



FOOD PORN

BEHIND THE SCENES OF SEDUCTION

Why does your mouth water uncontrollably the instant you open 'foodstagram' or a gourmet mag? Wise up on the secret ways stylists, photographers and marketers engineer your desire to eat.

Words: Stephanie Osfield

You want it. Right here. Right now. You crave. Something saucy. Or succulent. New. Tempting. Decadent. To stimulate all your senses then completely sate you. You desire...that dish you just locked eyes on while peeping at the cover of a gourmet food magazine. Maybe you were teased by a triple-dark Belgian chocolate mud cake topped with creamy ganache and raspberry compote. Or seduced by blackened Cajun salmon on a bed of crisp asparagus, sweet corn and bell pepper salsa with smashed potatoes. Either way, one glance was all it took for you to lose control. Of your epicurean urges.

Familiar? We've all found our mouths instantly watering after eyeballing a foodie mag or 10. In noughties Australia,

food has become one of our biggest national obsessions. Chefs and cooking gurus are superstars who, like Madonna and Kylie, only need first names – think Nigella, Jamie, Tetsuya, and Donna. Between food TV shows promising to turn us

Once reality TV arrived, and hits like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* became big advertising business, food was a natural choice for a reality makeover because it's something we all need and, let's face it, is one of life's greatest pleasures. "TV

coffee or during the program as viewers tweet and text each other." Using techniques from good television drama, TV cook-off shows completely suck us in. "They keep us glued to the set with dramatic voiceovers and music that builds tension,"

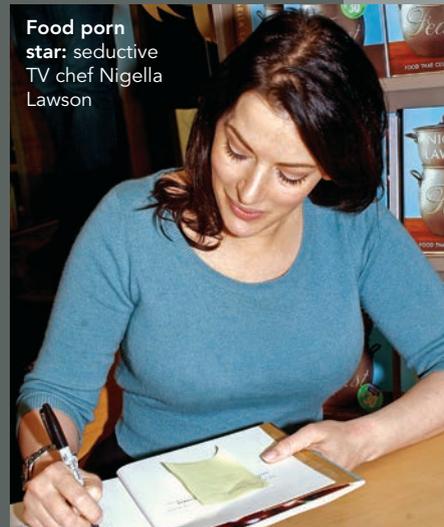
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TV food shows provide a 'social sofa'.
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into cooking gurus, audiovisual safaris from Delhi to Corsica and quiz-style quests for the perfect terrine, tostada or tart, our tastebuds and appetites are being constantly turned on by 'food porn'.

This trend was kickstarted in the late '90s as globalisation led us to try new cuisines.

food shows provide a 'social sofa'," says Emma Ashton, an expert in reality TV and publisher of *Reality Ravings*, a blog that tracks reality TV trends. "Through programs like *MasterChef*, people feel connected to their community because the show provides a talking point the next day over

Food porn star: seductive TV chef Nigella Lawson



BEST BODY » FUEL IT

says Ashton. “They edit a little incident to make it seem a huge deal and cut to ad breaks at crucial moments – just before the budding chef pulls their ailing pavlova nests out of the oven or the judge is about to announce the winner.”

How we're being played

As we watch, we salivate. “Food porn taps in to our primal ‘me want’ brain,” says John Berardi, whose website Precision Nutrition administers courses in healthy approaches to food. “Food porn presents offerings where everything is better than reality. It puts our culinary experience into a shiny, visually appealing, easily consumed fantasy package that creates desire.”

En route we are being completely manipulated, to think about and crave culinary delights 24/7. Little wonder there is an obesity epidemic – food is never far from our minds. Studies show that just thinking about a chocolate bar or burger can start a salivation process in your mouth, making you feel instantly hungrier. “This food cue then triggers an action – where you seek out that cookie or drink,” says Berardi. “The problem is that regular exposure to this trigger can cause us to build tolerance, so we need five cookies, not one, to get the hit of satisfaction we’re seeking.”

