

MasterChef: A Master Class in Fight, Flight, or Flambé?

I'm not serving them, no f*cking way.

—Chef Gordon Ramsay

Knowing that Gordon is unhappy with our first dish . . . it's devastating.

—Contestant Shari Mukherjee, *MasterChef USA*,
season 10, episode 22

“Pressure,” “embarrassment,” “devastating”: these are words that commonly season episodes of *MasterChef*. With the eleventh series of the popular competitive cooking show imminent, it will soon be time to don aprons and sharpen knives once again, as contestants create and plate dishes that involve so many more ingredients than just food. Shows like *MasterChef* have become “less about how to cook and more about how to live” (Naccarato and Lebesco 2012: 48). But I would take this one step further: they are about how to *survive*. On *MasterChef*, we often see fearful wide eyes and shaky hands carrying plates to Chef Gordon Ramsay and the other judges for reckoning. These are classic stress responses to attack, known as “fight-or-flight.” When we feel our survival is being threatened, our body prepares in a range of ways. This makes for great television, where some of these reactions, such as contestants’ sweaty brows, are highly visible. But we are privy to even those things that happen inside the body; individuals often talk about having racing hearts or feeling nauseated. Collectively, these are signs that the body is getting ready for action. These kinds of responses helped early humans to survive—they were meant for dealing with predators in the wild rather than assailants on *MasterChef*. Today, however, combat can come in a culinary variety. I found myself a little wide-eyed when watching the recent UK series *Best Home Cook* after one contestant declared, “This is my recipe so if they don’t like this, it’s a knife through the heart.” Ouch. I was reminded of Halligan’s (1990: 118) observation that “the process of turning right materials into stuff

fit to eat is a series of bloody battles”—we must pound, beat, whip, strip, boil, sear, grind, tear, crack, mince, mash, crush, stuff, chop. It seems that contestants not only do this to the food but to themselves. There is an emotional battle being played out. As a psychologist, I wonder: what feelings are those in the kitchen really trying to master?

Before *MasterChef*, Gordon Ramsay featured on the British television program *The F-Word*. So far, our list of F-words associated with cooking includes “fight” and “flight,” but not “fun.” Cooking was probably not a lot of fun for our evolutionary ancestors. But perhaps what they would find funny is that *The Joy of Cooking* is one of the United States’ most published cookbooks. Most modern cookbooks promote this same message, yet this is not always the case (Trubek 2017). Certainly in the *MasterChef* kitchen, there is not much fun or joy; it is more a master class in how to cook up stress. But this can also be the case off-screen. Trubek (2017) talks about the rainbow of emotions that goes with maintaining family cooking traditions, from the fear of disappointment in replicating grandma’s special dish, to the stress of living up to social expectations. Sometimes there is no joyful pot of golden chicken soup at the end of that rainbow. And it is not always about nostalgia (or *noshtalgia*, in the case of food), which has its roots in the Greek words for “home”/“return” and “pain,” and speaks to my own ethnicity. Cooking can be painful.

Nigella Lawson (1998: 176) once said, “If you hate cooking, don’t do it.” Somehow it was not that straightforward for my own mother. My mother hated cooking. It was not unusual for the opening line of our family dinner table conversation to be “I hate cooking” (with the odd non-bleeped expletive thrown in, giving her something special in common with Gordon Ramsay). My mother would have gladly taken up membership in Peg Bracken’s *I Hate to Cook Book* club, the book first published in 1960 but still in print. After World War II, food on the home front changed: developments in

canned and frozen food technologies meant that many home-makers now had the chance to develop themselves *outside* of the kitchen; less time could be spent cooking from scratch by using prepared foods instead (Tunc and Babic 2017). Food became fast, and time-saving became a key ingredient. In the blurb of her book, Bracken describes the Olympics of those who hate to cook as “seeing who can get out of the kitchen the fastest and stay out the longest” (which reveals her own stress response to cooking as flight rather than fight) (1960). Bracken epitomizes her book’s name in her salty and sour comments throughout; other than the dessert chapter, no sweetness is expressed for cooking. But her comments have zing—they make you smile. And they are salty—they bring out the flavor of her character, and give the reader permission to do the same, and to be true to themselves.

