

Latin America at the *Chef's Table* - An analysis of Latin American cuisines representations in Netflix *Chef's Table* series

Ana Rosa Santos - PhD student, University of Coimbra/
Assistant Professor, University of Brasília
arsantos@unb.br

Aline Macedo Araújo - PhD student, University of Coimbra
alinentum@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the media has a fundamental role in building and mediating tastes and values of social groups, creating and disseminating images and imagery based on which symbolic and material consumption occurs. As Holden (2013) calls attention to, media can be understood as an institution (like the state, corporation, or family) that provides the ideational and concrete context within which social values and roles are represented and through which they are reproduced - entertaining and instructing viewers on many different aspects of life.

Digital media fulfilled, in the first quarter of the 21st century, the “educational” and leisure role that television played in the last century. The largest virtual entertainment shelf, with over 100 million subscribers worldwide, is Netflix. This platform has witnessed a boom of series, documentaries and non-fictional films about food and related topics. Netflix's first worldwide documentary series was *Chef's Table*, which features the routines and philosophies of renowned chefs from various countries, usually at their renowned, award-winning urban restaurants.

Counihan (2013, p. 175) points out that “Across cultures and history, food work can represent drudgery and oppression but also power and creativity. [...]” - which is true both on domestic and professional settings, as the ones portrayed on *Chef's Table*. Therefore, the show presents, performs, interprets, translates, negotiates and/or modifies discourses and ideologies that operate through food and cooking - displaying the “nuances of power in food-related activities that reside at the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and migration”, as Julier and Lindenfeld (2005) argue. In a few words, the inequalities of the global capitalist system that we are part of.

This work aims to examine Latin American cuisines representations presented in Netflix *Chef's Table* series, considering its role as mediator and producer of views on Gastronomy and fine dining. *Chef's Table* has a total of 30 episodes - five of them portrayed a Latin American chef: Argentine Francis Mallmann (volume 1, episode 3), Brazilian Alex Atala (volume 2, episode 2), Mexican Enrique Olvera (volume 2, episode 4), Peruvian Virgilio Martínez (volume 3, episode 6) and Mexican Cristina Martinez (volume 5, episode 1). The remaining episodes are distributed as follows: 10 European chefs, 9 North-American chefs, 5 Asian chefs and 1 Australian chef. It becomes immediately clear the marginalization of the global South presence in the show. Moreover, only 10 episodes feature female chefs (one of which is Cristina Martinez), reproducing an issue widely discussed by many authors: in most cultures and over time, women are associated with daily domestic cooking and family care, while the role of the cook - the chef - is masculine (Mennel, 1996; Contreras, 2011; Trubek, 2000; Holden, 2013; and many others). Swenson (2013, p. 140) argues that “Within

the public sphere, the professional chef has long been male. Even today, restaurant kitchens are notoriously sexist and macho (Pratten, 2003, p. 455). Women still hold less than 10% of the top positions in the culinary industry (Cooper 1998). [...]”. Therefore, it is unavoidable to address how these two major (and intertwined) matters of gender and centre-periphery relations emerge in the selected episodes' analysis.

POWER AND INEQUALITY THROUGH THE CAMERA LENSES

Gender and food is a growing topic within the Food Studies area, whether from the perspective of the sexual division of labour, or the differences in food consumption between men and women and their normative models. In relation to audiovisual media, food and gender, the works of Holden (2013) and Swenson (2013) stand out. Both of them demonstrate how Food Television programs (re)produce and legitimate social meanings and communicate or defy hegemonic masculinity discourses.

Swenson (2013) analyses programs of the Food Network conducted by male hosts, and classifies them in four cooking codes, according to its contents: “*Cooking As Way to Flex Professional Muscles*”, “*Cooking As Leisurely Entertainment*”, “*Cooking As Journey*” and “*Cooking As Competitive Contest*”. Those categories could be linked to the ones that Holden (2013) proposes, following Ito’s (1996) trinity of *authority*, *power*, and *possession*, and adding *creation* and *freedom*, to examine how masculinity is constructed and communicated in the Japanese television shows. According to Swenson,

By adopting the role of chef, instructor or scientist, male hosts construct cooking as a way to flex professional muscles, a theme which rejects situating the male cook as an everyday provider of the personal, domestic care that is a hallmark of family life. [...] By giving cooking an aura of professionalism, hosts reify masculine autonomy from domestic responsibilities and maintain the masculine ideal of “breadwinner” and “good provider.” (Swenson, 2013, p.142)

On the other hand, the author explains, female hosts “[...] reify their femininity by coding cooking as a fulfilling act of love and intimacy done for others” (id., p.145), showing themselves as approachable cooks that prepare meals for family and friends, sharing recipes that are associated with their own family history and values. The use of science, business expertise and professional training separate the work done by masculine figures from the feminine, private domain of the household.

This classification relates to Holden’s (2013) *possession* and *authority* dimensions. *Authority* is displayed in different ways. For example, the elevated position of control and authoritative action that comes with the role of hosts or chefs, which the author calls “executive function”.

