

November 11, 2010

Hi John-

Here's the article I did about the shows Master Chef and Top Chef. I've sent notes to Antenna and Mega channels and am waiting for photos. I'll send them to you as soon as I get them. Sending file as back up. Talk soon, Perri

Eat Me, Baby! Greece Goes Gaga for Gastronomic Game Shows

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Reality goes culinary: the complimentary appetizer

Every year around the end of summer holiday season, the big-time, corporate hype-machine begins cranking out scads of flashy advertisements during primetime hours for the upcoming fall season television programs. This year, as has been the norm for the last several, reality-competition shows have been the big favorites of the viewers. Recently, shows like *Greek Idol*, *Next Top Model*, *X-Factor*, *Fame Story* and *So You Think You Can Dance?* have been the smash-hit, glitzy, empty calorie eye-candy programs which have pulled in the big home-watch numbers. This year is no exception to the rule, except that the competition platform has moved from the dance floor and bandstand to the kitchen cutting board.

Bologna and Cognac

In Hollywood, we have the Academy Awards program for the hot-shot critics' choice of best films. We also have the Peoples' Choice Awards for the laity to chime-in with their always welcome, but inexplicably *vin ordinaire* review on the top flicks. I always preferred the Peoples' Choice because it's the only place where guys like Chuck Norris and Dolph Lundgren have a chance to wear their smoking jackets and not get labeled as pansies by their respective fan clubs. On a similar note, we have the haute cuisine show *Top Chef* on the Antenna channel for the self-appointed gourmants and the more instructional, a la carte program *Master Chef*, for the food-intensive indulgence of the masses, which appears on Mega.

Master Chef: Bread and Circuses

The Greek version of *Master Chef* is a knockoff franchise program of the original which aired on BBC in England from 1990-2001. I like *Master Chef* for the mere reason that it began with a public cattle call for any and all people who have an interest in cooking. There were no scholastic prerequisites, obligatory work experience resumes or letters of recommendation from exalted ted kitchen demigods needed to throw your hat into the ring. Potential contestants made their finest personal home recipes for the panel judges and all were fairly weeded out to the top twenty chefs to compete for a fifty-thousand Euro prize.

Top Bananas

The judges for the show reads like a gourmet Myers-Briggs roulette wheel. Lefteris Lazarou is the guru overseer. He's big, paternal, wise, slow to judge others and very low profile. His considerable presence is the visual anchor of the panel. His two fellow judges, Yiannis Loukakos and Dimitris Skarmoutzos are the two extreme poles of the critical menu. Lazarou is also a smart cookie, as he's cashing-in quick on the show's hype, as his photo, recipes and personal interview are on every other magazine jamming the racks of the corner kiosks.

When looking at panel judge Yiannis Loukakos, one is reminded of the inescapable Yuppies (Young Urban Professionals) which swarmed America in the 1980s. One cannot but be impressed by him: young, handsome, tall, very well spoken, perfectly coiffed with a picturesquely trimmed beard and dressed with just enough understated style and *je ne sais quoi* as to be accepted into any private country club you care to name. Fellow judge Dimitris Skarmoutzos, is another story- entirely.

Covered with tattoos, T-shirted and buzz-cutted Dimitris Skarmoutzos looks more like a semi-retired L.A. punk rocker rather than a multi-degreed gourmet chef. He leers at the contestants with arched brows over his short, scraggly Van Dyke beard and tells them, in exact terms, how good, bad or utterly indifferent he feels about their work. I have to imagine the country clubs would fall over themselves to have him in their employ, but would experience nervous facial tics about having him as a member.

Top Chef: The Ultimate in Food Porn

Top Chef is also a bastard child knockoff of the original American show of the same name which has appeared on the Bravo channel from 2006 to the present. In direct contrast to *Master Chef*, this show features nothing but the crème-de-la-crème heavyweight champs of the Greek haute cuisine circles. The competitors are all degreed professionals with years of experience. Many own their own successful restaurants. The mouthwatering meals they prepare during the show are something extraordinary to behold; it is almost beyond human endurance to watch without slavering like a ravenous Java man. The judges, who sit like kings in repose while the contestants scramble like electrified rats preparing their repasts, are the superheroes of the country's kitchen pantheon.

Unlike *Master Chef*, where the judges are completely diverse in their characters and temperaments, the panel judges on *Top Chef* are very similar in style and appearance. Herve Pronzanio, Apostolos Trastelis and Christoforos Peskias are the titanic-names of Hellenic cookdom. All of them are low-key and even-tempered personality types. But when they

critique the work of the contenders, they very politely, and with diplomatic finesse, filet, ex-sanguinate, debone, parboil, french fry and occasionally microwave the participant before them with the precision of an optical laser.

“This is not a risotto,” one of the judges remarked to a trembling participant as he disapprovingly picked at his dish with a testing fork, “this is *something* like a risotto.”

You Eat With Your Eyes

There wouldn't be reality shows with a serious babe-factor involved in the mix. Both *Master Chef* and *Top Chef* are fully equipped in their respective kitchens with some serious estrogen. The stunning classical music composer Eugenia Manolidou is the hostess of *Master Chef*, while former daytime TV personality Nadia Boule shares the same duty on *Top Chef*. Both of them appear to perform the same functions on their shows: reading teleprompted instructions, looking pensive, quizzical, derogatory, accusative or contented as the situation requires and appearing tasty for the camera, which they both do perfectly.

Where's the Beef?

So why now? Why do we have such profound interest in food preparation, that two of the major television channels in the country have made these programs their pet projects? People have been cooking since the time of the Australopithecus. My guess is, just like yours, the economy.

The Greek economy has been completely pureed for the last several years. The last couple of years from a profound drop in tourism have been cataclysmic, especially among the young where unemployment numbers are scary. In times of trouble, the basic, foundational elements of our lives come to the forefront: food, shelter, clothing and family become the epicenter from which we revolve. Extraneous, discretionary, frivolous, impulse buying has become a thing of the past for many Greeks. But people must eat, and while great numbers of people in the country are staying home more than ever before, domestic life takes on a new precedence.

Many people I know personally can't afford to eat in restaurants, I mean *any* restaurant, and go out maybe once a week with friends for coffee, ice cream or a souvlaki. If programs like *Master Chef* and *Top Chef* can give people some free entertainment and good ideas on how to jazz up their pork chops or make a dessert more tempting with a new sauce or topping, who's to say that in their own way, they're not actually *helping* the country get through the difficult times and creating economic growth by creating interest in cookware, kitchen appliances and new and varied recipes which are new to the Greek palate.