



# Agon and Apron: hybridizing gender by “sportifying” cooking in *MasterChef USA*

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Accepted: 6 July 2022 / Published online: 17 November 2022  
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## Abstract

Competition is fundamental to American life, and sport is the cultural institution most closely linked to organized competition in the U.S. Historically, sport has been a male preserve. At the same time, the structures, practices, and iconography of sports have infiltrated a variety of social fields and institutions less obviously dominated by men—a process known as “sportification.” Reality programming is one such field. In this paper, we analyze forty episodes spanning nine seasons of the reality show *MasterChef USA* to explore the gendered implications of the sportification of cooking. *MasterChef USA* harnesses competition, metaphorized as sport, to transform (feminine) cooks into (masculine) chefs. In the language of Greek mythology, the heroism of the agon meets the mundanity of the apron. The show not only effectively “softens” sport and “hardens” cooking, it also hybridizes traditional gender difference itself as the cook-chef distinction animates and destabilizes boundaries between home and work, amateurs and professionals, the ordinary and the elevated. However, the hybridization of gender has limits and is not equally balanced between masculine and feminine poles—and the imbalance is where gender inequality resides.

**Keywords** Gender · Sportification · Heroic masculinity · Social performance · Food · *MasterChef*

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## Introduction: the main ingredients

Launched in the UK in 1990, *MasterChef* (MC) is a reality television franchise now broadcast in fifty-two countries worldwide. The format is a competition among amateur cooks for the title of “MasterChef.” The American version—*MasterChef USA*—debuted in 2010 and is still in production. Filmed at a Los Angeles soundstage, it features a large kitchen area containing multiple cooking stations and an overhead balcony, along with a pantry, a refrigerator/freezer area, and a fine-dining alcove. Each season opens with televised auditions, from which roughly fifteen contestants, also sometimes known as “chefeestants,” are selected to go forward. In subsequent episodes, the contestants face various cooking challenges, where they have to prepare dishes evaluated by three judges, all prominent culinary figures, including the renowned celebrity judge Gordon Ramsey. Most episodes end with the dismissal of a contestant whose dishes fail to meet the judges’ exacting standards. Once the competition is reduced to two or three contestants, the finalists compete in a three-course cook-off. The winner receives \$250,000, a MasterChef trophy, and the “elevated” title of MasterChef.

*MasterChef USA* is but one of hundreds of reality television programs populating the contemporary media landscape. Wikipedia currently lists 760 different reality shows worldwide, not counting spin-offs or variations of the same franchise. The vast majority involve competition of one sort or another, some more explicitly than others. Besides cooking contests, there are talent searches (*The Voice*, *Project Runway*, *Dancing with the Stars*), survival/adventure competitions (*Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*), and “gamedocs” (*Big Brother*). Even make-over shows, dating shows, and docusoaps are competitive, as people vie with others (and/or themselves) to lose weight, fall in love, or win the most camera time. Indeed, media scholars writing about reality programming have noted the centrality of competition, highlighting in particular the genre’s ethos of competitive individualism in which contestants vie not only for material reward but also for the opportunity to perform, brand, and monetize the self (Coudry 2008; Hearn 2008; Deery 2015, p. 99; Redden 2018; Horowitz 2020). Another common focus among scholars is the representational politics of the genre: how reality programs do the cultural work of constructing raced, classed, and/or gendered (among other) subjectivities as embodied and performed by ordinary people, often in clichéd or caricatured ways that reinforce social inequalities (Biressi and Nunn 2005; Ouellette and Hay 2008; Skeggs and Wood 2011).

Our interest in *MasterChef USA* is complementary but different. As a cooking contest featuring amateur cooks, the show inevitably foregrounds competition among a range of people from different walks of life. *How* it does this, however, is the critical point: the competitiveness of *MasterChef USA* is organized predominantly around the structures and iconography of sport. Predictable for a show like *American Ninja Warrior*, whose main purpose is to dramatize feats of physical prowess, or even *Survivor*, with its emphasis on physical as well as emotional endurance and strategy, it is more surprising for a program designed to judge and reward culinary skill.



The emphasis on sport appears unique to the American version of MC, demonstrating that cultural artifacts are never uniformly adopted across cultural contexts, but are, rather, “translated” differently according to local, regional, and/or national custom (Groszlik and Lerner 2021). Although some combination of competition, cookery, and identity-based performances cut across all iterations of the global MC franchise (Phillipov 2013), their relative “dosage” varies. For example, the Australian version of MC is said to prioritize performances of class and cultural/ethnic diversity in a non-conflictual and supportive (as opposed to competitive) context (Lewis 2011; Bednarek 2013; Haarman 2015). Consider also the Israeli version, in which the theme of competition is even more muted; instead, the cooking contest serves mainly as a vehicle for participants to elaborate a presentation of self that is largely therapeutic in nature. Participants belonging to different ethno-national groups convey in highly emotional terms how cooking makes possible the authentic expression of their “true selves”—a transformational process that Groszlik and Lerner (2021) characterize as “cooking the self.”<sup>1</sup>

*MasterChef USA* not only foregrounds competitiveness; it also draws heavily on metaphors of sport. Historically in the U.S., competitive sport is tightly linked to manliness, a primary means through which men are socialized into business, politics, and war (Kimmel 1990; Messner 1992; Pringle 2005; O’Reilly and Cahn 2007; Markovits and Albertson 2012; Gane 2020). Sport enables what Gamson and Grindstaff (2019) call an “inside-gender” performance for men because it is fused with cultural expectations of masculinity; when men “do gender” (see West and Zimmerman 1987; Kessler and McKenna 1985) through sport, they conform to (remain “inside”) these expectations. By contrast, sport is an “outside-gender” realm for women. Women are competitive and women play organized sports, of course, but in the U.S. context, unless they are engaged in gender-appropriate displays of athleticism—such as in figure skating, gymnastics, or tennis—they are still understood as encroaching on historically male terrain (see Theberge 1993; Festle 1996; Messner 2002; Grindstaff and West 2006; Cahn 2015).

Sport is so inside-gender for men that scholars routinely point to its centrality in constructing what R.W. Connell has termed “hegemonic masculinity”—a patriarchal cultural construct associated with high-status traits such as breadwinning, leadership, competence, and control (Connell 1987, 1990, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In the context of *MasterChef USA*, which is a reality show and not a sport per se, we suggest *heroic masculinity* as a more useful term because it underscores sport as a form of domesticated battle cloaked in pageantry. Heroic masculinity animates *Agon*—the ancient Greek term for the spirit of rivalry and contest between opposing forces (Morford and Stanley 1976; MacAloon 1981). Like

<sup>1</sup> Although Groszlik and Lerner do not claim to offer an exhaustive cross-cultural analysis of *MasterChef*, their study is ambitious and comparative, as they reviewed selected episodes across seven countries and four languages: 30 episodes from English-speaking versions (UK, U.S., Australia, and New Zealand), 20 episodes from the Russian version, and two episodes from the Korean version (translated to English). All this was important context for analyzing 110 episodes of the Israeli version of the show (for more information on their methodology, please view their “data and methods” section). Their work helps us identify what is particular to the U.S. version.



hegemonic masculinity, heroic masculinity does not necessarily connote the accomplishment of male gender identities in an embodied, interactional sense, nor does it assume a fixed, a priori gender structure; rather, it expresses a relational system of power under patriarchy in which social performances shape, and are shaped by, cultural (and culturally-specific) narratives of gender difference.<sup>2</sup>

If “men make sports, and sports make men” (Birrell and Richter 1994, p. 226), and if sport is “the epitome of what a man is supposed to be” (Messner 1992, p. 61), then cooking would seem the opposite, as it is culturally associated with (traditional) femininity, domesticity, caretaking, and intimacy (DeVault 1991; Parkin 2006; Cairns and Johnston 2015). Across centuries and continents, as well as across racial/ethnic and class formations, “feeding the family” (DeVault 1991) has been constructed as women’s work, whether paid or unpaid, often justified as a “natural” outcome of biological sex difference, given (some) women’s ability to bear and nurse children. Cooking is fundamental to “Hestian culture,” *Hestia* being the Greek goddess of hearth and home. Goddesses notwithstanding, cooking is far from glamorous for many women much of the time. According to Contois (2020, p. 2), domestic food labor in the U.S. has been, and still is, “a distinctly feminine form of daily drudgery.” Cast in these terms, cooking is decidedly un-heroic. In contrast to sport, symbolized by medals and trophies, cooking is symbolized by an apron; cooking affords an inside-gender performance for women and an outside-gender performance for men.

At the same time, just as sports has institutionalized gender-appropriate variants for women, cooking has institutionalized gender-appropriate variants for men: notably cooking in professional kitchens as chefs (Black 2021), thus creating an inside-gender experience for (predominantly white) men within an overall feminine domain. Harris and Giuffre (2015) describe how male chefs have distanced themselves from unpaid domestic cooking in order to recast cooking as a lucrative, male-appropriate career. This is reflected in contemporary food media, including the televised cooking contests of the late 1990s, described as “[normalizing] the ‘manly’ nature of professional cooking [by] removing cooking from the cooperative ethos of family life” (Swenson 2009, p. 50). The stalwart chef in his chef’s whites remains a feature of many cooking competitions today (Herkes and Redden 2017).

The actual gender diversity within the cultural arenas of sport and cooking notwithstanding, we contend that, on a broad cultural level, sports signals masculinity and cooking signals femininity. What happens, then, when the masculine valence of competition/sport meets the feminine valence of cooking? When the heroism of *Agon* meets the mundanity of *Apron*? When the distinction between inside- and outside-gender performances blurs? Most obviously, feminine cooking “softens” masculine competition; simultaneously, masculine competition “hardens” feminine cooking—a blending of *Agon* and *Apron* that, given the show’s metaphorization of competition as sport, is well captured by the notion of “sportification.”

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<sup>2</sup> This is an important point, because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not synonymous with or reducible to the “doing gender” tradition; it is first and foremost a concept that explains the legitimation of patriarchy as a cultural system of power (see Grindstaff and West 2006).



