

Instagram Eats First:

How Social Media Has Changed the Way We Eat With Our Eyes

### *A New Picture*

Food media is an ever-developing landscape. Colorless recipe photographs, illustrated advertisements, and the first of American cooking shows (owed to revolutionary Julia Child) soon became highly saturated images in glossy magazines alongside tongue-in-cheek restaurant reviews. All of these can still be seen as recent history, considering how long humankind has been eating—and talking about it. Within the last decade and a half, the most major breakthrough was the inauguration and expansion of food-related social media content. Though it's an iterative process, food social—first Instagram and now TikTok—continues to tell the story of food through imagery.

Today, most establishments, chefs, product lines, publications, and even farms have a searchable online presence to boast their goods. Brands, or branded entities, now have the obligation of social media and the capability to reach their audience directly at any time. Food and beverage establishments market themselves far beyond print and word of mouth. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube play the role of advertising platforms, discussion forums, entertainment centers, and direct lines of communication. For the first time ever, we're seeing instant, asynchronous, and remote interaction with consumers—a phenomenon that may have seemed distant and unlikely just fifteen years ago. Once creators or their teams post videos to their grid or channel, viewers can access them anytime anywhere. Recipe content is saved, shared, and revisited. Consumers have a la carte relationships with the people and entities they follow. The home cook can chop alongside Massimo Bottura or Ina Garten from their own kitchen, iPad propped against a knife block or sugar jar, with the ability to pause, rewind, like, and comment.

Brands—in the form of products, personalities, or philosophies—are now pressured to stay 'relevant,' a word that had a vastly different meaning before algorithms determined someone's success or failure. To remain relevant, one must have a sound understanding of social media

algorithms; what techniques, aesthetics, and features are trending; how to leverage exposure and connections; and often an entire marketing team.

### *Taste the Rainbow*

Social media allows for an overwhelming of the senses, and consumers are now ingesting more content than ever before, at an unprecedented rate. TikTok's usage has steadily increased since its launch in 2016. Only five years later it was ranked the number one most downloaded app globally (Koestier, 2023). In order to compete, Instagram prioritized Reels in 2021, a choice that continues to leave creators increasingly vulnerable if they're unable to participate in the unending, auto-playing, overstimulating video feed. Video is a multi-sensory medium that, when constantly tethered to our palms, can be greatly influential. As different entities in and outside of the food space leverage the tool, food publications share kitchen hacks; influencers curate their 'what I eat in a day' highlight reels; Ina Garten invites upwards of four million followers into her kitchen; users even turned to Kylie Jenner with her YouTube series. Now, video is the highest-viewed and best-performing type of content. It's dynamic, editable, and available all hours of the day. It gives first-person voice to creators and corporations alike, allows chefs to come out from behind the grill station, and affords readers and eaters a wholly different experience.

Though engaging only sight and sound, videos are powerful sensory input, eliciting a response in the viewer that is vastly different from what readers and home cooks experience while reading cookbooks or recipe blog posts. Goopy melted cheese suspended between two halves of a sandwich; the runny yolk of plump poached eggs burst with a fork; a flash and sizzle as onions hit hot oil in a pan—these videos have 'synaesthetic potential,' or the ability to fuse the senses (Schlussel, 2021). While the viewer is not actually using their hands or mouth in contact with the food item captured by video, touch and taste are engaged through close-ups that show vivid colors and textures. These detailed shots can 'arouse the sense of taste or the imagined feeling of the food's texture from inside the mouth' and make 'viewers feel as if they can touch (and perhaps, even taste and smell) the food in the videos,' delivering a hyper sensory experience (Schlussel, 2021). In these instances, the eye becomes an 'organ of touch' and a conduit for other seemingly offline senses, ones that are not actually interacting with the media in a literal way

(Schlussel, 2021). What is still a greatly two-dimensional experience—watching flat screens on handheld devices—suddenly becomes an immersive, whole-body experience that pulls on senses whose organs aren't even interfacing with the food itself. In this way, recipe videos are an entirely new way for consumers' physiology to interact with food media.

### *At-Home With Celebrity Chefs*

Sometimes with a ring light and always with eye contact, subjects today film themselves selfie-style, narrating into the camera, filling the 9:16 screen. Culinary superstars like Masimo Bottura and Ina Garten leveraged pandemic isolation to connect with their audiences. Their videos are, in many ways, a natural progression of shows like *The French Chef* or *Everyday Cooking with Jacques Pepin*—big names demystifying kitchen skills in earnest. All show off their personalities, charming the viewer and camera crew alike, and use technology to reach wider audiences, build community, and spread their scrumptious gospel. Much like cooking shows of the not-so-distant past, 'social media platforms give chefs the opportunity to construct and disseminate their food discourse' (Irimias et al., 2023). Particularly when filming in their personal kitchens, seasoned chefs direct conversations and trends but remain approachable, almost familial.

