

10 Things Celebrity Chefs Won't Tell You

Below is an excerpt from the book *"1,001 Things They Won't Tell You,"* which was published in May 2009 and highlights popular columns from SmartMoney's long-running "10 Things" feature.

1. "I'm a celebrity first and a chef second."

Take one part America's obsession with celebrity, stir in a cup of our passion for all things culinary, marinate in a mix of specialty cable channels, and BAM! You've got the perfect recipe for the celebrity chef phenomenon. It's no surprise that more and more chefs are stepping into the media spotlight—"they're the new most likable celebrities," says Susan Ungaro, president of the James Beard Foundation—and they've grown in stature as America has fallen ever deeper in love with food.



At press time the National Restaurant Association was projecting restaurant sales to reach \$558 billion for 2008, a 47 percent increase over 2000, and the Food Network, the culinary world's premier stage, has seen its subscribers more than double in that time. As the financial stakes get ever higher, chefs are fleeing their kitchens in search of a bigger piece of the pie. Rachael Ray, the Babe Ruth of celebrity chefs, has ridden her culinary fame to a daytime talk show and her own magazine. The secret? It's not just talent, says Andrea Rademan, VP of the International Food Wine and Travel Writers Association. "Without the marketing, you can't be a celebrity chef."

2. "There's absolutely no reason to buy my cookbook."

You say you love Bobby Flay's food and want to try to make it at home? Before you spend more than \$30 on his Mesa Grill Cookbook, check out FoodNetwork.com's recipe database, where among the 36,000-plus recipes you can browse, a quick search will net you 1,914 of the master chef's recipes—or 1,764 more than Mesa Grill contains—and it won't cost you a penny. Indeed, free recipe-sharing sites like Recipezaar.com, which offers 271,000 recipes, and Epicurious.com, which holds more than 80,000, also threaten to make your favorite chef's cookbook virtually obsolete. But so far the vast storehouse of free recipes available on the Web hasn't dented cookbook sales; in fact, those authored by celebrity chefs drove overall cookbook sales to \$540 million in 2007, a 4 percent increase from 2006.



Do beware, cautions Christopher Kimball, host of America's Test Kitchen: Often with free recipes, you get what you pay for. First consider the source; if you don't trust the author, go somewhere else. Also, look for a lot of detail in a recipe. In general, the more specific the descriptions and instructions, the more likely it's going to work, Kimball says.

3. "Just because I have a cooking show doesn't mean I'm a chef."

When the Food Network canceled Emeril Live in 2007, it put TV chefs with actual chef experience on the endangered list. The new food faces tend to be cookbook authors and soccer mom cooks. The problem, says American Culinary Federation President John Kinsella, is that "people call anyone who writes a cookbook a chef. That's not what a chef is."



Rachael Ray will be the first to say she's never run a kitchen—but then neither have a lot of the other big food stars, like Nigella Lawson, Paula Deen, or Dave Lieberman. "It's not necessary that there are professional chefs on the Food Network," says Anthony Bourdain, Kitchen Confidential author and a celebrity chef in his own right. "But what they really need are good cooks, and they have precious few of those." A Food Network spokesperson says the idea is "to represent many different perspectives on food."

Foodies, take heart. PBS has been taking in Food Network castoffs, including respected chefs Ming Tsai, Mario Batali, and Sara Moulton. "For us the most important prerequisite is that hosts are experts who are great teachers," says Laurie Donnelly, an executive producer for public TV.

4. "Sex sells, even with foodies."

As the celebrity chef phenomenon has exploded, a growing number of chefs are making mouths water for



reasons other than their culinary acumen. Actress and model Padma Lakshmi, for one, has gone from guest-starring on *Star Trek: Enterprise* to hosting the popular reality show *Top Chef*, where she muses about plating alongside Tom Colicchio, an accomplished chef and one of *People* magazine's "Sexiest Men Alive" for 2007. Lakshmi's food cred includes two cookbooks, *Easy Exotic* and *Tangy, Tart, Hot & Sweet*—both of which feature glamour shots of the India-born starlet with her own recipes.



Rachael Ray forged new ground for nonmodel chefs when she appeared in the October 2003 issue of *FHM* in a skimpy outfit, seductively licking chocolate off a spoon. How did other women chefs react to the sexy spread? "It didn't hurt her career any," says Cat Cora, an *FHM* veteran herself, who has joined Nigella Lawson and Giada De Laurentiis in ditching traditional cooking togs for tight sweaters with plunging necklines. But not every celebrity chef is making a wardrobe reduction. "My hands do not function if I don't have an apron on or my hair's down," says Sara Moulton, host of *Sara's Weeknight Meals* on PBS.

5. "I'm addicted to porn—food porn, that is."

"Mmmm," moans Nigella Lawson as she "Jackson Pollocks" melted chocolate over chocolate cheesecake on an episode of *Nigella Feasts*. As viewers of the show can attest, there's a little something extra in Lawson's cooking. That something is what's known in the industry as food porn: presenting dishes with an eye toward their sensual appeal. And according to food stylist Wesley Martin, no one does it better than Lawson. "The way she talks about food and describes it is all about the senses," he says.



To that end it's crucial the food look great on-screen. Food stylists like Martin often shop for ingredients, prepare, and even cook the dish, all the while making sure it's ready for its close-up. Lawson, for one, appreciates the help; in particular, she credits director of photography Neville Kidd with making the dishes she creates look so scrumptious. "He's an artist creating beautiful paintings about the food," she gushes. But not all TV chefs are so concerned with presentation. On *Simply Ming*, Chef Ming Tsai likes to plate the food himself and shoot it without too much fuss over how it looks. "You're doing a disservice if you make it look too good," he says.