Bracken offers full permission to hate cooking: “Some women, it is said, like to cook. This book is not for them. This book is for those of us who hate to, who have learned through hard experience that some activities become no less painful through repetition: childbearing, paying taxes, cooking” (Bracken 1960: 1). For my mother, cooking every meal came with a sense of the unknown, despite countless times of making each exact same dish. The repetition of her experience never quite firmed up into confidence; she remained like underset jello, wobbling a little too much every time. Like many other households, our cultural practices were gendered, and responsibility for cooking, as well as caring for family members and the home, was part of my mother’s role as housewife. And the pressures of femininity when it came to feeding the family were inescapable (DeVault 1991, 1999)—something else stressful to add to the mix. My father was the breadwinner, and you could say that my mother’s hate for cooking left her as the bread loser. Cooking made my mother feel like she was “losing it,” a phrase often used to describe the loss of control that happens as part of the experience of stress. My mother had all the responsibility when it came to cooking, but not the control, really: our family meals were planned and provided around my, my brother’s, and my dad’s food-related dos and don’ts and preferences, as well as our daily schedules and other practical and emotional issues. The feeling of not quite being in control of all of this made it even more stressful for her. There was a sense of unpredictability, as though some culinary bogeyman was waiting to jump out of the pantry. It was not that my mother disliked domesticity; she loved the mindless and repetitive tasks involved in cleaning. Vacuuming or ironing elicited a relaxation response in her akin to chopping vegetables or repeated stirring (Benson, Beary, and Carol 1974). Nigella Lawson’s (1998: 83) own kitchen experience resonates: “I love the feeling of pottering

about the kitchen, cooking slowly, stirring and chopping and getting everything done.” My mother, however, replaced pottering with panicking, and stirring with stress.

So what was the ingredient that made my mother (psychologically) flambé whenever it came to family dinner time with me, my brother, and my dad? It appears to be the same underlying ingredient that causes stress to the *MasterChef* contestants: my mother was really frightened of negative judgment about what she had cooked, and that the food served was not good enough. Which meant that she was not good enough. Part of it was about not being a good-enough cook. But being a good cook means more than following a recipe, and my mother had cooking skills that could rival any chefs: she had experiential knowledge, judgment, and insight. Yet something cut deeper every night she was in sight at the table when dinner was served. It is only now years later that I have been able to translate my research from the laboratory to the kitchen to make sense of her. Our family dinner table and *MasterChef* shared the same psychological ingredients.

MasterChef borrows directly from the academic literature on stress for its winning formula. It is interesting that cooking has been considered a “performative act” (Antoniou 2004: 140), because the fear that task performance will be evaluated negatively by others is what humans find most stressful. This “socio-evaluative” threat, plus lack of control and unfamiliarity, are the three key ingredients that reliably cause our brain and body to generate a stress response (Clow and Smyth 2020). These elements are involved in specific laboratory tests to assess how reactive we are to stress, which is measured using the classic stress hormone cortisol. The gold standard of laboratory protocols is the Trier Social Stress Test (Oskis et al. 2019; Smyth et al. 2015), which includes tasks of public speaking and surprise challenges, all performed in front of a panel of experimenters in white coats and recorded on camera. The panel’s job is to be negative, critical, and judgmental of the participant’s performance; they are not smiley or encouraging, and they make rejecting comments—just like the *MasterChef* panel when contestants present dishes that are not up to scratch. The judging in the US version of the show is deemed more severe than the UK or Australian versions (Redden 2017). Just like in the Trier Social Stress Test, Gordon Ramsay issues severe verbal commands that are controlling and threatening in tone, such as “step forward,” “please step back,” and “take your apron off and lay it over your station” (Haarman 2016). *The MasterChef* tasks themselves involve surprise (notably, the Mystery Box) and uncontrollability (especially the Team Challenge), and the icing on the cake is the social rejection of elimination and being told to leave the *MasterChef* kitchen. It is the Trier Social Chef Test (see fig. 1).

