging you to be drawn into it," Tuschman had said. "It's a beautifully idealized world. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that world?"

Of course, recipes made on-screen rarely match their printed correlatives in books, or as they appear as text on the Food Network's much visited website, foodtv.com. "That's exactly the way the porn thing works," continued Nitke. "The sex, of course is impossible to replicate. No one gets a blow job like that." She explained the complicated hair issues (must at all times be drawn away from the face) and bothersome elbow issues (must at all times be tucked under the back) of on-camera oral sex, and elucidated the role of the recent film-school graduate generally consigned to hold the "C" light, which illuminates the crotch. Left to their own devices, crotches remain dark.

Nitke clicked on her tiny television and we settled into a show called *Food 911*, in which a handsome, sensitive hunk named Tyler Florence travels the nation, kitchen by kitchen, on a quest to liberate home cooks from their culinary frustrations. We watched as a desperate housewife stared at sturdy young Tyler. Could his *arroz con pollo* quench her flaming desire?

The camera zeroed in as Tyler expertly spread raw chicken breast across a cutting board. "That is the quintessential pussy shot," Nitke said. "The color of it, the texture of it, the camera lingering lovingly over it." Tyler gingerly rolled the glistening lips of chicken breast into a thick phallus, which he doused with raw egg.

"I feel a lot of love right now," Tyler told his transfixed acolyte. "This is a sexy dish." Perspiration had begun to bead on the poor woman's forehead, her dark curls had wilted, her lower lip trembled, and as she gasped, the camera caught her low-cut yellow sundress squeezing her breasts. "This is the pizza man," declared Nitke. "There's the helpless woman who can't do it for herself. In walks the cute young guy who rescues her."

The result was inexorable. Eventually, Tyler and the housewife would go cheek to cheek, lean forward, open their mouths, taste the chicken and rice, and melt into a flushed-face, simultaneous food swoon. When the inevitable sequence finally rolled, the editor kept looping their wet mouths and rapt faces as they pushed forkful after forkful of *arroz con pollo* past their lips, chewed, and swallowed – and pushed and chewed and swallowed again and again. "Classic porn style," said Nitke. "They're stretching the moment out, the orgasmic moment. In porn they'll take a cum shot and run it in an endless loop."

Next up was the great Emeril Lagasse, who has singlehandedly replaced the stay-at-home mom's afternoon soap opera, and perhaps her 4:00 fuck. Hunched, lumpen, with a clearly evident bald spot, he poses the boozy charisma of an uberprole, and his "Bam!" and "Let's kick it up a notch" have

become iconic verbal viscera of the medium. Today, Emeril was making po'boy sandwiches. It was a rerun, but as in traditional porn, so in classic daytime gastroporn – reruns don't matter, and neither do beginnings, middles, or ends. "The big thing in porn is you can't have too much story line," explained Nitke. "It detracts from the sex. Same thing here. Nothing detracts from those food shots."

Emeril jabbed his fists, grunted, then made a guttural promise to demonstrate "that food of love thing. See that?" he asked, holding up a dripping crawfish. "Just place it in there like such. I think you get the drift." He leaned into the camera, his face framed above the gurgling saucepan. "Look at this. Unbelievable! Oh *yeah*, babe." The phrase reminded Barbara Nitke of a retired porn actor named George Payne who had a habit of repeating the exact same expression. "George was famous for his ad-libbing." Recalled Nitke. "'Little girl likes that, *yeah babe?*' I can hear Emeril saying, 'Little girl likes that – *yeah babe?*'"

As Nitke and I finished up the tortilla chips, it was time for Rachel Ray, who has shows in both daytime and prime-time Food Network slots, a multimillion-dollar book deal, and a paradigm evident to all. "She's the girl next door," Sara Moulton had explained to me. In 2003, Ms. Ray pleasantly surprised her aficionados with a series of images published by the soft-core laddie magazine *FHM*. Subsequently disseminated over the Internet, the most popular of these photographs proved to be one of "Ray-Ray" (as her fans call her) in frilly underwear, licking chocolate syrup from the tip of a pendulous wooden spoon. In another shot, Ray sat on a kitchen counter, her bare legs smeared with egg whites.