Men are executives insofar as they are accorded the lead and the power to direct. All activity flows through them, or else beneath their commanding gaze. In food shows, masculine guidance can take the form of two guises: host and chef. (Holden, 2013, p. 124)

Another kind of authority, conforming to Holden, is the one that comes from the recognition of a chef as an “expert”.

In Japan, where organizational affiliation is one of the significant markers of legitimacy, food shows take pains to introduce their kitchen authorities not simply by name or age, but by pedigree. For example, they name the schools in which they have trained, the countries in which have they apprenticed, and under which banner they now wield a spatula. In a word, this discursive formation is framed institutionally, in terms of economy and social sanction. (id., p.126)

As for *possession*, he contends that recurrently male chefs are introduced as successful owners of restaurants they have founded, and manage and maintain. That ownership lends an additional power - “[...] He is not only executive, not only employer, not only expert, he is also landholder, proprietor, and business owner. In Japan, for historical (social class-based) reasons, these are quite powerful statuses to hold.” (Holden, 2013, p.128).

Swenson also proposes that, when portraying masculine figures, TV programs show “*Cooking As Competitive Contest*”, promoting a version of masculinity tied to hierarchy, success, power, speed and stamina (Swenson, 2013, p.150). According to her,

[...] Overall, competitive contests function to normalize the “manly” nature of professional cooking and to remove cooking from the cooperative ethos of family life; however, the sports orientation of these programs does not completely work against a nongendered division of labor. In small ways the network does resist the classification of separate spheres when female hosts become active participants in the public sport of cooking and the performance of hegemonic masculinity. [...] (id., p. 243).

In consonance, Holden states that food competition shows are a demonstration of *power* related to a sporting, contentious masculinity, in a discursive frame that conjures constructions of gender in terms of combat and centres on competition to avoid pecuniary loss and public shame (Holden, 2013, p.123).

Another category that Swenson’s found in her research is “*Cooking As Leisurely Entertainment*”, which is largely based on the idea that, by showing meal preparation as a special event, separated from the ordinary domestic environment, cooking becomes an acceptable masculine activity. This is associated with Adler’s (1981) premises that, within the heteronormative domestic sphere, there is an ideal opposition between “Dad’s” and “Mom’s” cooking.

Dad’s cooking exists in evident contradistinction to Mom’s on every level: his is festal, hers ferial; his is socially and gastronomically experimental, hers mundane; his is dish-specific and temporally marked, hers diversified and quotidian; his is play, hers is work. [...] (Julier and Lindenfeld, 2005, p.5)

This relates in a lesser extent to Holden's *freedom* dimension, an aspect of masculinity construction offered by the shows that is centred on autonomy and an individually-oriented existence. He points out that

This is not so much embodied by the chefs who have hung out their shingle and run their own businesses; rather, it is in the aegis of the entertainers and guests who saunter onto the food show stage seemingly unencumbered and free of institutional affiliation or organizational layering. (Holden, 2013, p.130)

Finally, Swenson (2013) points out an entire typology of programs that are focused on presenting "*Cooking As Journey*". This kind of program showcases travelling and eating, particularly unusual or special dishes, and sights in restaurants, bakeries, farms and other establishments, to satisfy themselves or indulge in exotic escapades. Her research found out that the female hosts would frequently perform trip-planning or budgeting services for viewers, while their counterparts "[...] are portrayed as down-to-earth, 'everyman' food critics who want to satisfy their 'manly appetites' with 'real' American food or as 'cultural anthropologists' who can unlock the secrets of exotic locales by eating local cuisine [...]" (id, p.148).

Holden also highlights this aspect within the *possession* dimension, arguing that "In such cases, the chef becomes something more than a food preparer; he becomes host in his own right, commander of a world of his own invention, and interviewee" (Holden, 2013, p. 128).

The only element that does not draw immediate parallels between the two authors is the dimension that Holden understands as "*creation*", or *masculinity as production*. This expression of masculinity is linked to a dominance over nature. Citing Sherry Ortner, Holden emphasizes "[...] the notion that the male world is "made"; it is a world invented, produced, rendered, and controlled." (Holden, 2013, p. 129). According to him, the humanly constructed environment is configured to confer status and facilitate the expression of power.

Although it is most obvious that *Chef's table* is a *Way to Flex Professional Muscles* and to show *possession* and *authority*, it is very interesting to note that the series can be framed in most of the categories/dimensions explained above, as we will examine in the next section.

LATIN AMERICA ON THE SPOT

Unlike most of their Asian, European and North-American counterparts, representations about Latin America and its chefs are constantly linked to wilderness and exoticism, which appears both in the episodes storylines and descriptions (adjectives such as « adventurous », « remote », « wild » or « unknown », or verbs like « explore » are used in four of the five descriptions, whilst among the non-Latin episodes this kind of description occur in 5 of 25 episodes). As for the storylines: Mallmann roasts the asados in an open fire, along with the ice; Atala tracks through the jungle looking for ingredients; Virgilio Martínez participates, in the Andes Mountains, in the traditional ritual of making the Huatia oven together with Quechuas and then cooking potatoes, to name a few.