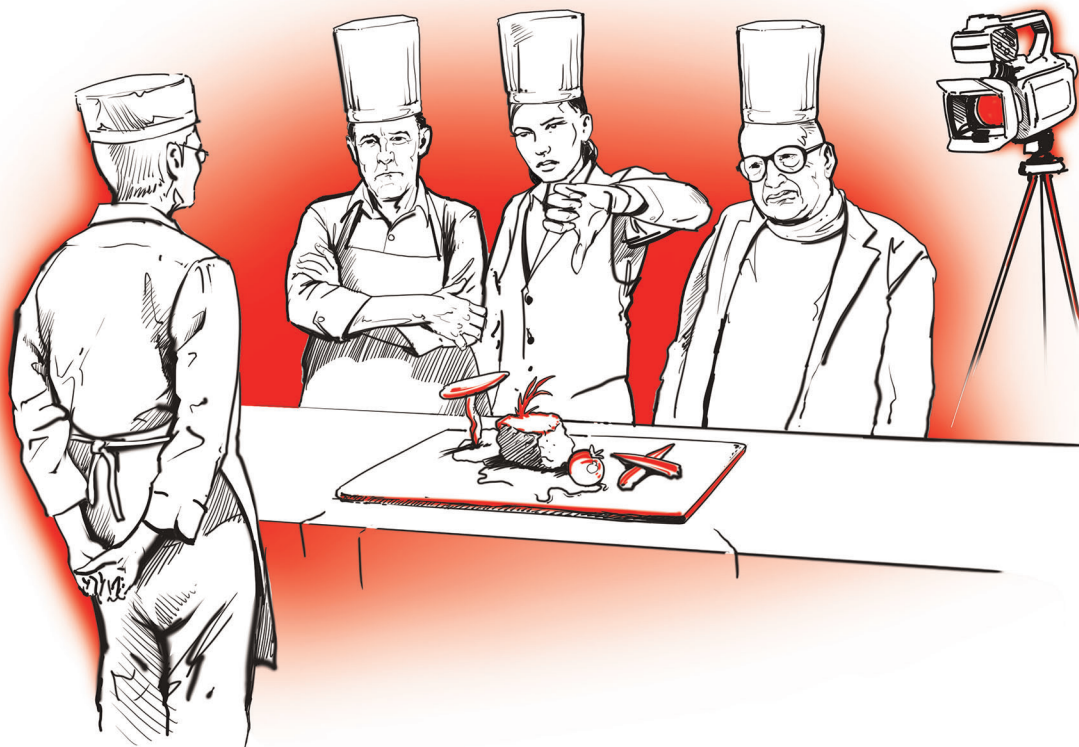


FIGURE 1: *What the Trier Social Chef Test might look like.*

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But this was not how *MasterChef* started. As a child in the UK, the show was part of my Sunday afternoon tradition. My heritage may be Greek but siestas are not really a thing in London; the closest I ever got to a nap was sleepily watching *MasterChef* after our Sunday roast dinner. It was that kind of show when it first aired in 1990. Host and judge Loyd Grossman was politely authoritative, at best. If Gordon Ramsay's judgment is sharp and weapons-grade by knife standards, Loyd Grossman's was a stubby butter knife in comparison (see fig. 2). But I liked Loyd. He was like a posh uncle, who would sniff at the food in front of him and then gently judge it using vocabulary that most of us would not understand (at the time I was eight years old and he prompted me to look up the word "cogitated" in the dictionary). In fact, watching him could easily activate the body's "rest-and-digest" system — fight-or-flight's sister.

The original *MasterChef* has long been put to bed. The show was transformed in 2008 and went from being relaxed to fast-paced, something that was also conveyed by the new logo

that used the "@" sign; the show was now part of the high-speed, interconnected generation. According to current UK judge John Torode (2005: 8), the purpose of the show's transformation was to "up the pace and make the series more hard-hitting, so it was relevant to the way we live today." By "upping" the judgment in all sorts of ways for the present format, the show is in fact just as relevant to the way our evolutionary ancestors lived. The judges now pace and prowl, survey, and time each contestant at their workstation/lair. The setting has become sort of an industrialized jungle. The judgment of each cook is more foregrounded, now made on camera and in front of other contestants. And in the US version there is even less opportunity to hide, as verdicts are given in front of a live audience for some parts of the show, which includes family and friends. The role of the judges is to judge, not to share knowledge and skills with either the contestants or the audience at home. The threat of negative judgment, that key ingredient that activates our body's stress response machinery, is ubiquitous.

