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Multimedia mogul Rachael Ray

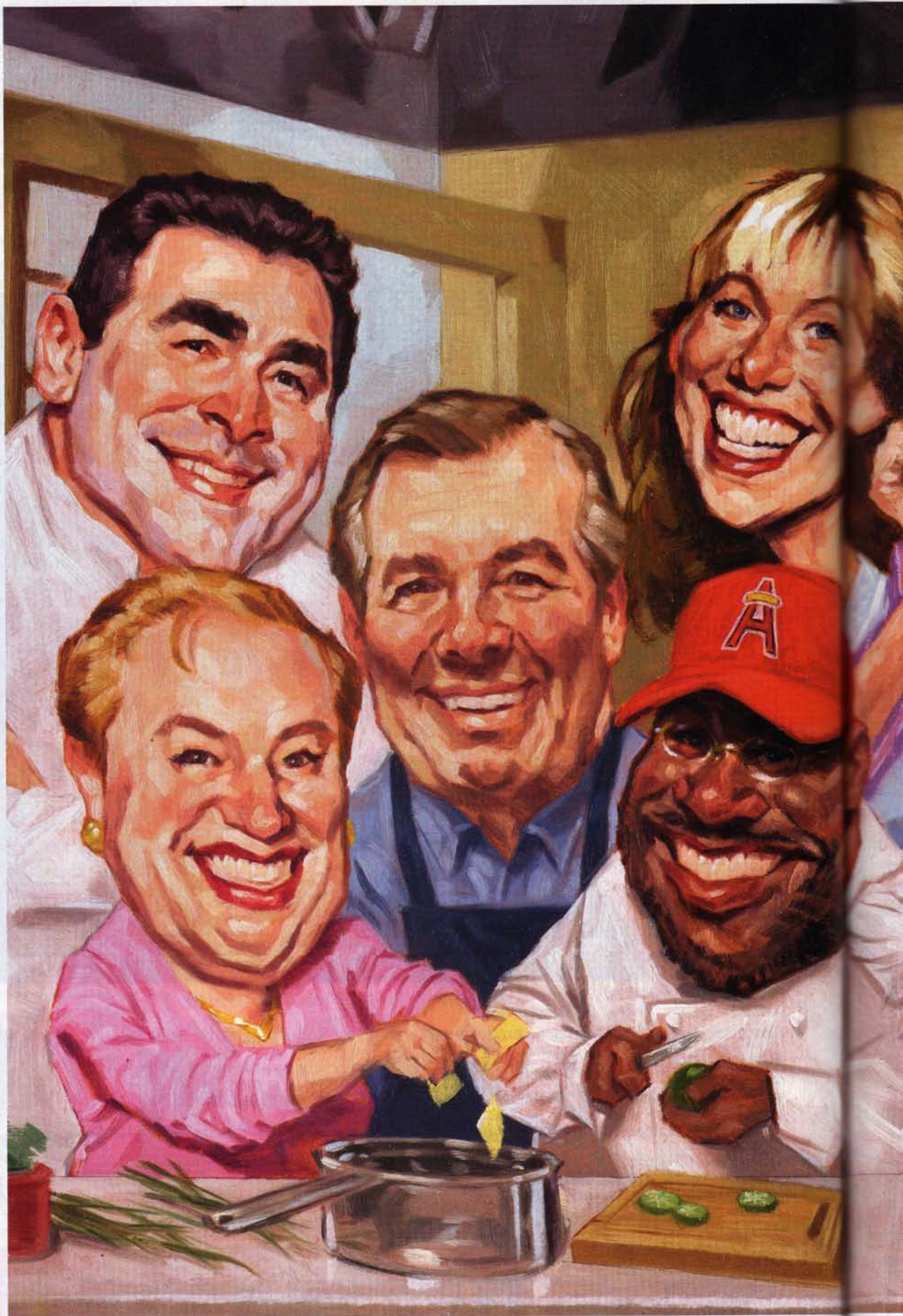
Rating the Top 10 TV Chefs



A scientific exercise
in television and culinary
criticism that will change
your world forever

TOP 10 TV CHEFS

Here's the scoop on which television stars best blend their cuisine with charm on screen. By Joseph Guinto. Illustration by Darren Gygi





What's so hard about being a TV chef? You just stroll onto a set, chop an onion, smash some garlic, throw a bunch of other pre-prepped ingredients into a pot, make with some pithy, foodie blah-dee-blah, pull an already finished dish out of the oven, and say, "Here's what it looks like when you're done." Thank you, good night, bon appétit.