In short, this constant spill of media foodie offerings is repeatedly switching on your appetite signals. And as foodie images are on glossy steroids, they’re hard to ignore. The blueberries are bluer, the steaks juicier and the salads and Asian greens look crisper than Photoshopped pork crackling. And behind the scenes of every gourmet food shoot is a crew of photographers, stylists, directors and toucher-uppers preening the food to ensure it looks nothing less than irresistible.

When famous American food stylist Denise Valdo visited Australia in May this year, food

and travel writer Carli Ratcliff wrote about her workshop for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The styling secrets she learned are, ironically, somach-churning.

“Valdo talked of using water-soaked and microwaved tampons to create steam in a bowl of soup or porridge,” Ratcliff explains. “She taught us about using eyebrow pencil streaked on steak to increase its charred appearance; shaving cream mixed with liquid soap to fake beer foam and motor oil added to sour cream to ensure each dollop looks plump.”

Chefs, food technologists, food stylists and photographers are master illusionists. They travel with a diverse selection of serving plates and accessories such as vintage ‘50s salad bowls, Moroccan glass teacups, boldly striped tablecloths and rustic chopping boards. So if the mood of the food story is Turkish teahouse, olde style farmhouse or ‘70s retro, they can instantly conjure that atmosphere, making the food photo more evocative. In the process, a stylist’s toolkit is like a bag of magic tricks. Fruit or vegies looking a bit tired on set? Hairspray will give them faux freshness. Extra sheen needed on that handful of prawns? Time to paint on some glossy nail polish. Salad leaves wilting? A spritz of water crystals from the florist will fix it. Steak looking lopsided? Hidden balls of cotton wool prop it up from below while dental adhesive glues food to plates and dressmaking pins nail wayward stacks of sandwiches or pancakes.

No wonder the meals you cook from scratch at home never look as delectable or



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well presented. After all, you wouldn’t spray your pancakes with the Scotchguard used in food shoots to stop them soaking up syrups. The fabric protector is also mixed with water and glycerin to give a lasting frosted appearance to glassware filled with chilled drinks or desserts. And ice cream? It’s rarely the real thing. “You might mix corn syrup, margarine and icing sugar to create the ‘ice cream’ consistency, then add something like pink food colouring for a strawberry flavour,” says food stylist Fiona Rigg, who has worked for clients like *MasterChef* and Stephanie Alexander. “This concoction won’t melt under the lights as one food shot may take anywhere from one to several hours, sometimes more.” And although it might look baked from scratch, short cuts are often taken. “If you need to rush the preparation of a crème brulee, you might save time by half stuffing a ramekin with cotton wool and topping it with some shop-bought custard,” explains Rigg. “Then you quick bake it to form a skin, add a bit of sugar and give a quick blast of the blow torch to make it brown up and you’re good to shoot.”

Remember this next time your turkey roast looks like a shrivelled imitation of the photo. To achieve that delicious roasted look, the turkey has most likely been fast-tracked through the oven so it was barely baked. It’s probably still raw inside. “Food stylists might stuff turkey with paper towels to plump it up then paint it with brown boot polish or paint and dab on a mix of spices like paprika,” says Rigg. If you ate the poultry in the photo? You’d risk food poisoning. Doesn’t matter

though, because you've already devoured the food with your eyes.

Evocative words like 'piquant', 'velvety', 'perfumed' and 'stained' make food porn jump off the page. "Good food writing gives you plenty of sensory information that makes the taste, aroma and texture of the food immediately come alive," says Ratcliff, who also teaches her craft at the Australian Writer's Centre in Sydney. "The description is so vivid you can taste the food in your head. This makes you want to race out to the nearest supermarket to snap up the ingredients and give the recipe a try."

Little artistic touches in foodie shots also give the shot an atmospheric backstory. This might stem from the asymmetry of a fine china jug placed near a plate, a distressed antique door in the background, or food shot in an al fresco setting with gorgeous skylscapes. These details tell us that what we're seeing is sophisticated and stylish (and if we eat the truffles or agnolotti or mojo, we are too). In each shot, the food is the DiCaprio or Blanchett of the story. "So we draw the viewer's eye there through carefully placed lighting and the angle and frame of the shot," says Cath Muscat, an experienced food photographer who works in Australia and overseas. "To make the food look extra appealing, the photographer might foreground it with a nice shallow depth of field and a fuzzy background or create a beautiful natural feel through daylight and background greenery in an al fresco setting."