As a concept, sportification stems from the work of Norbert Elias (1986), who viewed it as part of the Western civilizing process associated with 18th Century modernity. It refers to the appropriation of “processes distinctive to the development, modernization, production, reproduction, and consumption of sport” by an array of social institutions (Jirásek and Kohe 2015, p. 259), beginning with recreation but expanding in the post-industrial era to include entertainment, music, fashion, business, and politics (Crum 1991; see also Elias and Dunning 1986; Dunning and Rojek 1992; Ingham 2004; Hughson 2005; Carlsson and Svenson 2015; Heere 2018). According to this conceptualization, reality programming as a whole reflects processes of sportification far beyond cooking; indeed, reality television could be said to “sportify” (as well as mediatize and monetize) life writ large. *MasterChef USA* is but an especially good example. Appropriating the building blocks of sports—players/teams, coaches, rules of play, rivalry/strategy, winners and losers, audiences/fans—*MasterChef USA* invites us to experience the same thrill of victory and agony of defeat as sporting contests but in a feminized context and with a more overtly theatrical narrative imperative.

Processes of sportification, like sport itself, are deeply gendered, a fact that the literature on sportification has yet to adequately address. Aiming to fill this gap, we seek to understand how and why *MasterChef USA* harnesses sport and cooking to accomplish a specific cultural project: the hybridization of gender. In their overview of the literature on “hybrid masculinities,” Bridges and Pascoe (2014) note that hybridization, a term borrowed from the natural sciences, is used in the social sciences and humanities to suggest processes and practices of cultural interpenetration. In terms of gender, hybrid masculinity primarily refers to the selective incorporation by straight white men of elements of identity associated with marginalized “others”—women, gay men, and men of color—which underscores that “unhybridized” masculinity remains the unstated norm. There is no comparable literature on hybridized femininities, perhaps because women’s incorporation of masculinity—particularly in terms of leadership and breadwinning—has been considered fundamental rather than epiphenomenal to the pursuit of gender equality and therefore more common and expected. Femininity is the devalued category in the gender hierarchy, so women must temper it with at least some masculinity in order to achieve social recognition whereas tempering masculinity with femininity is optional for men (indeed, it can undermine their status) (Wade and Ferree 2019). Wade and Ferree (2019) discuss this as a matter of “balance” for women rather than hybridity, the specific contours of which vary by race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other factors.

We are less concerned about how individual men (or women) negotiate gender identity than about how gendered meanings are enabled/constrained by “cultural systems,” in Geertz’s (1973) sense of mutually reinforcing ensembles of symbols and practices. On *MasterChef USA*, the sportification of cooking brings the cultural systems of sport and cooking together and this effectively hybridizes gender difference, simultaneously relying upon and unsettling traditional gender binaries. Hybridization is manifest in individual performances, to be sure—*MasterChef USA* features “real” people competing in “real” cooking challenges—but is not limited to them.



Any cultural arena is an arena of social performance transcending the individual (see Alexander 2004). Unlike Erving Goffman (1959), who metaphorizes social performance in theatrical terms to explicate the dynamics of everyday interaction, Jeffrey Alexander (2004) conceptualizes social performance as the chief modality through which meaning is created and deployed over time (historically) and space (across cultural fields). Both conceptualizations of performance inform our analysis. Television programming, regardless of genre, is an arena for producing theatrical performance, social performance, and cultural narratives simultaneously, making the language of drama—setting, dialog, narration, action, *mise-en-scene*—especially apropos. At the same time, we parse the drama that is *MasterChef USA* not to learn about individual characters or storylines but to understand the centrality of gender to the two cultural systems brought together by the show. We do not address the show’s impact on the “real” world, certainly a legitimate and much-debated question (see Montemurro 2008; Letak 2022). Instead, we presume that media texts, whether they reflect, shape, distort, or deny perceived reality, construct cultural narratives that really exist in the world, and, to be sense-making, they must contend in some way with what Alexander (2004) would call “background representations”—the experiences and expectations of audiences, broadly conceived. When texts and background representations are closely aligned, texts achieve “fusion”—a sense of authenticity (Alexander 2004).

Drawing on careful empirical analysis of *MasterChef USA*, we foreground cultural systems of meaning and demonstrate the gendered work they do. The show does not give us a model of behavior per se, it gives us a lens to examine how the intersection of cooking (feminine) and sports/competition (masculine) effectively hybridizes gender while ostensibly not having a gender politics at all. In the clash of *Agon* and *Apron*, individual men and women matter less than what the clash produces: a “hard” version of cooking and a “soft” version of competition that muddies inside- and outside-gender distinctions. As we shall see, the dramatic transformation from cook to chef depicted in *MasterChef USA* is gender-neutral on its face (in the sense that both women and men compete and win) but articulates gender difference by requiring participants to navigate the gendered meanings of home (kitchen) and work (restaurant), amateurism and professionalism, and, ultimately, the ordinary and the elevated. That these meanings are unmoored from individual gender identities destabilizes the historic connections linking men to sports and women to cooking; traditional gender boundaries are relaxed and redrawn, opening up a space for imagining both masculinity and femininity differently—but within limits. The animation of the unstable union of *Agon* and *Apron* is both the gender politics and the cultural politics of the show.

## Data and methods: the recipe

The framework laid out above stems from two years devoted to collecting, discussing, coding, and analyzing a representative sample of forty episodes of *MasterChef USA* across nine seasons. We employed a qualitative approach to textual analysis that was inductive, iterative, and interpretive, loosely guided by the tenets



of grounded theory methods (see Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2001, 2014). This method encourages researchers to be flexible and open-minded. It does not start with a theoretical agenda that the data is then used to prosecute; it starts with the data—ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, archival documents, television programs—and these data inform what theoretical concept/arguments emerge as important.

In collecting and transcribing episodes, we were lucky to work with two undergraduate students—Brianna Hayman and Elizabeth Avila—who had preexisting interest in the show and assisted us in exchange for research credits. Together, we identified and used fan websites of *MasterChef USA* to create a list with active links to all 240 episodes comprising Seasons 1 through 9 (2010–2018). To build a smaller sample of forty episodes to analyze, we randomly selected a subset of three to five episodes for each season (depending on the total for that season), as well as the first and last episodes. We did this on the premise that the first episode introduces the judges and contestants, establishes the general format of the show, and apprises the audience of any shifts or changes in format over time, whereas the last episode, as the culmination of the season, recaps key developments and provides a summation of the drama by elevating one contestant to the level of MasterChef.

We transcribed the forty episodes, converting them from video to written texts. This meant documenting not only who said what, but also a person's tone, attitude, emotional expression, and actions. In addition, we noted voice-over narration, music, sound effects, and details of the setting—in theater terms, the *mise-en-scene*.<sup>3</sup> As shown in the Appendix, these forty episodes featured five judges (four men and one woman) and the contestants (fifty-nine men and fifty-two women). Women won the title of MasterChef five times, and men four times. Any given episode featured three “regular” judges, occasionally replaced or accompanied by a guest judge. For five of the nine seasons we studied, all three regular judges were men. In Seasons 1 through 5, the series starred celebrity chefs Gordon Ramsey and George Elliot, along with restaurateur Joe Bastianich. Chef Christina Tosi stood in for Bastianich in Seasons 6 through 8. In Season 8, Elliot was replaced by a series of guest judges, one of whom was Aaron Sanchez; Sanchez then continued on as a regular.

We (Rafi and Laura) then discussed and analyzed the transcripts, typically while streaming the corresponding episode, first sharing our overall impressions of the story's arc and subsequently approaching the transcript line-by-line to summarize action and dialog. From those line-by-line notations, we began identifying recurring topics or categories of action (“codes” in more quantitative language). In the end, we identified a dozen overlapping codes: pursuing the dream; transformation; elevation; claims to the best; competitiveness; invocations of sports/war/military; assertions of heroism; strength/confidence vs. sensitivity/emotionality; simplicity vs. complexity; home, family, and heritage; mothers and motherhood. Once we had a clear idea of

<sup>3</sup> *Mise-en-scene* is a French term meaning “place on stage.” It indicates whatever is visually present in the space provided by the stage itself, including lighting, décor, props, costume, and characters' spatial relations to each other. The term was adapted to film production and analysis, and means much the same thing, with individual camera shots standing in for the stage (see Thompson and Bordwell 2010).



the codes, we constructed an index—a single document to keep track of all instances in which a code was being expressed/exemplified. Codes are not mutually exclusive but often overlap. For example, a passage coded for “elevation” might also be coded for “transformation,” “competitiveness,” and “assertions of heroism.” Codes are the building blocks of broader themes. They aren’t necessarily meaningful on their own; rather, their combination suggests the themes that drive the analysis, and ultimately the theoretical frameworks most relevant to that analysis.

Although all this may sound like a linear and even mechanical process, it was not. We were often watching episodes, coding/analyzing transcripts, and going back to the literature simultaneously. And continually talking through our impressions. It was not a matter of uncovering preexisting meanings waiting to be discovered, but of coming to collective agreement about the meaning of what we were seeing and hearing in the text. Moreover, we have intellectual interests and academic training that likely shaped our interpretations. A different team of scholars may have crafted a different story from similar ingredients, even following the same basic recipe. This is inevitable with qualitative research and suggests the importance of rigor and transparency of process and execution.

### **Agon and Apron: setting the table**

As with all reality shows, *MasterChef USA* is both formulaic and ritualistic; there are a set number of players/teams, a recurring series of contests, rituals of evaluation, ceremonies of punishment and reward. In dramatizing competition, all episodes from the first to the last convey *Agon*—the ancient Greek term for the spirit of rivalry, the penultimate contest between opposing forces, the quest for personal fame (the “good life”), and the pursuit of honor through heroic action in sporting events (Morford and Stanley 1976; MacAloon 1981). An intensive display of skill is required to achieve the agon, a display embedded in pageantry and ceremony (Hardy et al. 2009).