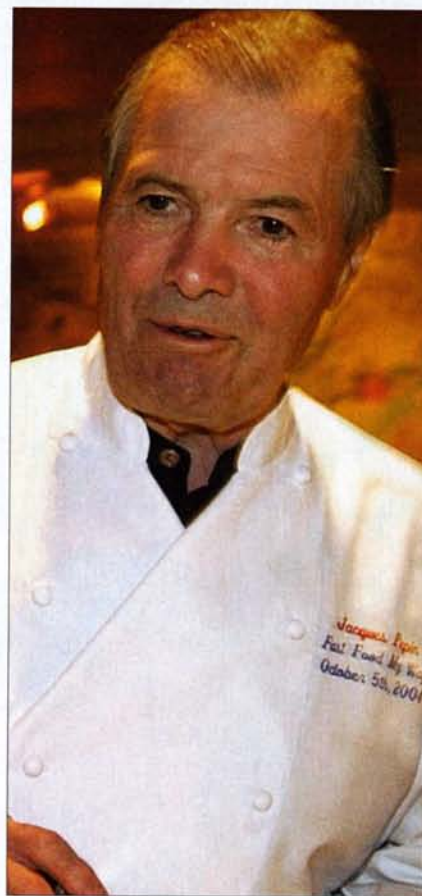
Anyone can do that. And it seems everyone is. But the best TV chefs go beyond those basics. The best also teach us how to chop that onion and smash that garlic and, further, explain to us why onion and garlic are good base flavors for so many dishes. Maybe they even tell us how onions and garlic are grown. The best TV chefs manage to make such cookbook subjects entertaining to those of us who care, even a little, about food. The truly great TV chef goes that one better. He or she also manages to inspire us to skip the takeout and get into the kitchen.

To be sure, chefs who successfully blend the, ah, ingredients of teaching, entertaining, and inspiring are rare. But they're out there. Indeed, they're in here. We've sampled dozens of cooking shows and their chefs and, from months of research, selected the top 10 TV cooks. We've then rated those 10 using a proprietary system that merges the judging techniques of the Miss America contest with the calculations used for the NFL's quarterback rating. (See "The Judging" on this page for details.) Trust us, this makes sense. As the Miss America pageant does, we graded the top chefs in five weighted categories, one of which required us to cook a selected dish from each chef. The weighted grades were then translated to numbers reflective of the quarterback rating, where superior passers can score above 100. It's all very scientific and educational and inspirational and possibly even entertaining. Thank you, good night, bon appétit.

The Judging

TV chefs were graded on a 100-point, weighted scale in five categories. Here are the categories, their relative weight, and the Miss America category that inspired them.

- 1. Casual Ingredients, 15 percent (Miss America, Casual Wear):** Does the chef use ingredients that can be picked up either at most supermarkets or most farmers' markets? If not, does he or she offer easy-to-find alternatives to hard-to-find ingredients?
- 2. Provocative Recipes, 10 percent (Miss America, Swimsuit):** Do the chef's recipes go beyond "meat and potatoes" to offer unusual, perhaps even flirtatious combinations of tastes and ingredients?
- 3. Poise and Presence, 15 percent (Miss America, Evening Wear):** How elegant and commanding is the chef on screen?
- 4. Instructional Talent, 30 percent (Miss America, Talent):** How easy is it to follow the chef as he or she assembles recipes? Further, does the chef offer useful and unusual tips and suggestions, including, but not limited to, basic kitchen techniques?
- 5. Cookability of Recipes, 30 percent (Miss America, Private Interview):** We go one-on-one with a dish from each chef and grade it on its appearance, taste, and how well it lives up to the chef's intent for the dish.



1. Jacques Pépin

TV CHEF RATING: 113.5

SHOW: *Fast Food My Way*, PBS

SCHTICK: Jacques focuses on easy-to-make foods that have complex tastes. Unlike his previous PBS series, you will not see Jacques doing difficult things like boning out a leg of lamb or making swans out of melons. (Mmm. Melon swans.)

