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The Kitchen Refuge

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It required the late election race to make the appeal of the Food Network clear, at least for me -- though, as its steadily enlarging audience shows, its charms have worked their effect on others for a good bit longer. That effect has been, for many, a kind traditionally ascribed to charms -- powers that can protect, soothe and beguile.

Nothing on television in that rancorous, long and hysterical election season, fascinating as it was, offered anything equal to the beguilement of those Food Network shows, daytime and prime time, weekdays and weekends. And nothing on now offers as much insulation from nonstop tides of disaster reporting.

On the Food Network, which launched in 1993, you'll hear no grimness, no details of the stimulus package -- the only pork mentioned is the kind being fried, baked, char-broiled before your eyes. Nothing about the fantastic budget, the unmistakable emissions of class war now emanating from Washington, nothing about the newly worsening stock-market plunge and job-loss levels. Not for nothing is it enjoying its highest ratings ever.



Alton Brown of the Food Network's "Good Eats."

From morning till late night, it's food, and cooking, not to mention eating, all captured by sizzling camera work the most ambitious pornographer might envy. The prime-time food shows concentrate, mainly, on entertainment-reality shows, cooking competitions, and such --

while on the daytime shows (most headed by hosts who are now household names or close to it) the focus is largely on instruction.

Largely, of course, doesn't mean exclusively -- that depends on the daytime host in question.

Paula Deen



The immensely popular Rachael Ray, whose "30 Minute Meals" premiered in 2001, is in fact all business. Brisk and cheery, she grinds, chops, and whirls around the kitchen in workaday shirts and jeans while showing viewers how heavenly meals can be made in a trice -- and never mind the measuring cups. "Just eyeball it," she instructs her audience at regular intervals.

Focus is somewhat more variable when it comes to "Barefoot Contessa," whose demurely engaging host, Ina Garten, also joined the network in 2001, after a varied career that included stints as a budget analyst in the Carter White House, the proprietor of a gourmet food store in the Hamptons, and more. Ms. Garten is prone to take time out from cooking instruction to deliver updates about her husband, Jeffrey, former dean of the Yale school of management -- on his tastes in food, their enduring loving relationship, and causes thereof.

On one "Contessa" program that recently aired, devoted to the couple's 40th anniversary, we

could see Mr. Garten shopping for a tent as an anniversary gift -- don't ask -- while Ms. Garten prepared Italian Wedding Soup as a dinner surprise for him. It was no surprise to receive, thereafter, details of Ms. Garten's recipe for her own happy marriage -- namely, that she wanted Jeffrey to be happy and he wanted her to be happy. Moments do arise when a brief time out from the Food Network may feel compelling.

Paula Deen joined the network in 2002 with "Paula's Home Cooking." An incontestably vivid presence, Ms. Deen is given to lots of down-home wisdom delivered, like her recipe instructions, in a deep Southern accent. You could end up, as I did, with deranged ambitions to make a grits pie. The show is, like its host, all comfort: sun-filled, homey, assured, as Ms. Deen drawls on about the deliciousness of the butter and the other artery-killing stuff that goes into her recipes by the ton.

The same can be said, of course, about the food featured on most of the other shows, not least "Drive-Ins and Dives" in prime time. Here host Guy Fieri rattles around the country sampling ribs, steaks, fries, ice cream and every other magnificently fatty food ever conceived -- usually in places packed with regulars attesting to their addiction. The pace is dizzying -- the point is not to learn how the food is made, but to feast on those close-ups of all that smoking meat, rivers of cheese -- and did I see gelato topped with pork drippings? That's one of the Food Network's ideas of entertainment, and it's not a bad one.

The nighttime lineup does offer entertainment of a much sharper kind, along with serious cooking instruction (however unserious the delivery) -- namely, Alton Brown's "Good Eats." Mr. Brown -- a bracingly acid guide to food science, history, and the culture and development of various dishes -- dispenses cogent information in rapid-fire bursts.

A recent program covered milk, milk products, milk cake -- you don't want to think about that -- and lactose in the history of humankind. That's in addition to his recital of all the ethnic and racial groupings subject to lactose-intolerance problems. A hundred years ago, he informs us, a cow yielded 1,700 quarts of milk a year -- today,

the yield has gone up to 8,200 quarts annually. Somewhere in the middle of all this, there's a lesson, complete with illustration, on how to make cottage cheese from scratch.

Mr. Brown -- the network's prime-time star if ever it had one -- can, furthermore, deliver instructions on coconut layer cake you're not likely to forget.