Carefully faked mess adds the finishing touch. "Instead of food images looking pristine, we are now more likely to show the filling oozing out of apple pie where a piece has been taken, or the crumbs on the table after someone just couldn't resist one of the muffins," says Rigg. "This heightens the sense that what you are seeing is a real

food experience where people took the time out to indulge and enjoy."

The copywriter, an arbiter of style, endorses each recipe choice, even referring to the 'notes' in a flavour, as though each bite resonates like a symphony. "These associations are intensified by discussions of the origin of a coffee bean or recipe or ingredient," says Janet Mitchell, a food stylist who has worked for big names like *Australian Gourmet Traveller*, *Latina Pasta* and *Woolworths*. "When we use heirloom vine-ripened tomatoes, Himalayan rock salt or a Bulgarian feta in a recipe, we feel like we're more worldly. We also feel we've briefly escaped from the mundane, even if we've only travelled through our tastebuds."

Food porn meets function

Flashback 20 or 30 years and our food images were far less sophisticated. Fancy meant garnishing a dish with a lettuce cup or curled carrot and food was usually photographed on stark white or plain pottery dinnerware. So what made our media food culture morph from a focus on backyard barbequers to budding gourmands? In part it's a knee-jerk response to our fast-paced lifestyle. "In a world where so much of life is led on the run, the gourmet food trend is about the desire to stop and enjoy life and live more simply," Mitchell says.

The obvious hope is that people will learn new cooking techniques and engage in preparing more home-cooked meals. The reality? "Statistics show that every year, Australians are eating less food prepared by themselves at home," says Aloysa Hourigan, a senior nutritionist with Nutrition Australia. "Unfortunately, the meals offered in gourmet food magazines and 'how to' cooking shows are not always the healthiest options," Hourigan says. "They tend to be high in

fat, salt and sugar and are often quite complex to prepare, which might give the unhelpful message that cooking a meal is fiddly and time consuming and you have to get everything just right or the quality of the food will be no good." Instead, Hourigan would like to see more programs teach viewers how to make recipes healthier – whether by using a low salt soy sauce and no palm sugar in Asian food or substituting sour cream for yoghurt in a creamy sauce.

The focus of the gourmet food push is all on fresh ingredients, and that's a plus. "However, just because you make your pasta from scratch does not mean that using it for a boscaiola with cream and bacon makes it all healthy," says Hourigan. Your home-cooked gourmet meal may be as high in fat and kilojoules and low in vegetables as take-away fast food. "Repeatedly eating meals of this nature can lead to weight gain and higher blood glucose levels and may put people at greater risk of diabetes, stroke and heart conditions," Hourigan adds.

However, with books such as *I Quit Sugar* and groups such as the Slow Food Movement gaining popularity, the Aussie foodie landscape has recently seen a swing towards greater health consciousness and authenticity. Subsequently, some publications, TV shows and blogs are starting to focus on more 'at home' style presentations of food. "I'm now finding that on more food shoots I'm being asked to cook food to the instructions so that the result looks a little closer to what the average person in their kitchen is making," says Rigg.

This shift is about quality of food and quality of life. "We are becoming more aware of the food/health link, so more people are seeking food free of trans

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fats and colours and numbers," says Ratcliff. The loss of flavour and freshness in processed food is also prompting us to plant market gardens, keep chickens, bottle home-made jam and savour fresh bread after tossing the ingredients into the bread maker. "I think, at heart, we all want to be Italian and be using Nonna's recipe to make our own salamis or bottle the spaghetti sauce with the home-grown herbs," says Ratcliff. "So our focus on gourmet food is also about a sense of family and connection and sitting around a big table with people you love, with food as the invisible thread that brings us together." Pity someone forgot to mention the invisible bit to the food porn industry. ■