WHY WE LIKE HIM: His French-inspired recipes are always solid, and he's one of the best technique teachers on television. Plus, there's the accent. Jacques cracks us up. We'll never forget the time he told Julia Child that he doesn't wash chicken before he puts it in the oven. It went something like this: "The cheekeen will cook at 425 degreeeze for tree hour. If zee bacteria can survive that, they deezerve to live."

HOW HE RATED: Jacques scored well in every category, losing to no one in Instructional Talent and placing behind only one other chef for Provocative Recipes.

WE COOKED: Chicken bouillabaisse. To quote British TV chef Jamie Oliver, the recipe was "dead simple," but it also produced amazing results — probably one of the best things ever to emerge from our kitchen.

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2. Emeril Lagasse

TV CHEF RATING: 112.93

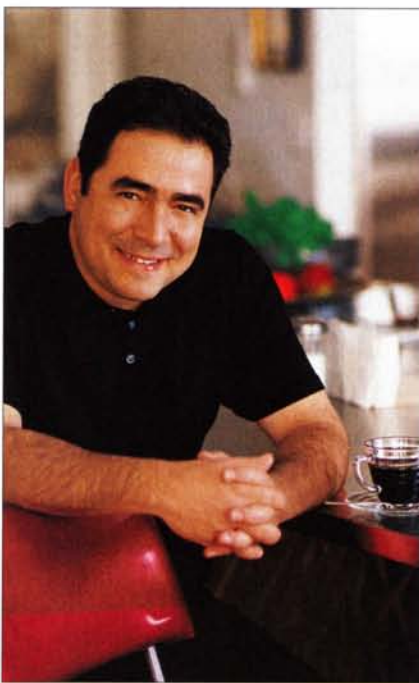
SHOW: *Emeril Live, Essence of Emeril*, Food Network

SCHTICK: On *Live*, Emeril cooks, well, anything, for the delight of an overexuberant studio audience. On *Essence*, he removes his chef's jacket and takes a quieter approach to a still-broad range of foods.

WHY WE LIKE HIM: Bottom line: Emeril makes us want to cook, and we've made plenty of his meals to excellent results. But, he has an unfair advantage. There's a lot about *Emeril Live* we don't like. Seriously, what's up with the audience? "Garlic! Whee!" But *Essence* helps balance out the silliness, giving us time to learn dozens of important techniques and food facts that we wouldn't get from *Live* alone. It was from *Essence*, after all, that we learned to make a roux. First, get some beers. Then, mix equal parts flour with butter or oil in a sauté pan. Then, Emeril says, "For a blond roux, have one gulp. A medium roux, one beer. A dark roux, two beers. You could go three beers, but I don't know what that roux would look like."

HOW HE RATED: Emeril blew away almost every other chef in Poise and Presence and scored well in most other categories.

WE COOKED: Cornbread and andouille dressing. Put it this way: Our test chef is a Yankee. He knows only from stuffing. Yet, this dressing was deemed good enough for his Louisiana-born wife's Thanksgiving table.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY G. GARVIN; © CHRISTOPHER HIRSCHMEIER; COURTESY FOOD NETWORK

3. G. Garvin

TV CHEF RATING: 109

SHOW: *Turn Up the Heat With G. Garvin*, TV One

SCHTICK: Garvin, who runs an eponymous restaurant in Los Angeles, cooks a bunch of New American, restaurant-style dishes, while a funk backing track plays.

WHY WE LIKE HIM: Garvin — or can we call him "G"? — pops with personality. He welcomes us, saying, "G. Garvin, baby, turning up the heat with ya," and signs off with the tagline "I'm gonna holla at ya." Plus, we've never seen a man work a pepper mill with quite as much intensity.

HOW HE RATED: Though we have to give him props for once serving honey fried chicken over buttermilk waffles, Garvin scored low on Provocative Recipes. But he did well on Instructional Talent.

WE COOKED: Blackened veal chops over white bean and spinach ragout. Blackening may be as dated as cargo pants, but we still love it. Here, it proved the perfect technique for cooking the chops through, yet keeping them moist. The ragout was not as impressive, but did make for a colorful presentation.



