

Reality Bites: Consuming Food Television

“Unti e Bisunti. The Slow Food Travel Cooking Show”

Marta Perrotta, *Università Roma Tre*

Food in Italy is one of the main opportunities for socializing and its rituals are a rich container of professional, familiar and friendly relationships. Regional cuisine and street food exert a particular fascination on the audience of foodies and television schedules benefit from this success. Therefore, Italian channels are filled with food shows: adaptations of global formats, ready-made versions of international shows and tailor-made local programs.

There are four main sub-genres: 1) factual programmes that serve as cooking tutorials with demonstrations of how to cook basic or complex recipes; 2) scripted reality shows which use the kitchen - its rules, its professional challenges - as a reference to tell makeover stories (*Kitchen Nightmares*); 3) culinary talent shows, from the more humorous approach of *Ready Steady Cook* to the melodramatic competitions staged in *Bake-off* or *Masterchef*; and 4) travel cooking shows, some with a documentary flavor (*Bizarre Foods* or *Gordon's Great Escape*) and others more akin to reality shows (*Man vs. Food*). In these last examples, food has an identity role, while eating and cooking become the focus of the narration: every supposedly lost cooking ritual presented is to be discovered and reaffirmed, reminding the viewer how important it is to preserve traditions.

There could also be a parallel between food television and food culture itself, where fast-food and slow-food approaches live side by side. And in Italy there are just a few original local shows: one of them, *Unti e Bisunti (Greasy and Greasier - <http://bit.ly/UntieBisuntiS02E01>)*, on Discovery Channel DMax, hosted by Gabriele Rubini, aka Chef Rubio, a former rugby player covered by tattoos, might be considered a televisual transposition of *Slow Food* movement.

As with all television programmes, time is crucial for telling a good story: alongside all the discussion about the importance of following the elaborate cooking times of the traditional recipes, the preparation of food is always done under the pressure of time - see the “pressure test” in *Masterchef*. But *UeB* highlights the varieties of Italian food geography, where the cuisine changes dramatically even if you move a few kilometers. Rubio travels throughout Italy, describing incredible regional street food and looking for the most caloric recipes: applying the main principles of *Slow Food* philosophy, he explores local cooking traditions in a slow pace and in the pursuit of genuine gastronomic pleasure.

Each episode focuses on a small town where Rubio challenges a legendary chef on the preparation of one representative local dish. However, the main narrative focus isn't the challenge itself but the description of the cooking techniques that have been passed through generations, and the search for genuine ingredients in local markets and farms. The gastronomic variety of the Italian landscape, combined with the aesthetic appeal of this show, made the immediate success of *UeB* and secured the production of three more seasons based in Italy and also in Spain, Germany (countries where Discovery has released the show) and France.

The format is a character-oriented one, built around Rubio, who started as a YouTuber that made fun of Italian celebrity chefs and their shows. Rubio claims that chefs should use clay, wood and glass (and not food) to make art, and this is exactly the main aesthetic idea behind *UeB*: to overturn the philosophy of food as status symbol, something to be described, filmed, but not eaten, as a triumph of exotic ingredients and elegant shapes celebrated in *Masterchef* and by its legion of followers.

Indeed, Rubio speaks with an authentic Roman accent, often with a full mouth, without formal or affected manners, and leads the viewers into the little alleys where street food reigns, to meet tavern hosts and cooks of the most hidden and authentic kitchens. The storytelling of the dishes involves “poor” recipes, prepared with few ingredients, found on a limited territory and, realised with the least popular - therefore cheapest - parts of the animal like entrails, which deserve long cooking times.

UeB promises a very rich aesthetic experience in terms of visual pleasure, pushing the limits of what is possible to show in an Italian cooking show. We see Rubio tasting every edible thing he meets in his quest searching for the dish for the challenge; with his bare hands he eats food that is served on paper or rustic dinnerware; the camera indulges on details of the dishes and on mandatory close-ups of his full mouth, with oil dripping from his moustache.

The *mise-en-scène* plays a lot with archetypal cinematic references - from “Italian-style comedy” to “Spaghetti Western” - and parodies all film genres, from porn to anime, from action movies to superhero sagas, in order to appeal to the widest audience. The high-pace editing is enhanced by a very energetic soundtrack. A split screen graphic describes the ingredients and calories of the dish, also indicating the amount of time needed to digest it.

The show offers the viewer both an archaeological tour into taste and the temporary opportunity to embrace a new lifestyle based on an up-to-date reading of culinary tradition. This ironic host may disguise himself as a superficial hipster celebrity-chef (<http://bit.ly/UntieBisuntiPROMOeng>) but both the accuracy of the production and the strong focus on the content prove that Rubio’s format is unique in the de-professionalization of cooking competencies towards the exaltation of the importance of simple ingredients, slow preparations and traditional culinary secrets.