By stressing those views on Latin America, the series invokes both a colonial picture about the region as an exotic and wild place to be conquered, and a gendered perspective on the chefs that subdue it. They are framed as men of action, full of stamina, they know the secrets of their environment. In other words, they own their dominion, at the same time that they exhibit autonomy and freedom - or Holden's dimensions of *creation* and *possession*.

Another constant is the notion of tradition and the use of traditional ingredients and techniques, often learned from local people and appropriated by the chef. In fact, a great part of the episodes is dedicated to following the chefs during their travels to traditional places, closely related to Swenson's category of *Cooking as a Journey*. The value given to local ingredients is highlighted, either if they are highly consumed (such as cassava in Brazil and corn in Mexico), or if the products are unknown to the majority of the country's population, such as the Amazon or Chicatana ants. However, those traditional foods are not usually shown in their original manners, they are reframed as gourmet/haute cuisine. This process also depicts the centre-periphery relations, as the rural or wildness areas just supply (products, recipes, and inspiration), but the food production and consumption occurs in urban settings, physically and symbolically distant from its original ways.

The importance of the family is also emphasized, whether in the recurring scenes of the chefs with their families, or in the treatment of their teams as a second family - or even, in chef Cristina's case, her own customers. Yet, the way they are depicted is a gendered one. When the chef's own family members are displayed, most of them female relatives, it is either in a support role for the cook activity or permeated by an attribution of responsibility for the care of members of the household to the women: wives, sisters and daughters who work in the restaurant kitchen or the restaurant management alongside the chefs, or who take care of the chef's children as he cannot be there to share this responsibility, as he is occupied with the restaurant (or, in Cristina's case, she immigrated to the United States to provide better living conditions for her daughter). As for the "second" families, male chefs reinforce a narrative about male camaraderie and fraternity with their teams (reinforcing what Swenson calls *Cooking as Leisurely Entertainment*), while the female chef (re)produces the "rhetoric of caring" as she bonds with her community assuming a "motherly" position of nurture and maintenance of tradition, values and generational legacy - which is related to what is seen as the primary function of women in many cultures: creating and caring physically and psychically for family members. As discussed before, this would be the opposition of Swenson's *Cooking as Way to flex professional muscles* and Holden's *power* dimension, the very premise (and most part) of the show.

Women traditionally are the protagonists at Latin American kitchens at home, in charge of but this is not reflected in the remarkably unequal distribution in relation to the gender of the Latin American chefs portrayed. Other differences were observed between the 4 episodes starring men and that of female chef Cristina Martinez - which, by the way, is the only one who does not work in their own home country, but in the United States. It is interesting to note that even the directing of the episodes show the same distribution: the 4 episodes are conducted by male director Clay Jeter, whereas the female chef episode is directed by female director Abigail Fuller.

The men's trajectories were somewhat similar: they started to work in gastronomy by chance, left their country to acquire training in European cooking techniques, underwent a

transformation in their gastronomy perspective and made a move back to their origins. That training is both a claim for masculine *legitimacy* and *authority*, as Holden argues, and a demonstration of a colonialist perspective, as this legitimacy must be sought outside their countries. They also put themselves in the position of being responsible for modernizing the gastronomic scene of their countries and teaching their people the value of its cuisines, by promoting it as fine dining, but during the episode there is little or no questioning of the inequalities present in gastronomy or society.

The female chef, in turn, began to learn the technique of Mexican barbacoa at the age of 6, followed the traditions of her family, left her country to work and provide better living conditions for her daughter. As barbecuing is conventionally a male task in Latin American cultures, it is important to acknowledge that the only female protagonist occupies a traditional male position in the kitchen.

Another difference between her and the male chefs is the intention they show. She just looks for making gastronomy for the sense of home, with no intention to change anything, only to make it taste better. She exposes not only the social issues linked to immigration, but also the physical and verbal abuse suffered by women, child labour, among others.

CONCLUSIONS

The selected episodes present and reproduce the inequalities and gendered distinctions in Latin American - and worldwide - professional kitchens, although there are moments of slippage between these inequalities and distinctions. Media representations such as Chef's Table ones feed the discourse that a woman's place is in the domestic realm (even in professional settings), linked to homemade food and comfort food, while men are presented as dreamers, avant-garde, innovators in the fine dining scene. Because of that kind of vision, women do not reach the same wages, positions and valorisation and are in inferior working conditions as men in professional kitchens.

An analysis of the portrayal of Latin America on Chef's table says a lot about the region and its issues, but says even more about the producers and consumers of the show. It is interesting to note that the series encompasses most of the masculinity markers categorized by Swenson (2013) and Holden (2013) - and might be part of the reason for its huge success. This media representation is just a sample of the lack of female visibility and centre-periphery relation in gastronomy environments, and of how a tv show has an important role in defining tastes and views on fine dining, orientating consumers on eating in those urban settings.

Still, the series has its values and plays an important role in the dissemination of Latin American cuisines. The portrayed chefs seek, through their carefully curated display of their trajectories; show the vibrant diversity of ingredients and high quality delicacies that Latin America has to offer. They also demonstrate how they managed to value local ingredients, modernize cuisines and amplify environmental concerns - now they should continue in the path and modernize labour and social relations.

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