Barbara Nitke and I watched Ray-Ray do her perky act with a ripe tomato. "I love just giving it a good smash with the palm of my hand," she bubbled. "A good whack. Then I run my knife through it." Her glistening fingers closed around the dripping fruit.

"She is moist," Nitke noted. "She gets her hands dirty."

Of course, the girl next door is not the only female porn archetype. For every Mary Ann there's a Ginger, and the Food Network's resident glamazon would be Giada De Laurentiis. Giada, Bob Tuschman explained, "has a huge following. She has filled out her skin and really fills out the TV screen." Sara Moulton put it more reductively: "She's eye candy."

Nitke and I watched as Giada prepared some Italian cookies. As usual, she dressed in a tight, sleeveless top. "Now I can touch the dough and *elongate* it," she said. "*I'm getting it all over my fingers.*" When Giada squeezed a lemon, the camera moved in for a closeup of the abundant yellow stream. "All that juice," came Guida's thick voiceover. "Oh my god," said Nitke. "It's watersports."

Now Giada chopped garlic – quickly, hypnotically. "That's the equivalent of the sexual skills," Nitke said. "The chopping – that's the hanging-from-the chandelier-having-sex moment. It's amazing to watch that chopping, and we see it over and over, all day long. I would compare it to the deep-throat thing. That's *the wow.*"

Jeff Kay sat in the control room, which bore more than a passing resemblance to the bridge of the *Starship Enterprise*. Eight people on plush swivel

chairs in two semicircular rows faced a wall of thirty-seven television screens, each one running tape of Sara Moulton's hands or Sara Moulton's face or Sara Moulton's apples in various stages of mediation and development. Each member of Kay's crew was focused on his or her black console, all of which were packed with switches and buttons and levers and lights. Kay was delivering orders into his headset. "Go three," he said. "Music up. Dissolve two. And dissolve. Take two. Dissolve four."

Moulton sliced onions while Edge grabbed handfuls of ground chuck. "It's kind of a free-form hamburger," Edge told two.

Jeff Kay put his hand in the air. "Three to one...take one," and the technical director executed the cut from camera three to camera one. "One to two," said Kay, then changed his mind. "One to four, take four. Take two. Two to three, take three. Three to two. Take two..."

All the cameras closed in as Edge slapped handfuls of raw meat into a smoking pan, then turned his attention to the apple pie.

"Music up," said Kay. "Dissolve two. And dissolve. Lose the matte. Two to three..."

Moulton dropped apples into the food processor. Edge moved in and poured a powdery stream of cayenne pepper.

"That's not a full teaspoon," whispered an assistant producer.

"Dissolve four," said Kay. "Three to four. Three to one. Take one..."

"I'm gonna pulse this four times," Moulton said.

The hands camera locked on to the food processor and began to pan down its plastic sides.

On the floor, the "One Minute" sign went up.

"Three to four," said Kay. "Three to two."

Edge scooped up the dripping, peppered apples and tumbled the chunks into a pie dish. Jeff Kay dissolved to a closeup of the dough, which Sara Moulton unceremoniously whacked a couple of times with an oversized rolling pin. Edge grabbed the unfinished apple pie and delivered it to Moulton, who held it in front of her belly.

She did not look entirely comfortable in the pose, nor as certain of herself as when she was peeling and coring those apples, but as though she were as perplexed by the act she found herself committing as she was dumbfounded by the future of food media itself. ("I have no idea what it's gonna be," she ruefully admitted to me later. "None, zero, zip, zilch. You never know, it's so changed.")

Thirty seconds...

"Three to two," said Kay. "Take two. Three to four, take four."

A job shot of spice-slathered apples filled the monitors. Now Edge grasped the perfectly rolled circle of glistening dough, which hung low and loose in fleshy sags. Then in a quick, overhand thrust he slammed it on top of Moulton's fruit. In extreme closeup, the dough quivered, then lay still.