A culminating feature of the agon is the prize—in the contemporary American sports world, typically medals and trophies, often accompanied by money. The first episode of Season 3 opens with a shot of dozens of people in a hall, anticipating their auditions. As the judges—Gordon Ramsey, Graham Elliot, and Joseph Bastianich—take the stage, onlookers applaud and cheer enthusiastically. Ramsay says, “welcome to MasterChef. Thousands and thousands of home cooks across the nation tried to make it here today. They failed! You succeeded!” Subsequently, Bastianich announces, “someone in this room is going to earn, and I mean EARN a quarter of a million dollars.” He lifts a box to reveal a stack of money; those auditioning cheer and clap. A few seconds later, the camera refocuses on Ramsay. Reaching for another, more ornate box, he pauses dramatically and says “but there’s one final box, and what’s under it, is the real reason why all of you should be here today.” He reveals a tall acrylic trophy made to resemble glass, announcing “this is the key to the reality of your dreams: the MasterChef trophy.”

Trophies, medals, shields, and ribbons have been among the most visible forms of material culture in sports competition. As badges of honor and signs of triumph,





trophies symbolize, even metonymize, the agon. They are tangible proof that athletes have achieved the penultimate level of heroic performance (Goode 1978). Given their etymological origins in hunting and battle (Kinnee 2018), the iconicity of trophies cannot be separated from masculine power and competitiveness.<sup>4</sup>

Yet during the auditions of *MasterChef USA*, the prize offered to those who pass their first cooking challenge to become full-fledged contestants is an object whose symbolic meaning seems sharply at odds with the masculine implications of the trophy: a bib apron. As the narrator in the first episode of the first season explains: “Each home cook is given just five minutes to plate up their dish. If two of the three judges think they have what it takes, they’ll win a coveted MasterChef apron and move on to the next stage of the competition.” And indeed, during the audition phase—which lasts several episodes each season—aprons are given as a sign of high skill and achievement. In the first episode of Season 1, the judges utter phrases that will be repeated throughout the series: “the main goal today is to win one of these: the MasterChef apron,” Graham Elliot proclaims. Gordon Ramsay warns participants that earning an apron “will take more than a home-cooked dish: [you] have to feel that passion and that hunger and that determination and that [pause] that will to succeed.” Later in the episode, he holds a rolled white apron above his head and asks, “is that dish worthy of this apron? For me—no, it’s not [or, yes, it is].” In this and other episodes, aprons are awarded to successful auditioners in a *mise-en-scène* akin to a sports awards ceremony (see Alexander and Smith 2010). “You have a lot of determination,” says Ramsay. “You’re getting an apron. Step up to the mark.” (He puts an apron on a participant as if donning an Olympic medal). “Okay,” he says to her, “good luck” (S1E1).

For centuries, both men and women have worn different styles of aprons symbolizing various types of work, in addition to cooking—industrial labor, craft working, trade, artistry, medicine, butchery, gardening, and more. However, by the late 1940s, the apron becomes the icon of the (implicitly white, middle-class, and heterosexual) American housewife as domestic goddess. As writer Dolores Monet describes, “the apron became the symbol of family, mother, and apple pie ideals. Aprons signified a cozy kitchen and enough food for everyone” (Monet 2021). Whether decorated with flowers and flounces, or plain white, like the aprons in *MasterChef USA*, the bib apron has emerged as the ultimate icon of Hestian culture (Rasmussen 2016).<sup>5</sup> It is paradoxical, then, that a “feminine” apron should serve as a prize in the context of “masculine” competition. In effect, the apron represents in *material* form (no pun intended) the a priori *cultural* paradox of making a competition out of cooking. At the same time, using the apron to signify the winner in competition serves to decouple it from femininity, just as using cooking as the basis of competition more broadly serves to “harden” cooking and “soften” competition.

<sup>4</sup> The connections between social structures, cultural environments, and material objects is also addressed by Douglas and Isherwood (1979, p. 75), who wrote “material goods build up the structure of culture like coral islands.”

<sup>5</sup> Arguably, aprons also conjure the image of the endless hard work that domesticity requires, especially from women (Cheney 2005).



Complicating the picture further, at the end of each season the apron gets replaced with a phallus-shaped acrylic trophy, a more appropriately masculine symbol of the agon. The underlying paradox of making a competition out of cooking is still there, but the iconic symbol of femininity/domesticity is, quite literally, shed from the body, as the winning contestant removes the apron in order to accept and hold aloft the trophy. *Agon* and *Apron* are no longer entwined in the narrative, even though the broader fusion between cooking and competition remains. Thus the feminization of competition through cooking has limits, expressed literally by substituting one icon for another. The juxtaposition of *Agon* and *Apron* neatly encapsulates the process of hybridizing gender—and the limits of that process—that *MasterChef USA* helps to dramatize. Gender can be hybridized by turning cooking into a sport-like public performance, but the construction of cooking as an inside-gender performance for men can go only so far before masculinity has to be defended. The construction of sport as an inside-gender performance for women has limits, too, but they are more flexible; on the show, as in the broader culture, women have more latitude in gender expression because by mixing some masculinity into their repertoires, they are “stepping up” and adding value to their game. In what follows, we discuss the thematic threads that *Agon* and *Apron* pull together.

### **Elevate the dish, become “the best”**

The overt goal of contestants on *MasterChef USA* is to get the trophy by winning the competition. So how does a contestant win the competition? What separates one cook from the rest? There are many ingredients and no single recipe, but episode after episode, it is clear that one can only win the competition by becoming “the best.” “The best” is both a category and the outcome of a process, referenced repeatedly in the show as “elevation.” Becoming the best requires elevating one’s skills—and one’s dishes—to a chef-worthy level. Elevation enables transformation: most fundamentally and significantly, the transformation from cook to chef.

The emphasis on elevation has precedence. A key inner logic of gastronomy—the art and science of delicate eating—is the discourse of elevated food and the performance of what could be considered an elevated dining experience (Mennell 1985, pp. 266–267; Johnston and Baumann 2007). Since the first half of the nineteenth century, during the emergence of gastronomy as a social phenomenon in Western and Westernized societies, the apparent ability to elevate cooking to an art form through sophisticated cooking techniques and culinary knowledge was conferred on a select few; most, unsurprisingly, were male chefs working in commercial, as opposed to household, kitchens (Fantasia 2018, p. 33).

In *MasterChef USA*, elevation—the imperative of moving beyond “culinary simplicity” to achieve the highest levels of sophistication and perfection—is a staple of every episode.

The judges regularly communicate this imperative while evaluating the work of contestants—regardless of age, gender, or race/ethnicity. For example, when contestants are asked to prepare a beef dish, judge Gordon Ramsay says, “elevate your protein and let those steaks be the hero” (S8E8). In the same episode, Judge Arón



Sánchez says: “the second dish [... is made by] a home cook who’s already established himself as a force in this kitchen. This home cook elevated a humble cut of meat and made something spectacular with it.” And when Samantha, a 20-year-old college student from Iowa, adds walnut pesto to gnocchi, Ramsay praises her this way: “Your gnocchi has got an amazing flavor, crisp on the outside, light and fluffy in the center. That walnut pesto just makes it elevated” (S9E7). Accordingly, a failure is often explained as an inability to elevate: “Claudia, I loved your shrimp,” Ramsay says to Claudia Sandoval (a 31-year-old Latina events manager), “but the rice didn’t really enhance or elevate the dish” (S6E1).

And yet elevation is no easy feat, even (or perhaps especially) when “simple ingredients” and “simple dishes” are involved. Just like achieving a milestone in sports, cooking an elevated dish is a heroic accomplishment. Gordon Ramsay makes the parallel to sports explicit when he says about Gerron, a young African-American teacher from the South, “Gerron is making this chess pie, something very typical to the South. But this is a big gamble, because it’s a very basic staple. But again, you know, everything he’s brought out of Nashville, he’s elevating. So, if it works, home run.”

For their part, contestants also invoke the language of elevation when narrating their ambition to reach the *MasterChef* level, and thereby garner the respect of the judges. Consider how Necco, a young white marketing manager from South Carolina, discusses his preparation of beef tongue: “I’ve never worked with it before. [I’m] gonna braise it, put on ... some pickled vegetables, top with a little bit of chili oil to give it some spice. I know that I can elevate it, and, uh, I’m confident” (S8E8). Whitney, a soft-spoken white college student from Mississippi, says this about cooking: “My cooking, and Southern cooking, is all about taking ordinary ingredients that don’t cost that much, like collard greens or turnip greens, and elevating them to something so much more” (S1E13).

The movement from ordinary to elevated is clearly gendered, although it is never stated explicitly. Elevation underwrites the transformation of cook to chef. This transformation, in turn, encodes the interrelated shifts from amateur to professional status and from the intimate space of home to the more professionalized public space of work (the restaurant). All these dimensions indicate upward movement in a gender hierarchy. Regardless of actual or perceived gender identity, when a contestant succeeds in elevating the dish to become the best, they transform from an amateur home cook (culturally coded as feminine) to a professional restaurant-worthy chef (culturally coded as masculine).

The historic discourse of gastronomy as an art form notwithstanding, no one becomes *MasterChef* because of skill or artistry, a sophisticated palate, a confident hand, preexisting knowledge, or innate talent. Instead, elevation on *MasterChef USA* happens because of grit, determination, and singularity of purpose to be the best. As Ryan, an unemployed white man from New York, says in the first episode of Season 3, “I’m going all the way. My quest to be *the best*, it starts right here, right now!” Being anointed “the best” has been deemed the leitmotif of the MC format, particularly the American version (see Haarman 2015; Philips 2016).

The quest to be the best is a heroic mission. Often—and, in our view, superficially—this mission is framed as pursuing a lifelong dream that is seemingly



gender-blind, color-blind, and even divorced from aspirations of upward mobility. The narrator invokes the dream metaphor in the very first episode of Season 1: “For some [contestants], dreams will become a reality.” Faruq, a 30-year-old black male bartender confirms the point when he says, “[being in *MasterChef USA*] seems like a fairy tale—once upon a time starts right now!,” while Whitney, the white female college student from Mississippi, says in the same episode, “becoming America’s first *MasterChef* will change my life completely [...] if you have a dream, go after it.” Although it’s true that winning a contest on national television could be life-changing, the dramatic action of the show—the pacing, the iconography, the music and dialog—is anything but dreamy. Instead, it is framed as intense, cut-throat competition in the agonistic tradition of competitive sport—which is not gender-neutral, as dreaming of becoming the best would suggest. In a different episode, the narration underscores the heroism that will be required of contestants who survive the audition process: “those who make it will have to endure some of the most intense and extreme challenges *MasterChef* has ever seen, that will push everybody to their breaking point” (S4E1).