6. "The dishes I make on TV don't always work so great at home . . ."

Sue Gordon, a New Jersey cooking instructor, is a big fan of the Food Network. "I'm always looking for what they'll teach me," she says. Unfortunately, when she tried to duplicate the sweetpotato gnocchi she watched Giada De Laurentiis make on *Everyday Italian*, she learned the age-old lesson that looks aren't everything. "It was so sticky, I had to keep adding flour," Gordon says. "The amounts were completely wrong." Turns out Gordon wasn't the only one who had problems with the recipe—the reviews section of *FoodNetwork.com* features similar complaints from a number of viewers. (A spokesperson for De Laurentiis declined to comment.)



Often it's a matter of translation. A chef might take a recipe for, say, 24 servings and divide it by four—but then fail to adjust the cooking time properly. These slight variations can make a huge difference, according to Ellen Brown, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Cooking Substitutions*. Also, home cooking and professional cooking are entirely different; even the equipment varies. "It's like getting advice from a race-car driver on how to commute to work," Kimball says. "It's two different skill sets."

7. ". . . and sometimes they're just plain gross."

Besides having to worry about whether a recipe you got from a cooking show is correct and usable, you also have to be wary of recipes that just don't taste very good. "I've seen chefs on TV create things that make me cringe in horror at the thought that people are going to eat them," says Ellen Brown.



Take the Red Bean Beach Salad that Ingrid Hoffmann made on the beach-picnic episode of *Simply Delizioso*, for example. Users' reviews on the *FoodNetwork.com*'s recipe board slammed the dish for its strange, unappetizing combination of beans and sweet pickles. (We're serious.) "Yuk! It is beyond nasty," posted "Leah" from Philadelphia. (A spokesperson for Hoffmann declined to comment.)

Obviously, it's not fair to condemn a cook for a single dish, especially one she makes on-air. But before attempting a recipe you've seen on television, do your homework. "If it's from a trained chef like Bobby Flay, you're in safe hands," says Gordon.

8. "It might be my restaurant, but that doesn't mean I cook there."

A recent ad campaign for the city of Las Vegas used a commercial featuring Emeril Lagasse, Mario Batali, and Wolfgang Puck, promising that in Vegas you would visit three celebrity chefs in three days. What the ad didn't mention is that you've got a better chance of hitting the jackpot at keno than you do eating food that's actually been cooked by your favorite celebrity chef at one of his many restaurants.



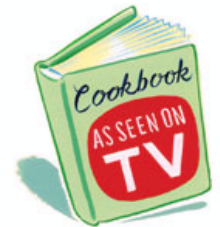
That's not to say the food isn't going to taste good. The menu at these restaurants is prepared from the chef's own recipes, and as Batali's assistant Pamela Lewy says, "Mario is in all of his restaurants all of the time." But while that may be true spiritually, it's simply unrealistic for diners to expect their meal to be prepared by a celebrity chef restaurateur.



But you can improve your odds by checking your favorite chef's tour schedule. If he's going to be traveling to your city, he's more than likely going to visit his restaurants there. If you're lucky enough to catch Lagasse at one of his places, for example, you could be in for a treat. "If he's at the restaurant, he's behind the line cooking," says a spokesperson for the chef.

9. "My show is one long commercial for my cookbooks."

The publishing world sure has changed since cookbook author Mollie Katzen altered the landscape back in 1977 with *The Moosewood Cookbook*, widely credited with introducing vegetarian cooking to the mainstream. Before finding a publisher, Katzen sold the book out of her car, and through word of mouth its popularity exploded, making it one of the 10 bestselling cookbooks of all time, according to *The New York Times*.



With the rise of the Food Network and the birth of celebrity chefdom, it's unlikely that Katzen, who says she was rejected by the Food Network for not being entertaining enough—"I'm too much like Mr. Rogers," she says—could ever have sold as many books if *Moosewood* were released today. (The Food Network had no comment.) That's because celebrity chefs have a stranglehold on the bestseller list, which is proving tough to break. The top five cookbooks of 2006, and four of the top 20 in 2007, belonged to Food Network personalities, according to Simba Information, a Stamford, Conn., marketresearch firm. "When you're on TV, it's like having a commercial on every week," says Anthony Bourdain.

But things might be changing. Despite Rachael Ray's growing media presence, her books didn't perform as well across the board in 2007 as they did in 2006, according to Michael Norris, a senior analyst at Simba. "Would you be on every box of crackers in the country if you thought your cookbooks were going to pay the freight forever?" he asks.

10. "Bottom line: My celebrity status is great for business."

Camille Becerra experienced the Midas touch of celebrity chefdom firsthand when she was chosen as a contestant on *Top Chef*. After appearing in four episodes, Becerra estimates that she's seen a 35 to 40 percent increase at her Brooklyn, N.Y., restaurant, Paloma. Not bad for someone who lasted less than half a season.



Little wonder, then, that some chefs, like Melissa Murphy, owner of Sweet Melissa Patisserie in Brooklyn, N.Y., are using brief appearances on food TV to boost their business. Murphy, who won a Food Network Challenge making edible ornaments, already has a cookbook out and is currently shopping a show idea of her own. But it's not so easy to climb to the top of the celebrity chef heap. As Tom Colicchio says, he once told a graduating class at the esteemed Culinary Institute of America, "If you got into this business to be the next Emeril, you should apologize to your parents for wasting their money."

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