
Reality bites

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How much reality is there in ‘foodie’ reality TV (specifically, MasterChef and MasterChef Junior)?

For the last 20 years, reality TV shows have demanded more and more space on the small screen, largely because there are loads of willing participants and because reality TV is such an affordable programming option.

What’s more, even though most viewers suspect that reality shows are misleading, we still love them. They’re a guilty pleasure. We can’t get enough of the interpersonal drama and the catchy (often bitchy) sound bites.

And yet, MasterChef and MasterChef Junior are distinctive; belonging to a sub-genre that tries, I believe, to offer genuine insight into unfamiliar terrain.

But how genuine is the insight? How much of what we feel is fed to us like baby birds from the mouth of a manipulative production team?

Understanding reality TV

My first step was to unpack reality TV into its component parts, as a genre of TV programming that documents ‘unscripted’ real-life situations populated by an otherwise unknown cast of individuals (non-actors).

The genre has various standard tropes: ‘confessionals’ or interview segments, used by cast members to express their ‘private’ thoughts; participants being eliminated by a panel of judges; and the notion of being able to compete to earn immunity from a coming elimination.

Critics say that reality TV shows are both contrived (participants are placed in artificial situations) and deceptive (via misleading editing, participants being coached on behaviour, storylines being sketched out beforehand, and scenes being staged). Some shows have even been accused of secret ‘match-rigging’: setting up the public’s favourite or an underdog to win.

In the MasterChef kitchen

Now MasterChef (in which I may, humbly, be called a lay expert) has all of the standard tropes. But it’s a slightly different ball game, because it seems to want to teach both the contestants and the viewers to be better cooks. That is, the contestants arrive as skilled amateurs and leave as masters, or so the series would have you believe, says Van Der Werff (AV Club, 2013).

Master plan

In MasterChef, as in all reality TV shows, a production team develops concepts and storylines, contestants are auditioned and re-auditioned and, while all the footage may be real, it’s heavily edited. So there’s a mamma bird, if you will, directing the events behind the scenes.

Casting

How come, in MasterChef Junior in particular, the kids are so engaging, so eloquent, and so unbelievably good on camera? My eight-year-old avoids eye contact with strangers, rambles, mumbles, and chews on her nails while staring into space. Surely, surely, these kids must be heavily coached?

Apparently, that's a No.

Fleischaker (2014) points out that no kid will be cast in MasterChef Junior if they're not a guaranteed source of funny or appealing sound bites – and this is gauged upfront, during casting: “It's easier to cast a person who's charming to begin with (especially when you're dealing with...kids).”

So they're looking for precocious, cute 8 to 13-year-olds – with the right basic skills. But why that specific age group? MasterChef Junior's supervising culinary producer Sandee Birdsong explains, “Once you get to 14 to 17, they might be more skilled, but they've also kind of shut down a lot more. So they're not as good for TV, frankly (in Fleischaker, 2014).”

Questioning

Whenever you see someone on MasterChef describing their thought process or narrating their actions, this footage comes from an interview conducted during or after the shoot day itself. These interviews can take hours, because contestants are talked painstakingly through all of the events of the day.

Rumour has it that participants are seldom coached on what to say; the interviewer is just good at asking the right questions. Sycophant (2015) agrees: “Most non-actors are bad actors. If you tell them what to say, they will do it poorly. Instead the brilliance of reality TV is putting the right people into the right situations, so that they do and say what you hope they will.”

Metafilter (2015) says, “The interview bits that you see are often two seconds out of a long interview. You see the cute, funny, pertinent bits – but there are tons of questions the person doesn't answer succinctly or that are boring.”

Editing

A 44-minute episode of reality TV consists of 6-8 hours of shooting with multiple cameras covering multiple groups or individuals (Metafilter, 2015). There's an insane amount of footage, most of which you and I will never see. What we see are nuggets that tell the story the producers want told.

Producers also use a device known as “frankenbiting”, explains Metz (2018), to splice conversation excerpts or sound bites into a whole new dialogue. Footage captured days apart can appear as one scene or situation.

Production

So, who's in the kitchen?

Crew members, with lots of cameras: cameras on rollers, hand-held cameras, and cameras on cranes. Someone to observe each contestant (or pair of kids) and take notes on the unfolding story, for the producers and editors who'll later craft the footage into narrative. Production assistants at the ready, to sneak in tools that might be missing. And judges, who roam the floor - but do no more or less than what you see on-screen (Jensen, 2016).

What's more, "[t]here's a team of standards-and-practices officials who watch the contestants' every move. Everyone has the exact same advantages," says chef Christina Tosi (in Jitchotvisut, 2018). "Everyone must start with the same understanding of what the challenge is, and we have to confirm they hear every detail," she adds (in Jitchotvisut, 2018).

Food prep

How much of the food stuff is real? Is motor oil used instead of syrup (Kamps, 2018)? White glue instead of milk? Mashed potatoes instead of ice cream? Are skewers holding together the towering croquembouche?

My research indicates that, while all of the food items are indeed what they seem to be (there's no deodorant or hairspray being used to pep up wilting lettuce leaves), the contestants do get a bit of food training.

Mosthof (2015) says everyone has access to "a full library of pretty much every cookbook in the world", to study between challenges. But no one has any prior knowledge of what the challenges will be and no one gets to consult the library during challenges. Then there are cooking classes...

In MasterChef Junior, Sandee Birdsong's culinary team gives the kids classes between episodes, walking them through key techniques and giving safety training. Their classroom is identical to the set — same ovens, same food processors — so the kids can get used to the equipment. But when the cameras roll, there's no instruction from the wings, except for "an occasional whispered exhortation to be careful with the knives" (Fleischaker, 2014).

In Mosthof (2015), MasterChef finalist Josh Marks clarifies, "In baking class, they teach us to make pastry cream, sponge cake, cobbler, shortbread, and pie crusts. But they don't show us how to assemble an apple pie."

Judging

Do the judges actually eat anything? Yes, but since competition shows take so long to shoot and to judge, the food that the judges taste does not always come from the plates that were brought up for judging.

An open secret about MasterChef is that the food presented by contestants is already cold. Judges do the real tasting earlier in the show, while the contestants are at their individual stations (Calombaris, in Mammamia, 2018).

Legal stuff

Finalist Ben Starr went public in 2014 with the revelation that "MasterChef is entertainment. It is not real. It is not a competition. It is highly engineered fiction, designed to keep you watching" and requiring contestants to "give away all rights to how [they're] represented" (Wakeman, 2014).

Here's an excerpt from Starr's contract:

The rights granted to producer also include, but are not limited to, the rights to edit, cut, rearrange, adapt, dub, revise, modify, fictionalize, or otherwise alter the material, and I waive the exercise of any 'moral rights.' I understand that my appearance, depiction, and portrayal in connection with the series may be disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing, or of an otherwise unfavorable nature, may expose me to public ridicule, humiliation, or condemnation, and may portray me in a false light (Wakeman, 2014).

So, just how real is reality TV?

Ultimately, despite MasterChef's touching ethos, patent passion for the art of cooking, and differentiation from many reality TV shows, the fact remains that its producers and editors exert a huge amount of control over what happens on the show. They put adults and kids together in certain situations for specific reasons, and they decide on the footage that is and isn't aired.

In this way, they control how we feel. And in this I admit that, like other MasterChef fans, I'm little more than a hungry, twittering baby bird.