### Pressure cooker: competition as master frame

In sports, the performance of competition dramatizes gameplay and physical activity (Broch 2020, p. 188). *MasterChef USA* similarly focuses on the performance of competition, and thus makes cooking dramatic. All participants—contestants, judges and guest figures—confront, compete, and strive to prove themselves victorious. In contrast to cooking, which is generally conceived as an ordinary, domestic, and largely solitary practice, the spectacle of competition in sporting events transcends everyday routine; it highlights groups (teams) as well as individuals, and celebrates their *extraordinary* physical and mental prowess. As mentioned earlier, this puts a very “American” spin on the franchise. In her work on *MasterChef Australia*, Tania Lewis (2011, 2012) discusses the competitive individualism stressed on the show but frames it in terms of a neoliberal push toward entrepreneurialism, characterizing it as “a parable of precarious and time-pressured lives in an era of global uncertainty” (Lewis 2011). The competitive dimension exists alongside other, more salient themes—class, cultural capital, social distinctions, and regional political concerns.

In the U.S. version, by contrast, and as we’ve emphasized, competition is the master frame organizing both narrative content and *mise-en-scene*. Competition is a dominant mechanism across a wide range of social institutions in Western societies (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 94–105; Hinton 1983; Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002; Gershon 2011) and as such ensures “fusion”—the emotional connection between text and audience when a performance “rings true” to experience and expectation (Alexander 2004, p. 547; see also Jacobs 2018). *MasterChef USA* moves the competitive spectacle from the sphere of stadiums, stages, and battle rings to the domestic sphere of the kitchen. Simultaneously, the show transforms the ordinary kitchen into an extraordinary (and restaurant-ready) competitive arena. Media scholar Tasha Oren (2013, 2016) describes how global food programming over time has shifted from daytime



(instructional) to night-time (competitive) cooking, signaling “a move away from female-centered, domestic ‘how-to’ cooking in favor of restaurant-set competition” (Oren 2013, p. 20). Culinary skills practiced at home are replaced by professional, high-stakes performance with attendant criticism, stress, and risk. Oren’s analysis focuses on cooking shows featuring professional and celebrity chefs. *MasterChef USA*, however, envisions competition as a primary element for lay cooks aspiring to professionalize.

The esthetics of competition in the show are rooted in myriad textual/performative elements—a key one being the judges. Unlike the image of the “caring judge” in *MasterChef Australia* (Bednarek 2013, pp. 102–106) or the chef-therapist in *MasterChef Israel* (Groszlik and Lerner 2021), the judges in *MasterChef USA* are aggressive and tough, at times even dressing down contestants in the tradition of sports coaches. They aim to energize contestants and “advertise” the strength, stamina, and competitive spirit required to compete. “You’re about to cook for your life,” and “you are going to face the dreaded pressure test,” says Gordon Ramsay while touring the contestants’ workstations. During cooking contests, as contestants struggle with their missions, the judges function as coaches as much as mentors or instructors. For example, in the first episode of Season 4, they collude to inflame contestants’ enthusiasm, saying in rapid succession: “Do you have what it takes?” (Ramsay), “Do you have the skill?” (Elliot), “Do you have the guts?” (Bastianich). Such phrases not only strive to motivate the cooks, they also create a tense atmosphere of constant pressure. “It’s the culinary fight of your lives!” is a common refrain.

The contestants, for their part, describe their culinary decisions in strategic terms, using competitive language such as “taking a risk” or “playing it safe.” Like a boxer before a fight, or a runner before a race, they express high motivation and belief in their fitness to compete and triumph: “I must win this challenge tonight,” “my cooking skill and my passion can overcome everything,” “I left everything [behind] to win the title of MasterChef.” Christian, a white, single father, hints at past obstacles overcome as proof of his determination: “[I had] to fight through a lot of things in my life,” he says, “and I’m gonna fight through this competition and win it” (S2E1). Bowen, a 24-year-old Chinese-American working as a pilot, expresses bold confidence and strength of purpose: “I’m the strongest man in the competition. There can only be one winner, but I’m not chicken, I’m ready for it! Let’s compete!” (S9E7). Shanika, a 34-year-old black female event planner, says simply, “I’m not gonna crack under pressure. Not today” (S9E7). Many other contestants—regardless of age, gender, or race/ethnicity—similarly emphasize their mental and physical readiness “for a fight,” more often referencing strength and stamina than esthetic skills, good taste, or culinary creativity. “It’s a marathon, not a sprint,” as one contestant put it (S4E6). At the same time, because competition and masculinity are mutually imbricated, assumptions of masculinity haunt these assertions. Ramsay brings the ghost out of the closet at the end of Season 6 when he says to a female contestant, “How do I say it? You’re a lady, but your balls are getting bigger by the minute in this competition.”

Certain narrative techniques help enhance the drama of competition. These include imposing strict time restrictions on cooking challenges, pitting against



each other contestants who don't get along, purposely putting such contestants on the same team, and showcasing contestants attempting dishes “above their level.” Another is the “underdog effect” (Keinan et al. 2010)—staging the expectation of a loss to deceive the audience about the outcome of a challenge. In these cases, the judges deliberately criticize contestants in advance of their win. Late in Season 1, Whitney drops her just-cooked chicken on the floor. Members of the studio audience yell “oh, crap! oh, shoot!” and the judges scorn her throughout the episode by repeatedly referencing the blunder (“Whitney dropped the chicken!”). Eventually, however, she wins this culinary battle (S1E13). Other “screw ups” include burning dishes, upturning barrels of apples, and using a rival contestant's ingredients by accident. Such blunders slow contestants down and threaten to derail their dream of earning the MasterChef title, thus heightening the drama already inherent to competition.

## The Super Bowl of cooking

*MasterChef USA* isn't simply a competitive reality show; the competition more often than not is metaphorized as sport. There are players and teams, winners and losers, coaches and fans. The contestants, for example, are “athlete-cooks” under intense pressure to reach highly competitive goals. The judges not only act as coaches, they also enjoy celebrity status—just like sports stars. Action is often accompanied by sports-like audio–visual elements: enthusiastic cheering and applause from a live studio audience, expressions of excitement (*woo-hoo! yay! or hey yes!*) from audience members as well as fellow contestants, and dramatic music to underscore moments of tension. Several seasons include a narrator whose voice-over is near-identical to those on televised sports broadcasts. Just as in sports events, the narration enhances the spectacle and builds tension through “poetic imagery and game analysis” (Rowe 2004, p. 118; see also Broch 2020, p. 46).

Parallels between sport and cooking are conveyed in many of the episodes' titles, including “Return of the Champions” (S6E17), “Clawing to Victory” (S6E5), “Tag Team” (associated with professional wrestling) (S7E14), and “World Cup Dishes” (referencing the World Cup soccer tournament) (S9E7). Some episodes so strongly invoke sports contests that cooking seems beside the point. For example, the final episode of Season 3 feature all the contestants who participated during that season. Those already eliminated stood on a balcony, high above and overlooking the cooking arena. They act as fans supporting the rival finalists. One former contestant, Becky, a white woman in her late 20s who works as a food photographer, is particularly enthusiastic. Cheering loudly and waving her hands, she shouts excitedly: “This is it! This is the Super Bowl of cooking!”

A few contestants were themselves former college athletes. For example, Joshua, a 24-year-old black man working as an army specialist, is a former basketball player. In the first episode of Season 3, Joshua introduces himself by saying, “I'm seven feet tall, and I'm a championship basketball player ... When people look at me, they immediately ask me, “Oh, do you shoot hoops?” I'm like, “Nah, I shoot onions into skilllets!” He goes on to say, “my passion is cooking, and it kind of transitioned from



hooping to cooking ... Being an athlete and coming from an athletic background, we play to win and I'm not settling for anything less than *MasterChef*" (S3E1). Taylor, too, insists that his past experience with sports give him a competitive edge on the show. When asked by Ramsay, "why do you think you're the best?" Taylor, a 23-year-old black man working as a server replied, "[Because] I have the talent, and I'm gonna compete ... I played college football. You can't take me down, baby" (S6E1). At times, sports become the main topic of a scene, with cooking-related issues pushed to the margins. For example, Suzette, a young white woman auditioning in the first episode of the first season, was a former professional soccer player. During her audition, while preparing fish tacos, she says: "I really like to eat healthy. I played soccer professionally for Brazil." As she speaks, Ramsay interrupts her: "Excuse me, you played soccer for Brazil?" She replies, "I heard you played soccer too at one point. I figured we could chat about it or play afterwards. Gordon, I'm ready! I was a forward. If you were a back, I'll take you on!"

The episode titled "World Cup Dishes" (S9E7) features as a guest judge Alexi Lalas, formerly of the U.S. men's soccer team. The episode is an unabashed advertisement for the men's World Cup tournament held during the summer of 2018. In this episode, the judges don soccer jerseys reflecting their national heritage—Ramsay represents Scotland, Bastianich represents Italy, and Sánchez represents Mexico. Sánchez prefaces a description of the first cooking challenge by saying, "soccer, the most popular sport in world, this year is special because it's a World Cup year and ... when you got a soccer game, no matter where, there's always amazing street food." After Ramsay introduces Lalas as "one of America's most incredible soccer players ever," one of the contestants, Julia, asks in a mildly irritated tone, "are we playing soccer or are we cooking over here?"