Bottura, in his YouTube 'Kitchen Quarantine' series filmed by daughter Alexa Bottura, folds his viewers into his life. Their intro song is upbeat, featuring the voices of his family members. The series includes nine episodes which have anywhere from 10-36K views. In his most-played episode, he makes mac and cheese and teaches his way through it (Bottura, 00:00 - 16:27). Throughout each video, Bottura and his family members alternate between English and Italian in a way that is organic. The episodes are jovial, steeped in family and play. In one, everyone is dressed in pajamas. Bottura uses a warm and informal tone in all of his videos, and 'conviviality, the quintessence of any food experience, is enhanced through cameos with family members and the verbal clues: "It is not a master class, it is not a cooking show, it is just us, making dinner"' (Irimias et al., 2023). Vertical filming captures his gestures, expressions, cooking actions, and overall personality. There's little editing, mostly instruction, laughter, and culture. It's deeply intimate and informative—a pivot from his public life as a celebrity chef.

Ina Garten has also mastered this iteration of food media. From her East Hampton kitchen, she breaks the fourth wall with her viewers over a Cosmopolitan. The glass is about the size of her head, and this, in itself, seems to be punchline: in the midst of Covid lockdown, we could not drink together, so we drank—plenty—over FaceTime, Zoom, or Skype (Garten, 2020). Garten, too, generates a closeness with her viewers. Her Instagram is filled with delicious snapshots of food, photos of her smiling husband, Jeffrey, and many recipe videos. Some are reposts of others preparing her recipes, and some are her own with little editing—another nod towards earnestness. Her content is heavily educational, and varies between high-and-lo-fi, but remains committed to substance and storytelling. Higher-budget videos include whimsical music and alternate between overhead stove shots or textured close-ups. They wrap with hand-signed text reading ‘xxx Ina’ (Garten, Instagram 2023). Again, closeness here is paramount. Garten uses social media to directly address her viewers, maintain a relationship with them, and disseminate recipe content.

On the far end of food-related celebrity content lies Kylie Jenner’s ‘Cooking With Kylie’ series, whose ‘[Complete Edition]’ has over one million views. Jenner is not a chef, nor does her fame lie in food; nonetheless, the world watched. Her handful of episodes include one titled ‘the best burger ever,’ during which it seems as though Jenner has never before handled raw meat (Jenner, 08:30 - 09:22). In another, she stands alongside her grandmother and they make tacos with little recognition of the dish’s origins. Gratuitous post-production edits include neon text reading Kylie’s ‘your tacos aren’t real’ jab, a response to her grandmother’s observation that Kylie’s tacos lack lettuce and avocados, and therefore authenticity (Jenner, 01:07 - 01:17). Other episodes are compilations from her Instagram content, including Kylie at the gym and sampling her line of makeup products. The subsequent episodes have a higher budget and feature momager Kris Jenner and sister Khloe Kardashian (Jenner, 09:57 - 11:17). It all feels heavily performed, produced, and generally lacking in culinary content.

*Restaurants and Influencers Feed Each Other*

Today, restaurants benefit greatly from having an in-house or on-call influencer. There's a symbiotic relationship between the two that mutually benefits: exchanging exposure for free meals is a win-win. Positive influencer reviews are precious currency, and the days of Yelp reviews may even be dwindling. Follower count carries a hefty weight and the value of influencer marketing is eclipsing other contemporary strategies like organic and paid search (Filloon, 2019). Many restaurants find it to be a worthy investment that brings in more traffic for longer duration than traditional recognition.

Joe Isidori, chef-owner of Manhattan's Arthur & Son, has a longstanding relationship with twenty-four year old food influencer Jack Goldberg, whose TikTok Jack's Dining Room has over 500K followers, and Instagram more than 300K. His first video for the restaurant got more than 1.5 million views and brought in tons of reservations (Marcus, 2023). They then hosted an influencer party where all the food was complementary and every bite was filmed. More restaurants are leaning into this approach. A free meal is a relatively low cost for millions of views, and 'anything is better than blurry Yelp photos' (Marcus, 2023). The more grammable, the better.

Food videos with high-resolution and like counts are reserved for influencers, celebrities, and career chefs. What about the creative diner? Imagine a pop-up space outfitted with production equipment where curious consumers could experiment with creating recipe content. With the right tools, high-quality ingredients, a bit of instruction and plenty of natural light, the process of creating lip smacking food videos becomes accessible for the typical viewer. In this workshop, a support staff would guide customers through the activity step-by-step, and 'menu items' would be a quarterly rotating list of trending TikTok recipes. Users would have the chance to make their own content from start to finish, and even film their first bite. They'd review the recipe, and post with the hashtag #ChewItYourself.

The glamor and perfection of food social media include high barriers for entry: one must be fluent in technology, have previous success, or shake hands with the right restaurateurs. There are countless humble home cooks with a passion for food, eager to share their work. This space would allow everyone—young teens with kitchen curiosity, empty-nester aunts who photograph

every casserole, tourists eager to taste their way through a new city and film it—the opportunity to join in on the fun.

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