It was a wrap. The culinary assistants swarmed, shoving what was now a rather bedraggled and sorry-looking apple pie off to the side, next to a lukewarm onion burger. Sara Moulton stepped back from the counter and took a long drag of tea. She looked at me and said, "That was fun, huh?"

Michael Gershon, chairman of Columbia University's Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology, believes there is a brain in the gut. This "second brain" controls the expansion and contraction of the vast majority of the body's sphincters, the ring-shaped muscles located, among other places, up and down the digestive tract. Any elementary human-biology textbook will tell you there are sphincters in the pupils of the eyes and sphincters in the sexual organs. There are cervical sphincters, urethral sphincters, pyloric sphincters, two separate and distinct anal sphincters, and the sphincter of Oddi, which controls secretions from the liver, pancreas, and gallbladder. Sphincters, it turns out, abound throughout our bodies, but we never have to think much about getting food from our stomachs to our intestines, or calculate how to equilibrate our own blood pressure. According to Professor Gershon, the brain in the gut takes care of such things.

Gershon is one of many American scientists who have devoted their career to understanding the human bowel. Frederick Bryon Robinson's landmark study, *The Abdominal and Pelvic Brain*, was published in Chicago in 1907. "In the abdomen there exists a brain of wonderful power maintaining eternal, restless vigilance over its viscera," wrote Robinson.

It presides over organic life...It is the center of life itself...The abdominal brain can live without the cranial brain, which is demonstrated by living children being born without a cerebrospinal axis. On the contrary the cranial brain can not live without the abdominal brain.

Even when we sleep, the web of nervous plexuses emanating from that ancient region of the lower brain remains awake, haunting our bodies with a mysterious presence. Perhaps, long before the day the central nervous system convinced us it was in charge, our way of understanding the world had been purely involuntary and autonomic, fluctuating without subtlety between poles of stimulus and response, contraction and relaxation, excitement and satisfaction. Perhaps the enteric brain remains our last link to the time before we ate the apple of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the time before we knew death. The primeval brain of the involuntary, the abdominal brain, the brain that controls sympathy and revulsion but not ratiocination, that is the brain of *the wow*.

When it comes to television, the theory becomes practice: Whether on the Hot Network, E! Entertainment Television, or CBS, the splanchnic response, not the lucubrations of the intellect but the primal gut reaction – that's what hauls in the ratings. When the new president of CNN/US, Jonathan Klein, took over last November, he introduced himself to the troops with what has become the perennial "it's about the storytelling" speech. As Van Gordon Sauter preached in the 1980's, news needs the emo, and executives now understand that the emo comes from the gut, the gut makes the wow, and the wow makes the money. It's not the content that matters – food, sex, or news – so much as the autonomic form.

Enteric attraction explains why the Food Network reaches 87.5 million households, and why the network's share of the cable market has grown more than twice as fast as MTVs in the past year, and almost tripled CNN's rate. And producers envision ten new channels in the next ten years: Food Network Italian,

Food Network Southern, The Gourmet Food Channel, The California Food Channel, the Food and Wine Channel, the Jewish Food Channel...

As sphincter power translates itself into a grand, economic force, the autonomic American will take dominion everywhere. Sex porn has become a \$12 billion industry. Content providers like Wicked Pictures, Sin City, Adam & Eve, and Vivid Entertainment have proved irresistible to distributors like Time Warner, AT&T, Marriott, and Hilton International. Until General Motors sold its interest to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, reported the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, it peddled more sex films than Larry Flynt. At least half of all people who check in to major hotels end up paying to view adult films.