Metaphorizing *MasterChef USA* as sport clearly aligns cooking with masculinity, and serves to identify cooking as acceptable for men, although it may remain an outside-gender activity in a broader sense. The "hardening" of cooking through sport-like competition brings men and women together on "equal" terrain: women in the larger culture are deemed "naturally" suited to domestic cooking, but they are unable to capitalize on this inside-gender advantage in the context of the show because the masculine framing of cooking as competitive sport takes precedence. This is not to suggest that the metaphor of sport "neutralizes" the show in terms of gender, only that it shifts the program to a masculine register for both women and men. Through the framework of sport, *MasterChef USA* effectively "disappears" gender—and other social differences—as a relevant property of individual contestants but not as a structuring narrative framework.

## A boy with boobs: hybridizing gender performance

If masculine competition, metaphorized as sport, serves to render the feminine terrain of cooking acceptable to men, it also serves as an affirmation of women's ability to compete in male arenas. This is not unique to *MasterChef USA*, of course, but parallels the admission of women, albeit unevenly and incompletely, into politics and business as well as sports. At the same time, the emphasis on competition does



not prevent men from tapping into their feminine potential through cooking, nor does it foreclose the creative interplay of masculine and feminine elements irrespective of gender identity and decoupled from sport. *MasterChef USA* juggles gendered categories, allowing traditional and hybrid gendered representations to coexist and collide. In this section, we highlight the “hardening” of femininity and the “softening” of masculinity as mapped onto the seemingly opposing qualities of strength/confidence and sensitivity/emotionality. This manifests most obviously when women appear strong and confident and men appear sensitive and emotional. At the same time, depictions of both women’s strength and men’s sensitivity are primarily “straight,” shored up not only in the narrative itself but also by heteronormalizing references to off-camera life.

On balance, female contestants are portrayed in the program as opinionated, educated, and assertive, and not simply traditional home cooks. Contrary depictions—having a gentle demeanor, cooking mostly “homey” dishes, and seeming to lack confidence—were the exception. Consider Jaimee. A young white bakery assistant, she smiled a lot and was stereotypically described by another contestant as “having the perfect fingers for making dim sum” (S5E14).<sup>6</sup>

Much more commonly, women are cast as “true” competitors willing to fight for the win. And yet their strength is invariably balanced with a healthy dose of traditional femininity. In some cases, femininity is said to mask—or, alternatively, enhance—their competitiveness. Jennifer, a tall, blond realtor, is described this way by another contestant: “Don’t let her fool you, you know. She’s pretty on the outside and bubbly and laughing, but I think she’s a great cook” (S2E20). Jennifer made it known that she had previously won *Miss Delaware, USA*. Emphasizing the confidence gained by competing on the runway, she boasted: “I walked in a swimsuit on national television in five-inch heels” (S2E1). She describes herself as “a boy with boobs” who is “competitive by nature,” adding “I came here to win. Don’t let the blonde hair and the nice smile and high heels fool you.” Diamond, who works as a web designer and is African American, was another contestant who referenced a beauty-queen past: “I have the *Miss San Diego* crown,” she said. “Unfortunately, I did not get the *MasterChef* crown that I wanted. I wanted to prove that pageant girls can do more than look pretty” (S7E11). In Season 9, Alecia says “everyone sees the pretty face and the hair, but I’ve got some big guns underneath here, and I’m ready to pull them out!”

In a different episode, the “wrong” gender attributes are coupled with the “wrong” regional pedigree to further highlight the unexpectedness of a female contestant’s success. Guest-judge Edward Lee, a famous NYC chef of Korean descent, asks Katie, a white woman from the South: “What does a good Mississippi girl know about curry?” Katie answered: “I travel a lot. So, as I travel, I’m not afraid to ask chefs how they make things.” After Lee announces that her dish is “fabulous,”

<sup>6</sup> Note the implicit racialization of this description, since dim sum is a traditional Chinese dish. Perhaps it is coincidental, but linking feminine delicacy to Asian-ness is common in U.S. culture and is consistent with constructing Asian women as hyper-feminine compared to white women: dainty, delicate, submissive, and sexually available (see Pyke and Johnson 2003).





she says: “I’m so proud of it. A lot of people see me as a dumb blond. I’m a really a smart, educated, hardworking individual” (S7E8). Indeed, the hyper-femininity associated with Southern women was a plot device expertly leveraged on the show. Of all contestants, Whitney best personified this. Dubbed the “pastry princess,” the 22-year-old college student from Poplarville, Mississippi was portrayed as sweet and sugary on the outside but tough as nails underneath. As she herself put it, “I might be small, I might be young, but I’m fierce in the kitchen” (S1E13). In the season finale, Whitney squares off against her nemesis David, a cocky white male software engineer from Boston. She cooks home-style buttermilk fried chicken; he cooks Beef Wellington with foie gras. The episode is a symphony of oppositions: girl vs. boy, South vs. North, small town vs. big city, home-style vs. restaurant-style, student vs. working professional. That Whitney triumphs in the end asserts the effectiveness, to paraphrase Jennifer, of being a boy with boobs.

Contestants like Jennifer, Diamond, Alecia, Katie, and Whitney are reassuringly feminine while still being competitive, a phenomenon that scholars of gender and sport call the “feminine apologetic” (see Felshin 1974; Festle 1996). Other female contestants balance competitiveness by emphasizing their roles as mothers. As Krissi, a 34-year-old paralegal of Italian descent, says in Season 4, “Luca tried to take Natasha out and me along with her. Watch out for the moms! We’re fierce!” (S4E17). Claudia, a 31-year-old Latina single mother, crowned MasterChef of Season 6, was portrayed as a particularly strong contestant. “I’ve never been under so much pressure,” she says. “I don’t want to go home today. I’m not ready to see my daughter yet—even though I really would love to see her. It’s just not the right time now. I’m not going down without a fight” (S6E18). In the next episode, Claudia speaks of her special obligation as a single mom to teach her daughter to “never give up,” just as her mother taught her. She says, “I’m winning this for ... my mom, my daughter, my grandmother” (S1E19). Claudia embraces (masculine) competitiveness but associates it with the symbolic power of (feminine) motherhood. Countless contestants, women and men alike, pay homage to mothers (and grandmothers) for teaching them how to cook, and for passing down specific recipes and traditions bound up with memories of childhood. Fathers get mentioned far less often.

Interestingly, the only female judge featured on the show, Christina Tosi, is not cast as maternal or nurturing nor does she add a “softer” voice to the judging process (despite being a slim, blonde woman in her late 30s at the time of her participation).<sup>7</sup> Reputed to be “scary but friendly,” her persona fits the criteria defining culinary masculinity: authoritative, knowledgeable, an artistic genius, formally trained, and with well-earned credentials (see Johnston et al. 2014). Tosi’s persona is “softened” primarily through her profession—as a pastry chef. Pastry is the only department in the culinary industry with more women than men (Harris and Giuffre 2015). Yet pastry itself is masculinized through competition and thus, like cooking more generally, assumes a hybridized quality. As Tosi announces: “To be THE MasterChef, you have to be able *to defeat* the desserts” (S6E18).

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the show’s producers were especially mindful of how Tosi, as the only female judge, would be closely scrutinized by viewers and thus took special care to avoid overt gender stereotypes.



For their part, male contestants enact a hybrid gender performance not simply by cooking but also by getting teary and emotional at critical junctures in the competition, typically when losing (sadness) or winning (joy) a challenge. Heightened emotional expressiveness is typical of television generally and reality programming specifically (Grindstaff and Murray 2015; Grosalik and Lerner 2021). *MasterChef USA* is no exception, and men are just as emotional as women.<sup>8</sup> This is established from the very beginning, and arguably indicates adherence to the narrative codes of the genre as much as gendered cultural scripts. Consider Nick, who appeared in the first season with Claudia. A heavily tattooed, olive-skinned dishwasher sales rep, Nick gets eliminated after a chocolate cake cook-off. Before Nick exits the show, judge Gordon Ramsay poses the following question to him: “Three [contestants] are left. One of them is gonna become America’s next MasterChef. Who’s it gonna be?” Nick gestures dismissively at two finalists. “None of those idiots,” he sobs, tears streaming down his cheeks. “You know what? Claudia reminds me of someone that I cherish, my mom. She’s a fighter. So, I think Claudia” (S1E1).

Faruq, an African-American bartender, provides another example of male sensitivity. According to the voice-over narration, “Faruq put his dreams [of becoming a professional cook] on the back burner for the sake of his young family.” Later in the episode, Faruq’s wife emphasizes the point, saying “he has put things aside. You do [this] with family. He wanted to go to school for [cooking], and he just [gesturing with hands] couldn’t” (S1E1). When the judges announce that Faruq has passed his cooking challenge, we see footage of him placing the apron on his young son, crying with happiness. Faruq is not only sensitive emotionally, he brackets his own ambition to prioritize family, arguably a “feminine” choice. And then there’s David, the cocky software engineer from Boston, who breaks down when the judges criticize his dish. Teary-eyed, he begs for another chance. Meanwhile, his fellow competitor, Mike, cries with joy when the judges praise his dish.

Even when men have stereotypically masculine personas, their portrayal may be hybridized in other ways—through association with “homey” dishes or “everyday” foods, for example. Dan is one such contestant. A white male server from North Carolina, he is portrayed as a “dude” and a “frat boy”—and yet he cooks sweet and savory Nutella turnovers. While cooking, he boasts about the “high level” of the dish and his own cooking skills: “My pastry looks like it came out of a professional pastry shop. People are gonna think I stole this from Christina Tosi’s station. But, no, this is straight up Captain Dan.” Later, Tosi, the judge, praises the dish: “I thought you had used store-bought pastry because it looks beautiful ... I’m very impressed with your baking skills.” Like everyone else, Dan strives to win the competition and break into the professional ranks, but he takes up the challenge with Nutella, a sweet food symbolizing homeliness and childhood—not a typical symbol of professional (masculine) cooking. Even the World Cup Dishes episode hybridizes masculinity insofar as soccer in the U.S. is considered a lesser (more feminine) sport

<sup>8</sup> Both food and emotions are historically constructed as visceral as thus as mundane and feminine, which is why, as men are permitted to display “softer” emotions de-linked from anger or aggression, it contributes to their hybridization (see Lupton 1996; Seidler 2007; De Boise and Hearn 2017).



than those at the “institutional core” (Messner 2002)—football, baseball, basketball, and hockey. As if to underscore the point, guest-figure Alexi Lalas, former player for the U.S. men’s national team, looks Gordon Ramsay up and down (Ramsay is wearing a soccer kit) and jokes, “damn sexy! Look at those legs!” (S9E7).

