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Food, glorious (genetically modified) food

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The interesting show tonight is about food. In fact it claims to be about "deconstructing" the stuff we eat. Television is obsessed with food. There is an entire channel devoted to it. Anyone who can boil an egg can get a TV series in order to show off his or her skills.

It helps if you're good-looking, of course. The two big stars of cooking-TV in recent years are Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson and the appeal of both has a lot to do with viewers fantasizing about a knee-trembler with the host. It's not about knockwurst or knishes, or whatever you're having yourself. Jealous biddies might complain in print that Nigella Lawson can't actually cook, but they only emphasize the real point of her show.

It's mostly a matter of watching, really. I'm not convinced that anybody rushes to the kitchen after watching a show on the Food network. Some people talk incessantly about food, of course, and others don't. Whether you natter about food and what you had for dinner depends on your cultural background. During a five-minute phone chat with my mother in Ireland, she'll inevitably tell me what they had for dinner. But I don't discuss food with my little pals when I'm talking to them on the phone.

I will tell you this, however. I'm a great believer in the family meal. Mostly I go in for an Italian menu. There's nothing like a plate of pasta and a glass of red wine after a hard day at the office figuring out some smart remarks to make about television and hauling countless packages of videotapes from one end of The Globe to the other. On the other hand, it occasionally occurs to me, you can't beat a good roast.

You get several meals from a roast in my house. Besides, the cats adore it. It really is the family meal. There's nothing they like better than roast beef, taties and carrots for their dinner. Not a speck of it is left over. As for myself, well, you have the roast with the spuds and veg one night and then you can have the rest of the beef in a fancy sandwich. You need a good Italian loaf, provolone cheese and you need to make a dressing of olive oil, balsamic vinegar, garlic and fresh oregano.

The thing is, one of the cats, Mick, adores this dressing. I've found him on the kitchen counter, his gob stuck into the bowl of dressing and his tongue going in and out like a fiddler's elbow. After the sandwich, the rest of the beef is used with cappellini for yet another meal. You don't get that kind of anecdote on Lawson's or Jamie Oliver's show, now do you? I feel an idea for a TV show coming on: a cooking show aimed at feeding you and your pets at the same time! You read it here first.

Deconstructing Supper (Vision, 9 p.m.) has anecdotes, but they're not much fun. Restaurateur John Bishop hosts the program, which gets him out of his kitchen and into an investigation of the quality of the food used in his restaurant. It's also about the food all of us eat. Did you know that 60 per cent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in North America comes from one valley in California? Me neither.

The program is not really about deconstructing your supper and mine (or the cat's supper). It's about genetically modified food. Bishop sets out to discover what genetically modified is and how it is created. It's a horror story.

The program's strength is Bishop's naivete. He's learning about genetically modified food with the viewer. He talks to farmers on the Prairies and goes to laboratories where the genetic modification is researched and carried out. He discovers that he's entering into a battlefield where farmers, activists and journalists are at war with companies who want to keep putting genetically modified food on the supermarket shelves.

The turning point for Bishop and the viewer comes when he talks to two U.S. reporters who wrote about the potential dangers of genetically modified food and found that their newspaper was terrified of a legal battle with the company that is trying to downplay any doubts about its food products. One reporter says, "It's not up to giant corporations to dictate to people what they put in their own bodies. If I don't want to eat a genetically engineered tomato, that's my choice."

The trouble is, in North America, most people don't know if they are consuming a genetically engineered tomato, or indeed drinking milk from cows that have been injected with artificial hormones.

As Bishop learns, the usual response from the corporations pushing these products on us is that skeptics are trying to stop progress and inhibit new methods for feeding developing countries. So Bishop goes to India, where a local scientist tells him that this is all nonsense. "The notion that peasant societies have not had science is totally false."

Deconstructing Supper is really a plea for organic agriculture. Frankly, it's not an entirely convincing plea. Sure, there is good reason to be suspicious of what faceless corporations want to shove down our throats, but there isn't enough evidence here to sway everyone toward an exclusive diet of organically grown food. There's a lot of hippie cant that comes with it and then there's the price. Not everybody can afford it and that's an issue that Bishop, who makes his living running an expensive restaurant for a rich clientele, doesn't deal with here.

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