Germinated in the iconoscope and image dissector, involuntary response now blooms in satellite transponders and video-on-demand. Eros had been imprisoned in Lucy and Maude and Rhoda and Roseanne, only to spring free in Buffy and Carrie and Susan and *South Park* and Rachel Ray, whose undeniable porniness has landed her her own magazine – *Every Day with Rachel Ray* – to be published by that renowned purveyor of raunch, *Reader's Digest*. The dominion of the enteric brain has propelled porn from the social ghetto to social diffusion just as it as propelled Jenna Jameson to *US* magazine and cooking shows from Boston public television to the big time. Gut reaction drives the ratings, it drives our politics, and it even drives that most sacrosanct of all American contemplations, the business decision. "Even when we're doing food television it still has to be great television," explained Tuschman. "And it is dependent on having great stars, the person who walks into the room and you cannot take your eyes off them. You are enthralled. When I met Rachel Ray, I had the same feeling. When I met Giada De Laurentiis, I felt the same thing. The star quality." Tuschman paused. He searched for some expression that might communicate what it was the food-show host or hostess possessed that the rest of us did not. Then he smiled. He had found the right word. "Wow."

Before he began his career in television, Bob Tuschman studied political science at Princeton, where he imbibed the transnational spirit of Woodrow Wilson. "You think I'm a food Network zealot," he declared. "I think we do a great service to the world. We have tapped into a cultural need and desire and want. We are going to continue what we're doing. I think we're on the path."

Without negotiation or hint of pretense, Sara Moulton and John T. Edge went at it. Moulton's food swoon was well practiced, a controlled, quiet rapture, while Edge's bliss was more jubilant and rakish, as though each bite were another visceral hit in a lifelong succession of thrills. They ate standing up, straight from the serving dish. They ate without speaking, without napkins, without stopping. When they gobbled the apple pie, it was as if the serpent had never slithered down that ancient tree.

"Three to one, take one," said Jeff Kay. A closeup of Sara Moulton's face filled the monitors. "Excellent sequence," said Kay. "Three to two, take two."

When I spoke to her a few months after the shoot, Moulton recalled that a fan of hers had once sent in a picture of a parrot watching the show.

"Three to two," repeated Kay. "Three to four. Music under..."

Television returns us to the innocence of the beasts. Here, we may watch fornication with no sense of the profane, may witness the creation of a feast with no regret that it will never be ours to taste.

Moulton and Edge rolled their eyes and licked their chops.

"Three to four," said Kay. "Three to two, take two, two to four, take four, four to two, take two, two to four, dissolve two..."

If we could somehow manage to divest ourselves of all enlightenment, if we could pacify our minds into a purer state, perhaps we could spit out that apple of knowledge once and for all and live in prelapsarian paradise. And once we got rid of the brain in the head and substituted that brain in the gut, Eve might return the favor. She would stop being so complicated and demanding, stop complaining and imagining.

Moulton blinked and swallowed.

"Dissolve one," said Kay. "Three to two, take two. Two to four, take four. Four to two, take two. Matt it! Okay...Black"

The daily grind of kitchen choreography had finally reached an end, and it was time to shoot the beauties, the images of food and nothing but food. As the cameras converged on the cheese-exuding apple pie, I remembered one of the first anecdotes Barbara Nitke had told me, one about a philosophical discussion she once had with the editor of *Climax* magazine. Why, she asked, the unending publication of ultra-closeup pussy shots? Why so many? Why the exact same image, over and over again?

"We're all bored to death," the editor admitted, "but we get letters from readers. 'Can we see more?'"

The pie of the beauty shot was not the pie Moulton and Edge had climactically smashed together but one of many "swap" pies crafted in Food Network test kitchens. It was beautiful, but its transient perfection was sobering, too. Fruit ripens to die, Nielsens rise to fall. Sarah Moulton would tell me later that after more than a thousand shows, her contract with the Food Network would not be renewed. ("Listen, I'm not stupid," she would say. "Every show has a life. Every personality has a life.")

When the pie's moment had passed, it was time to shoot the great American hamburger, and everyone's attention shifted to the sparkling monitors. Ped two zoomed in on the onion-gilted sirloin beef, now topless and glistening tumescent, the better to penetrate the mind's eye. Jeff Kay and crew pushed forward, the beautiful dead meat growing larger, ever larger. And as the director called his endless stream of numbers and the producers nodded in silent approbation, even Sara Moulton had to stop and stare. After countless years in the business and a long day at work, this was the wow.