## Fortifying (gender) boundaries

Men’s “sensitivity” can go only so far, however. The feminine terrain of cooking may allow an expansion of masculinity, but the show resists portrayals of overtly feminine men. Likewise, women embrace masculine competition, but at the same time they consistently display a commitment to heterosexuality and motherhood. *MasterChef USA* is space for mixing gender categories, but not a space for challenging the gender binary per se. Lest there be any doubt about the defense of traditional gender boundaries, the show reminds us of the limits of hybridization in two key ways: by putting women in their place through sexist remarks, and, more systematically, by upping the ante of (masculine) competition from the arena of sport to the arena of battle.

Sexist and/or objectifying content is not a staple ingredient of *MasterChef USA*; it functions more like a garnish, or a spice peppered throughout the show. For example, when a female contestant is asked by Ramsay where her love of food comes from, she says: “Uh, boyfriends. I’ve always dated chefs. I have a thing for chefs.” In response, Gordon Ramsay calls her a “groupie,” and then tells her to keep dating chefs because she will never be one herself (S1E1). Consider also an episode in the second season in which a male contestant serves sushi on his girlfriend’s torso, literally making her part of the dish. Ramsay said: “You just poured soy sauce over your lady’s tummy, and it’s dripping everywhere. It’s Hugh Hefner’s breakfast!” (S2E1)—referring to the founder of *Playboy* magazine.

In another episode, Dan, the “frat boy” mentioned earlier, recounts that he grew up hunting duck on his family’s farm. What follows is a male bonding conversation about “girl hunting” (see Grazian 2007; Lahav-Raz 2020); Ramsay refers to the masculine sexual script of men as hunters, saying, “I can imagine you, right now, hunting chicks, but not ducks, Dan.” In this same episode, Dan responds to the challenge of making bibimbap (a traditional Korean rice dish), by referencing his college fraternity days: “I don’t know if you guys can tell or not, I’m not Asian. I was never whipping up bibimbap in the fraternity house” (S7E11). Although Dan is not suggesting that bibimbap would be misplaced in a fraternal environment necessarily (only that he himself, as a “non-Asian,” wouldn’t be making it), his invocation of the fraternity house—a gender-segregated (and, historically, racially segregated) space—aligns him with a narrative of masculinity associated with sexism, racism, and homophobia (Armstrong et al. 2006). There is also the implicit contrast between him and Asian men, long-stereotyped in American culture as unmanly and effeminate (see Chen 1999).

More common than expressing sexism, *MasterChef USA* fortifies gender boundaries by invoking metaphors of war and battle—bastions of heroic masculinity. This



is a strategy of marginalization and exclusion rather than denigration. The term “battle,” used countless times throughout the series, is well represented even in episode titles: “The Battle Continues” (S6); “Battle for a White Apron” (S7); “The Judges do Battle” (S9); “Battle of the Beef” (S8); and “Battle Round” (S10). “You will each compete in a head-to-head culinary battle,” says judge George Elliot, “steak *versus* steak, seafood *versus* seafood, bakers *versus* bakers” (S6E1). Other episodes depict “head-to-head” battles between contestants representing alleged opposing personalities, family cooking traditions, or regional affiliations. Even the dishes themselves are characterized as adversarial: fancy versus simple, homey versus gourmet. After contrasting “something you’d get at a diner in the low country” to “something you’d get in a fine restaurant in NYC,” George Elliot pronounces, “it’s the *culinary civil war*, North vs South” (S1E13).

If the metaphor of battle isn’t masculinizing enough, an entire episode in Season 3 is set against the backdrop of the U.S. military—specifically, the U.S. Marines. As a deeply gendered institution, the military has a long history of excluding women from combat positions, targeting female (and feminine) recruits for harassment and sexual violence, and enacting homophobic and transphobic policies (see Mesok 2016). Of course, mythic narratives of war and battle in the U.S. and elsewhere don’t dwell on these realities but instead dramatize the glory and sacrifice of male combat (see Woodward 2000). The battleground is the ultimate space of high-stakes competition, determining who (which side, which country, which allied forces) will emerge as “the man” among men. Across the globe, the U.S. has a reputation for military might, and across military institutions in the U.S., the Marines have the same reputation.

In this episode, contestants must cook in teams (red and blue) for more than 200 U.S. Marines (S3E5). Each Marine votes for the dish they prefer, and the team with the most votes wins the challenge. The meal is served in the center of a spacious field bounded by tanks and armored vehicles—a temporary, outdoor mess hall. The cooking happens in nearby tents and is depicted as immensely stressful due to the sheer volume of food needed. At the point of voting, Gordon Ramsay stands on the hood of a military pickup truck and yells into a megaphone: “Marines, it’s been an absolute honor to have the privilege to cook for you today. I’d like to invite you all to stand up in one big line.” Then, a shot of the red team features Ryan, a 26-year-old unemployed white man, addressing the women on his team: “If ever there was a time to flash a nip, ladies!” he exclaims. Later, Monti, a female contestant on Ryan’s team, says in a confessional voice-over: “Ryan is telling me, show them your nipples. It’ll get us more votes.” Then we see a shot of her scolding Ryan: “Dude, shut up. [BLEEP], have some respect, man.” Ryan deflects, “I’m just kidding.” But the point of the joke is clear: this is a straight male space and you women don’t belong. If you want admission, your ticket is your sexual attractiveness to men.

This same episode also invokes queerness as if to reinforce the limits of hybridization in defense of heteromascularity. Unsurprisingly, actual LGBTQ-identified contestants, while not entirely absent, in no way disrupt the overall heteronormativity of the show—indeed, *MasterChef USA* is even more “blind” to sexuality



than other categories of social difference.<sup>9</sup> Instead, there are oblique references to queerness that reaffirm its marginalization—two examples of which occur during the cooking challenge staged at the Marine base. In one scene, George Elliot nixes a contestant’s proposal to serve pasta salad, saying “it’s too frou-frou - nobody wants that right now.” In an earlier scene, David, the software engineer from Boston, has arrived on-location wearing a tuxedo-themed T-shirt. Ramsay takes one look at him and says, “did you realize we’ve come to the Marine base today with that top on? ... I think someone’s gonna beat the [BLEEP] out of you in a minute.” Temporarily, David is a target of what C. J. Pascoe (2007) calls “fag discourse”—accusations of effeminacy that police gender expression rather than sexual orientation per se. Here, as in the broader culture, the specter of “the fag” is raised in order to be contained. Adding to David’s feminization is the fact that he is portrayed as an urbane Bostonian with a sedentary job—a far cry from the rough and tumble physicality of the rural Marine base. Even the job itself—*software engineer*—suggests a contrast to the presumed *hardness* of “real” heteromascularity.

Considering the well-worn trope of “sport as battle” (Elias and Dunning 1986; Messner 1994; Trujillo 1995; Broch 2020), the show’s deployment of militaristic battle imagery is unsurprising, as it pairs seamlessly with sport and supports the role that *MasterChef USA* plays in the sportification of cooking. What is less obvious are the ways in which the masculinized discourse of sports/battle/competition is deftly and systematically deployed to both embrace and defend against the feminine valence of cooking via hybridization. Although the gender tensions that *MasterChef USA* takes on are never resolved, hybridization—of cooking, of competition, and of gender itself—puts them squarely on display.

## Conclusions: fusion cooking?

We’ve argued in this paper that the overt goal of *MasterChef USA* is to win a cooking competition. Covertly, and more culturally significant, is the show’s negotiation of symbolic gender boundaries to masculinize the competition through parallels to sport. *MasterChef USA* interlaces cooking and sport to accomplish a hybrid performance of gender. The hybridization has limits, and is not equally balanced between masculine and feminine poles. Masculinity, and more specifically heroic masculinity, is prioritized in the language and iconography of sport, battle, and the military.

Historically, representations (and the embodied practices) of sport on the one hand, and cooking on the other, “fuse” (in Alexander’s [2004] sense of the term) with inside-gender performances for men and women, respectively, because they align with the gendered cultural assumptions of audiences: sport is masculine and therefore “for” men (Young 1980; Messner 1992, 2002), whereas cooking is feminine and therefore “for” women (Ortner 1972; Schenone 2003). Popular media

<sup>9</sup> Fan wiki pages indicate that across the nine seasons we studied, only eight contestants of hundreds identify as LGBTQ and in no instance is sexuality explicitly foregrounded.



often reinforce these associations, and along with them the binary construction of gender itself—a necessary precondition for gender inequality. Even much academic scholarship, critical of gender binaries/inequalities, conceptualizes sport and cooking as distinctive arenas wherein opposing gender regimes are enacted—hegemonic masculinity in the field of competitive sports,<sup>10</sup> emphasized femininity in the realm of domestic cooking.<sup>11</sup> *MasterChef USA*, by contrast, brings sport and cooking into the same cultural space by turning cooking into a sport-like competition. Through the sportification of cooking, the show blurs inside- and outside-gender distinctions.

In *MasterChef USA*, gendered hybridity is constructed through parallels *between* cooking and sport and through cooking *as* a sport. In hybridizing sport and cooking, the sportification of cooking animates a series of binary codes that serve as “building blocks” (Alexander and Smith 1993; Alexander 2007) for the show’s gendered discourse: amateurism and professionalism, domesticity and the public sphere, the ordinary and the extraordinary, all mobilized through the narrative of elevation. These codes do not explicitly reference femininity or masculinity let alone women and men, but rather appear entwined, as a combined display of *Agon* and *Apron*, an amalgam of inside- and outside-gendered performances.