Our stress system that releases cortisol is part of a larger fight-or-flight system and is uniquely activated by threat, especially threats to our social self-esteem. Cooking appears to fire this up. Interestingly, when we cook, things like making choices about ingredients or having to prepare everything by oneself do not appear to cause stress responses; if the cooking itself is *not* judged by others then our body's stress system is not triggered—there is no change in cortisol (Osdoba et al. 2015). Other research has shown that when we cook just for ourselves our body's other stress system, which is more associated with excitement and other forms of positive arousal, is turned on instead. Here, heart rate goes up during “crunch time” moments of a recipe, like adding the curry paste and taking a bite at the end—in other words, emotionally significant, but not threatening, moments (Brouwer et al. 2019). And it is not just our body that talks during these emotionally salient moments when we cook for ourselves—we also speak about them as being more exciting and pleasant (Brouwer et al. 2019). Delia Smith, one of the most popular English cooks and famed for teaching basic cookery on television, was quite right in naming her recipe book for the single cook *One Is Fun!* (Smith 1985).

But it is more than that. Cooking for one presents a context that is less judgmental, and so less stressful. In *How to Eat*, Nigella Lawson (1998: 125) tells the reader, “when you're cooking for yourself, the stakes aren't as high,” and she goes on to define high-stakes as “that tense-necked desire to impress others. It's virtually impossible to be innocent of this.” Those high stakes for negative judgment when cooking for others exist in all forms, from the guilt of using pre-prepared ingredients to feelings of obligation and duty about being a “good” parent or partner (Costa 2013; Daniels et al. 2012). The lack of judgment in cooking for one is noted in food writer Molly Wizenberg's (2010: 120) own experience: “No one is going to tell me that blanched green beans, three slices of fresh mozzarella doused in olive oil, and two pieces of chocolate cake are not an acceptable dinner. (They are, I promise).” The experiential matches the empirical. Sisters are cooking it for themselves it seems, without stress.

But why exactly is being judged negatively by others so stressful for humans? Cooking makes us different from other primates, but it is part of our desire to be the same, in the sense of being part of something. We have a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and cooking has long played a part in this. At least 250,000 years ago, the use of fire gave rise to the definition of cooking as we know it today: “the application of heat to improve the nutritional quality of food” (Wrangham and Conklin-Brittain 2003: 36;

see also Ragir 2000). And all the while, something else was being cooked up along with the food on that fire. Being together around the fire allowed us to nurture our bonds with others and to be included, accepted, and welcomed into a social group—in other words, to belong. Belonging helped us to survive; humans are not very well-suited to fulfill their survival and reproductive needs living in isolation. Social rejection was risky, and could have deadly consequences. For early civilizations like the Greeks, exile and death were treated as equivalent punishments (DeWall and Bushman 2011). With every meal cooked around the fire, the positive rewards associated with inclusion were reinforced. Just like a soufflé, our social self-esteem rises greatly in response to belonging, providing that “aah” feeling of soothing and security deep inside. *That* is soul food. So it is not surprising that cooking quickly stirs up fight-or-flight responses—in early times we needed to fight to keep our place around the fire, or flee to find another one to be part of, as a matter of survival. We *did* start the fire of belongingness, it was always burning since the world's been turning—and cooking has always been part of its fuel.

But if you play with fire, you might get burned (remember what I said about my mother flambéing?), and cooking might not necessarily lead to those positive feelings. If belonging is the salt, the element that preserves our individual flavour and place in a group, then its peppery sister is rejection, and social exclusion, which threatens our drive to belong. This is *exactly* what our stress system is designed to react to, whether on *MasterChef*, in the kitchen at home, or in laboratory during the Trier Social Stress Test. And the more we need to belong, the more we will be affected by stress—as shown by higher cortisol levels (see Beekman, Stock, and Marcus 2016).

But rejection not only affects the cook; it may affect the eater too. Rejecting feedback has been found to impact the seasoning of later prepared food. An individual who is highly sensitive to rejection will purposely dole out large amounts of hot sauce to a person who hates spicy food if they feel rebuffed by them (Ayduk, Gyurak, and Luerssen 2008). While this might not be the best way to demonstrate a finely tuned palate on *MasterChef*, or to advance a person's chances in the competition, it might be something to consider if you have experienced a grilling by Chef Ramsay. *MasterChef* might not have the theatre or drama of other shows that bellow “you have been chopped!” but the focus on food is enough to get cortisol going. When a *MasterChef* contestant presents a dish of meat that has been prepared *sous vide* and without the use of fire, we see how much cooking has evolved from being a matter of survival. But when that plate is carried by



FIGURE 2: MasterChef judge Chef Gordon Ramsay's judgment is sharp.

