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Making change in the kitchen? A study of celebrity cookbooks, culinary personas, and inequality

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Highlights

- â€¢ Analyzes celebrity chef cookbooks and identifies 7 distinct persona types.
- â€¢ Culinary personas stratify artistic legitimation and naturalize status inequities.
- â€¢ Culinary personas are highly gendered, but also classed and racialized.
- â€¢ Feminine personas closely link their cultural authority to domesticity and the home.

â€¢ Male food celebrities choose from a wider range of respected persona types.

Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how cultural ideals of race, class and gender are revealed and reproduced through celebrity chefs' public identities. Celebrity-chef status appears attainable by diverse voices including self-trained cooks like Rachael Ray, prisoner turned high-end-chef Jeff Henderson, and Nascar-fan Guy Fieri. This paper investigates how food celebrities' self-presentations "their culinary *personas*" relate to social hierarchies. Drawing from literature on the sociology of culture, personas, food, and gender, we carry out an inductive qualitative analysis of celebrity chef cookbooks written by stars with a significant multi-media presence. We identify seven distinct culinary personas: *homebody*, *home stylist*, *pin-up*, *chef-artisan*, *maverick*, *gastrosexual*, and *self-made man*. We find that culinary personas are highly gendered, but also classed and racialized. Relating these findings to the broader culinary field, we suggest that celebrity chef personas may serve to naturalize status inequities, and our findings contribute to theories of cultural, culinary and gender stratification. This paper supports the use of "persona" as an analytical tool that can aid understanding of cultural inequalities, as well as the limited opportunities for new entrants to gain authority in their respective fields.



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Keywords

Food; Persona; Cookbooks; Celebrity chefs; Gender; Inequality

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JosÃ© Johnston is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her major substantive interest is the sociological study of food. JosÃ© Johnston co-authored (with Shyon Baumann) *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* (2010: Routledge), and she has a forthcoming book with Kate Cairns entitled *Food and Femininity*.

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