In *MasterChef USA*, “soft” domestic cooking takes on the “hard” elements of competition and athleticism (the athlete-cook), which requires cultural ingredients such as effort, achievement, stamina, intensity, and struggle—part and parcel of the hardening process. The framework of athletic competition uncouples cooking from the mundane, routine world of feminine care work (DeVault 1991; Cairns and Johnston 2015) and transforms it into an intense, exciting activity akin to competitive professional sports (see Cottingham 2012; Peterson 2015). Female participants are not portrayed as particularly domestic but rather as educated, opinionated, and assertive—although simultaneously reassuringly womanly and heterosexual. At the same time, sport-like competition is flavored with “feminine” elements—primarily expressions of emotion (disappointment/sadness and joy) and a stated commitment to family. In paying homage to the culinary skills of their foremothers, contestants invoke a maternal legacy of domestic cooking—not as daily drudgery but as the intergenerational transmission of valued skills and traditions.

The popularity of *MasterChef USA*, as well as that of similar sportified reality programs, might signal that hybridity is the new way to “fuse” social performance

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<sup>10</sup> But see Broch (2020) for a complicated analysis of sport/gender nexus in Norway taken from the perspective of cultural sociology of sport. See also Archetti (1999) on the fusion between sports, national, and gendered narratives in Argentina.

<sup>11</sup> But see Nolen (2020) for a discussion on domestic cooking and progressive masculinities, and Black (2021) on female-led kitchens and the major role women have played in France’s professional culinary industry.



with cultural expectations of gender, and that the historic split between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity is outdated (see Grindstaff and West 2006; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). The hybridity of the show seemingly suggests that both cultural fields—sport and cooking—can be, and often are, playful zones prioritizing liminality (see Archetti 1999).

Yet the question remains if/how hybridization impacts gender (in)equality. Does it facilitate greater equality or, conversely, undermine it? In their review of the literature on hybrid masculinities, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) argue that contemporary performances of masculinity that play with social boundaries are relatively superficial. “Hybridization is a cultural process with incredible potential for change,” they write, but, so far, research “has primarily documented shifts in—rather than challenges to—systems of power and inequality” (256). It may even reinforce patriarchy if socially privileged men’s appropriation of “Otherness” suggests that patriarchy no longer exists or exists by reputation only, without real consequences in people’s lives (see Donovan 1998; Demetriou 2001; Johnson 2005; Nolen 2020). In *MasterChef* terms, it is possible that “softening” sport and “hardening” cooking is entirely functional to patriarchy if heroic masculinity absorbs features of femininity only to maintain its dominance.

We don’t see cultural processes of hybridization as superficial or as gender-regressive if the alternative is to leave the gender binary—and the hierarchy it enables—unquestioned. Moreover, cultural processes are not reducible to individual performance, individual performances of gender hybridization included. Cultural processes are not epiphenomenal to social structure but are themselves structured and structuring. It is through culture that social life is lived and the social order built.

To be sure, the hybridization of gender on *MasterChef USA* represents a shift in the alignment of cultural systems, not the elimination of inequality. Hybridization doesn’t let go of gender difference altogether—it can’t and doesn’t jettison or “undo” gender; rather, it rearranges gender’s contours and remaps its codes. The dueling iconography of *Agon* and *Apron* dramatizes this rearrangement, presenting us with an ambivalent cultural text. There is benefit to the ambivalence of hybridity if we see it as an invitation to both imagine otherwise and confront the limitations of that imagining. Texts like *MasterChef USA* are neither objective reflections of what is, nor recipes for wholesale change, rather they offer opportunities to consider the gap between the two.

The remapping of gender codes is not an equitable process, and herein lies the critical point: hybridization occurs unevenly across gender. The unevenness is where power resides. Hybridized gender is less optional for women than it is for men. As gender scholars have long argued, western culture is not just sexist but also androcentric, meaning that masculinity is valued above femininity. This is why sons who are “girly” are more concerning for parents than daughters who are “tomboys”: girls are trading “up” in status, boys are trading “down” (Kane 2012). Women must embrace at least some masculinity—that is, lay claim to some (but not too much!) strength, competence, competitiveness—in order to be taken seriously in public life, whereas men can get away with doing little femininity or none at all (Wade and Ferree 2019). Although this means women generally have greater latitude in enacting



gender scripts, it also illustrates that masculinity is the more precious resource and a slide toward femininity will go only so far. Masculinity is less flexible and its value must be defended. Consequently, in the U.S. at least, hybrid femininity is already “fused” (to borrow once more from Alexander) with cultural expectation to a degree that hybrid masculinity is not. Indeed, hybrid femininity—what Wade and Ferre (2019) call “balanced femininity”—is arguably now the ascendant form (see also Grindstaff and West 2006).

That masculinity has the upper hand is nowhere more evident than in the world of organized sports. Gender-appropriate genres for women such as figure skating notwithstanding, feminization is generally an obstacle to legitimacy in sports, whereas masculinization helps secure it. In *MasterChef USA*, women compete on “equal” footing with men but along the way they must be reassuringly feminine/maternal and they are reminded of their tenuous occupation of male terrain by the metaphorization of sport as battle and war. In *MasterChef USA*, heroic masculinity is the lingua franca of success.

The whole point of heroic masculinity is to win the competition by becoming “the best.” And yet what does this mean? Quite literally, it means ascending the gender hierarchy, transforming from (feminine) cook to (masculine) chef. When this occurs, the (feminine) apron is replaced by the (masculine) phallic trophy, the ultimate symbol of the agon. Thus, the fundamental transformation driving the show is a deeply and thoroughly gendered one. Perhaps this is why Gordon Ramsay, a former soccer player turned celebrity chef (see Johnston et al. 2014) is the iconic persona of the show.

More broadly, *MasterChef USA* joins countless other reality programs on television offering a “softer” experience of competition than professional televised sports, meaning a sport-like experience less heavily dominated by men or heroic masculinity. In hybridizing gender, unevenly and incompletely to be sure, *MasterChef USA* also hybridizes sports competition itself, enabling its core features to transcend the realm of sport. Organized sports in the U.S. may have originated in military and educational institutions, and may retain strong traces of those institutions, but *MasterChef USA*—and reality television competitions generally—demonstrate the seepage of sport and sport-like performances into adjacent cultural arenas, presenting new opportunities for cultural analysis, and new possibilities for imagining cultural change.

## Appendix

Description of participants in the episodes sampled (“physical appearance” and “performed persona” are culled from participant bios, fan sites, and our own viewing)





Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Gordon Ramsay	48	Chef, Television Personality Judge— <i>MasterChef USA</i>	Johnstone, United Kingdom	White male	Critical judge (“hard-ass”)
Graham Elliot	37	Chef, Judge— <i>MasterChef USA</i>	Seattle, WA	White male	Less intimidating than other judges; “easy going”
Arón Sánchez	41	Chef, Judge— <i>MasterChef USA</i>	El Paso, TX	Latino	Critical judge
Christina Tosi	36	Chef, owner and CEO of successful bakery, Judge— <i>MasterChef USA</i>	Springfield, VA	White female	Sympathetic, “professional” judge, tough but kind
Joe Bastianich	44	Restaurateur, Judge— <i>MasterChef USA</i>	Astoria, NY	White male	Highly critical judge
Samantha Daily	20	College Student	West Des Moines, IA	White female, black glasses, long auburn hair	“Sorority girl”
Claudia Sandoval	31	Events Manager	La Mesa, CA	Latina, vibrant dyed red hair, Heavy makeup	Passionate cook, mother, winner of Season 5
Gerron Hurt	25	English Teacher	Louisville, KY	Black male	Kindhearted, likable, honest and humble personality, winner of Season 9
Necco Ceresani	26	Marketing Manager	Newberry, SC	White male	Arrogant
Whitney Miller	22	College Student	Poplarville, MS	White female	Soft-spoken, “pastry princess,” professional, winner of Season 1
Faruq Jenkins	30	Bartender	Glendale, CA	Black male	Family man, passionate cook



Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Christian Collins	31	Stay-at-home dad	Gloucester, MA	White male	Family man, nervous, lacks confidence
Bowen Li	24	Pilot	Tianjin, China	Chinese-American male	Chinese accent, immigrated to U.S. at 15, determined, short-tempered
Shanika Patterson	34	Event Promoter	Miami, FL	Black female	Bold, tough, daring
Rebecca “Becky” Reams	27	Food Photographer	Stilwell, KS	White female	Confident, assumes leadership with ease.
Joshua “Josh” Marks	24	Army Contract Specialist	Jackson, MS	Black male	Friendly, college-basketball champion. (enacts suicide one year after season airs while battling mental illness)
Taylor (no mention of family name)	23	Server	Milwaukee, WI	Black male	Competitive, former football player
Suzette (no mention of family name)	Unknown	Former professional soccer player	Unknown	White female	Competitive, flirty
Andrew (no mention of family name)	30	Political fundraiser	Charleston, SC	White male	Stereotypical nerd persona
Alecia Winters	30	Daycare owner	Grand Rapids, MI	Latina	Competitive
David Miller	29	Software Engineer	Boston, MA	White male	Cocky, short-tempered
Ryan Umare	26	Unemployed	New York, NY	White male	Overconfident, entitled attitude
Mairym “Monti” Carlo	36	Homemaker	Los Angeles, CA	White female	Authoritative
Daniel “Dan” Paustian	26	Server	Charlotte, NC	White male	Funny, often accused of not taking the competition seriously
Jaimee, Vitolo	23	A bakery assistant	Queens, NY	White female	Well-liked contestant, quiet



Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Jennifer Behm	34	Realtor	Wilmington, DE	White female, tall, blonde	Former beauty queen, smiley, laughs a lot, winner of Season 2
Diamond (no mention of family name).	24	Web Designer	San Diego, CA	Black female	"Girly" (emphasized femininity)
Michael "Mike" Kim	34	Server	Redondo Beach, CA Server	Asian American male	Passionate cook, smart, strong and confident
Krissi Biasiello	34	Paralegal	Philadelphia, PA	White female, Italian descent.	Strong, hated by the other contestants
Sheetal Bhagat	37	Teacher	Chicago, Illinois	Asian American female (South Asian descent)	Strong-minded
Sharone Hakman	28	Financial Advisor	Los Angeles, CA	White male	Overconfident
Anthony "Tony" Carbone	31	Server	Boston, MA	White male, Italian descent	Friendly
Sheena Zadeh	26	Marketing Executive	Anaheim, CA	White female	Strong, accomplished, overconfident
Jacob "Jake" Gandolfo	38	Construction Worker	Santa Cruz CA	White male	Humble, diligent
Tracy Nailor	42	Doctor	Atlanta, GA	Black female	Highly intelligent, family-oriented
Avis White	47	Elderly Caregiver	Vacherie, LA	Black female	Giving and selfless, volunteers
Randy Twyford	Unknown (middle age)	Farmer	Unknown	White male	Homey, simplistic cooking style, southern accent
Franklin "Frank" Miranda	28	Stockbroker	Holtsville, NY	White male, Italian descent	Confident but humble
Michael Chen	19	Freshman Meteorology student	Austin, TX	Asian American male	Inexperienced, easily flustered



Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
David Martinez	32	Educational Administrator	Glencoe, IL	Latino	Poor performer as a cook, easily flustered, arrogant, self-absorbed
Christine Hà	32	Student	Houston, TX	Asian American female	First blind contestant, beloved, strong and confident, winner of Season 3
Scott Little	38	Interactive producer	Annandale, VA	White male	Inexperienced
Felix Fang	23	Food runner	Los Angeles, CA	Asian American male	Outspoken, cocky, arrogant, strong, talented
Helene Leeds	35	Health Coach	Baldwin, Maryland	White female	Careless
Samantha McNulty	18	High school student	Florham Park, NJ	White female	Passionate about cooking
Shami (no mention of family name)	30	Recruiter	Seattle, WA	Black female	Passionate about cooking
Anna Rossi	28	Pharmaceutical sales	Boston, MA	White female	Strong, quiet, capable, rarely shows emotion during the competition
Tanya Noble	21	Student	Austin, TX	Female (ethnicity unclear)	Passionate about cooking, kind, friendly
Tali Clavijo	29	Musician	Chicago, IL	Latino	Arrogant, poor performer as a cook
Stacey Amagrande	29	Farmers market manager	Apple Valley, CA	Female (ethnicity unclear)	Chill, smart, strategic, tenacious
Derrick Peltz	28	Drummer	Fort Myers, FL	White male	"Mama's boy"
Stephen Lee	47	Urban gardener	Palm Springs, CA	White male	Energetic, eccentric
Tommy Walton	57	Fashion designer	Chicago, IL	White male	Funny, silly attitude
Katrina Kozar	34	Administrative assistant	Milwaukee, WI	White female	Nervous, lacks self-confidence



Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Nick Nappi	31	Dishwasher Sales Representative	San Diego, CA	Male, (ethnicity unclear)	Funny, ambitious, motivated, strong competitor
Mike "Newton" Newton	53	Ranch owner	Lipan, TX	White male	Arrogant, doesn't take the competition seriously
Yachecia Holston	43	Minister	Detroit, MI	Black female	Energetic, high-spirited, friendly, passionate cook, strong competitor
Jason Wang	34	High school music teacher	Newton, MA	Asian American male	kind-hearted, joyful, ambitious, likeable, humble, creative, strong competitor
Dino Angelo Luciano	28	Dancer	Bensonhurst, NY	White male, Italian descent, dyed platinum hair, tattooed	Quirky and flamboyant, passionate, well-liked, winner of Season 8
Caitlin "Cate" Meade	25	Nutritionist	Chicago, IL	White female	Kindhearted, strong, describes herself as a "tomboy"
Caitlin Jones	24	Dancer	Pittsburgh, PA	White female	Weak contestant
Eboni Henry	33	Addiction Counselor	Chicago, IL	Black female	Strong contestant, passionate cook
Jeff Philibin	29	Marketing director	Tampa, FL	White male	Arrogant
Gabriel Lewis	19	Fast Food Server	Oklahoma City, OK	Male, (ethnicity unclear)	Quiet, weak competitor
Brien O' Brien	32	Magazine Ad Sales	Redding, CA	White male	Arrogant
Jenny Cavellier	25	Special Needs Therapist	Cincinnati, OH	White female	Inexperienced, weak contestant
Reba Billingsley	48	Stay-at-home mom	Carthage, TX	White female	Weak contestant



Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Adam Wong	24	Student	Cambridge, MA	Asian American male	Has a high opinion of himself, weak contestant
Daniel Pontes-Macedo	31	Substitute Teacher	Medford, MA	Male, (ethnicity unclear)	Weak contestant
Luca Manfè	31	Restaurant manager	Astoria, NY	White male	Friendly, kind, winner of Season 4
Albert (no mention of family name)	51	Truck Driver	Kiln, MS	White male	Masculine, tattooed
Mike (no mention of family name)	36	Firefighter	Milton, MA	White male	Family man
Monica Chung	28	Pianist	New York, NY	Asian American female	Confident
Tracy Kontos	32	Sales consultant	Coral Springs, FL	White female	Enthusiastic personality, creative, leadership skills
Angel Moore-Soukkay	37	Property manager	Columbus, OH	Black female	Energetic, high-spirited, outspoken, quick-tempered
Christian Collin	31	Stay-at-home Dad	Gloucester, MA	White male	Family man, nervous, lacks confidence
Max Kramer	18	Student	New York, NY	White male	Arrogant, passionate cook
Benjamin “Ben” Starr	33	Travel Writer	Dallas, TX	White male	Friendly, kind, strong competitor
Jennifer “Jennie” Kelley	37	Musician	Dallas, TX	White female	Kindhearted, ambitious cook, strong competitor
Esther Kang	28	Lawyer	Los Angeles, CA	Asian American female	Arrogant
Derrick Prince	33	Web Designer	West Babylon, NY	White male	Kind, easygoing, Strong contestant
Adrien Nieto	28	Server	Ventura, CA	Latino	Calm, cool, and collected, takes the competition seriously



Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Christine Corley	27	Single Mom	Sopchoppy, FL	White female	Outspoken, tenacious, hardworking
Alejandra Schrader	37	Architect/ Urban Planner	Playa del Rey, CA	Latina	Diligent cook, seen as a strong contender to win
Erryn Cobb	26	Public Relations	Chicago, IL	Black male	Laidback personality
Susan "Suzy" Singh	27	Neural Engineer	Chicago, IL	Female, (ethnicity unclear)	Arrogant
Giuseppe Morisco	38	Granite salesman	Chicago, IL	White male, Italian descent.	Joyful and friendly personality
Tyler Viars	27	Hunting Sales Manager	Wilmington, OH	White male	"Country boy"
Ahran Cho	18	Student	Palo Alto, CA	Asian American male	Innovative, creative
Elizabeth Cauvel	31	Advertising Executive	Brooklyn, NY	White female	Arrogant, "in it to win it"
Christine Silverstein	31	Investment Director	Yonkers, NY	White female	Hardworking, leader.
Elisa "Elise" Mayfield	28	e-Learning Administrator	Birmingham, AL	White female	kind personality, lacked self-confidence
William "Willie" Mike	25	Church Music Director	Houston, TX	Black male	Likeable, takes risks
Jaimee Vitolo	23	Bakery Assistant	Queens, NY	White female	Friendly, humble, struggles to handle pressure
Francis Legge	34	Music Video Director	New York City, NY	White male	Likeable, funny, lively, bubbly
Victoria Scroggins	35	Bartender	San Angelo, TX	White female	Ambitious, passionate, eager, and energetic
Courtney Lapresi	25	Dancer	Philadelphia, PA	White female	Strong, confident, winner of Season 5
Christian Green	29	Sale Rep	New Orleans, LA	Black male	Passionate cook, strong competitor
Joshua "Cutter" Brewer	33	Petroleum Landman	Beaumont, TX	White male	Humorous
Leslie Gilliams	56	Stay-at-home Dad	Malibu, CA	White male	Grumpy, pre- tentious



Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Diana Bilow	23	Server	Plainfield, IL	White female	Confident, arrogant, egotistical, competitive
Alejandro Toro	26	Voice-Over Artist	Miami, FL	Latino	Kind, likeable personality
Eric Howard	26	Firefighter	Queens, NY	White male	Calm, confident
Brandi Mudd	27	Elementary School Teacher	Irvington, KY	White female	Kind, humble, talented skillful
Andrea Galan	21	Student	Miami, FL	White female	Lively, passionate, aggressive, strong
Nathan Barnhouse	20	Tuxedo Salesman	Slippery Rock, PA	White male	Funny and passionate but weak contestant (inexperienced and immature)
Lisa-Ann Marchesi	46	Insurance Manager	Gillette, NY	White female	Assertive, passionate, strong, but poor cooking skills
Diamond Alexander	24	Web Designer	San Diego, CA	Black female	Stylish, team player, average cooking skills
Shaun O'Neale	33	DJ	Las Vegas, NV	White male	Competitive, strong cooking skills, often opinionated, condescending, and petty, winner of Season 7
Tanorria Askew	34	Credit Union Coordinator	Chattanooga, TN	Black female	Strong, assertive, sassy personality
Katie Dixon	33	Fitness Trainer	Hattiesburg, MS	White female	Informed, skilled, strong competitor
David Williams	35	Professional Poker Player	Las Vegas, NV	Black male	Talented, competitive, aggressive
D"Andre Balaoing	25	Bartender	Las Vegas, NV	Black male	Gay and proud, has vibrant, flashy, stylish vibe





Name	Age at time of filming	Occupation	Hometown	Physical appearance	Performed persona
Mauel “Manny” Washington	29	Fireman	Orlando, FL	Black male	Energetic, funny
Terence “Terry” Mueller	40	Handyman	Long Island, NY	White male	Kind, likeable personality
Emily Hallock	28	Food Research Analyst	Neenah, WI	White female	Ambitious

**Acknowledgements** We would like to thank Brianna Hayman and Elizabeth Avila for their expert assistance collecting and transcribing episodes, and to UC Davis’ Small Grant in Aid of Research Program which partially supported our efforts. We are grateful to *AJCS* special issue editor Trygve Broch, who, along with anonymous reviewers, gave insightful feedback on earlier drafts; this paper is much better as a result. Finally, we would like to acknowledge each other for the fun, rewarding, and sometimes delicious collaboration.

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