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trembling, clammy hands, then we are reminded that perhaps cooking has not come so far as to forget its biological and psychological roots.

Speaking of origins, now is probably the time to say (in my defense) that I was not a mini Gordon Ramsay when it came to the food my mother would serve up each night at dinner time. I was quite the contrary; all that emanated was positive, whether in the form of words or “mmm” noises. It saddens me that my mother just could not hear any of it, because the stress that came with cooking was, for her, pretty overwhelming. Yet this feeling never flavored anything—I always felt loved, at the family dinner table and beyond. And it may be the case that love, and the body's response to this, did actually help my mother manage the stress of cooking. Although “fight-or-flight” is our primary physiological reaction to stress, some have suggested that another reaction to stress is the tendency to affiliate: the “tend-and-befriend” response. Specifically, in the presence of positive affiliative contacts, oxytocin, which has been dubbed the “love hormone,” attenuates psychological and biological stress responses, but when we are faced with hostile and unsupportive contacts (like those harsh *MasterChef* judges), oxytocin may in fact exacerbate our stress responses (Taylor 2006). So, I hope that my dissimilarity to Chef Ramsay helped to reduce my mother's stress levels somewhat.

From my mother to *MasterChef*, the desire to be a good cook often transcends the kitchen to other aspects of oneself that are “good” or not. The gendered stresses and pressures associated with home cooking tell us that if a woman “fails” at food, she risks being seen as also failing the family and at femininity (Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010; Parsons 2016). In other words, there is a risk of being rejected. Similarly, in psychoanalysis, many of the fundamental, “bread and butter” questions about human nature have been asked of the *mother*-baby relationship. In my own research and practice I draw on the work of Winnicott a great deal, particularly his concept of being “good enough” (Winnicott 1953), in which he states that a mother need not be perfect, but good enough, in how she responds to her baby's needs. Whether one is feeding the family or feeding the *MasterChef* judges, being good enough when “doing for others” (DeVault 1991: 1) is about living with an imperfect self (or with an imperfect plate) without becoming overwhelmed by stress, physically or psychologically—you can still be good enough to belong. If you can't stand the heat, you don't necessarily have to get out of the kitchen; it is just helpful to have a strong sense of being good enough.

Although *MasterChef* is a show fundamentally about food, hunger does not seem to be a particularly strong feeling. Have you ever noticed how nobody is really hungry? The judges eat,

but they are not hungry. In fact, it might help if they were because hunger has been associated with more leniency in judgment (Kerry, Loria, and Murray 2019; Vicario et al. 2018). The contestants cook, but they are also not hungry. Nor should they be: fight-or-flight is required to protect their social selves, not feed, which is exactly how evolution designed our stress system. When survival feels threatened, it is not the time to take a break and have a KitKat. The contestants are hungry to belong and to be accepted and told that they are good enough. The desire for belongingness is so powerful it can be satiating (DeWall, Baumeister, and Vohs 2008). It is a feeling that is also important for eating; “comfort foods” are comforting precisely because they evoke connections with our closest relationships and feelings of security and belonging (Troisi and Gabriel 2011; Troisi et al. 2015).

Belongingness is the backbone of cooking for others. In fact, perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is our *wish-bone*—it is what we hope for when we cook and present a plate of food to another. There is an Oliver-esque “Please, sir, can I belong?” when that plate is put in front of the eater. Belongingness and cooking go back a very long way—they are entwined with the recipe of human survival and evolution. Cooking is a drive-thru straight to our fundamental need to belong, both off- and on-screen. *MasterChef* provides a public master class in how to (or how not to) manage our most primitive, self-conscious feelings that come with this need: the sweetness of social acceptance and the bitterness of rejection (DeWall and Bushman 2011). These feelings, to borrow words from Anthony Bourdain, are *not* kitchen confidential here. In fact, the kitchen is the very place they are in full view. *MasterChef* is good television but it is underpinned by good science. The television kitchen borrows directly from laboratory and classic stress tests that involve the uncontrollable threat of our social self being judged negatively. Science also tells us which feelings we should cook up before going into the kitchen. And if we are particularly sensitive to rejection, hot sauce might be a key ingredient to have handy. 🍷

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