4. Lidia Bastianich

TV CHEF RATING: 104.93

SHOW: *Lidia's Family Table*, PBS

SCHTICK: Lidia cooks Italian dishes in her home kitchen in Queens surrounded by her kids and grandkids. It's like a trip to your grandma's house, minus the uncle who still lives at home.

WHY WE LIKE HER: In the Emerilization of TV cooking, too many chefs have forgotten that letting us listen as garlic sizzles in a pan is an evocative experience. Lidia hasn't. Her show is quiet even though she's excellent at instruction.

HOW SHE RATED: That home set sometimes gets in the way, and Lidia scored lowest for Poise and Presence. But she ranked among the best in Instructional Talent.

WE COOKED: Risotto salad with tomatoes, basil, and mozzarella. It never occurred to us to use risotto in a salad. On TV the salad looked great and easy to make. It turned out to be both.





5. Wolfgang Puck

TV CHEF RATING: 103.56

SHOW: *Cook Like a Celebrity Chef*, Home Shopping Network; *Wolfgang Puck's Cooking Class*, Food Network

SCHTICK: For HSN, Wolfgang cooks stuff while you buy his junk. For the Food Network, he stands Emeril-like before an audience, cooking a range of Californianish foods.

WHY WE LIKE HIM: Because he's compelling enough to make us watch HSN, even when we're not shopping. Maybe (as with Jacques Pépin) it's that outrageous accent. Probably it's that the guy stresses basic techniques.

HOW HE RATED: Scored solidly, if not spectacularly, across all categories.

WE COOKED: Orzo with roasted peppers, olives, and goat cheese. We'd never managed to make orzo — that little rice-shaped pasta — without it turning out sticky. This recipe helped us through that, calling for the orzo to be only partly boiled, drained, and immediately put into a pan with the sauce, where it finishes plumping without clumping. We'll never cook orzo any other way.



7. Mario Batali

TV CHEF RATING: 101.25

SHOW: *Molto Mario*, *Iron Chef America*, Food Network

SCHTICK: A red-haired, clog-wearing chef who helped reinvent how Italian food is served in U.S. restaurants serves up authentic Italian dishes. Yes, he makes lots of pasta, but there's also stuff like Rognocini Trifolati (aka kidneys with mushrooms and potatoes) and Sopa Coada (aka pigeon soup).

WHY WE LIKE HIM: Few other chefs outside of Emeril convey such genuine passion and depth of information about their subject matter. When Mario says he considers olive oil as valuable as gold, you believe he means it. When he tells you which olive oil he buys, you go find it.

HOW HE RATED: Dead last for Casual Ingredients. Up high for Provocative Recipes. Down low for Instructional Talent — thanks to the three goobers on his set who keep interrupting him. And on the lower end for Poise and Presence because, frankly, he comes off as a know-it-all. Then again, maybe he is.

WE COOKED: Bucatini All'Amatriciana. The recipe calls for guanciale, which is cured hog's jowl. Don't bother looking for it. Mario allows pancetta or good bacon to be substituted. Good thing. We chose pancetta and ended up with a dish that tasted smoky and rich, evoking memories of a crisp fall evening in the mountains of Abruzzo, even though we've never been to Abruzzo.



6. Tina Nordström

TV CHEF RATING: 102

SHOW: *New Scandinavian Cooking*, PBS

SCHTICK: A blond-haired, blue-eyed chef stands in Sweden's great outdoors, cooking game, vegetables, and berry-laced desserts. Then she mixes a cocktail.

WHY WE LIKE HER: Because she's just different. Who else cooks outdoors, and in Sweden, no less? Also, did we mention that she's Swedish? Plus, you're not likely to see another chef make whitefish with cloudberry sauce baked in paper, or smoked eel with scrambled eggs.

HOW SHE RATED: Tina finished near the bottom for Casual Ingredients. (Do they sell cloudberrries at your market?) But she did very well in Provocative Recipes.

WE COOKED: Apple drink with vanilla vodka. It has honey, apple juice, cloves, cinnamon, a vanilla pod, and vanilla vodka. After one, our tasting notes read, "Not too sweet, not too warm. Nice." After two, the notes read, "Would be even nicer to drink with a beautiful blonde on a cold evening." We're not saying what we wrote after the third.

Math Is Easy!

The equations behind our rankings

As with the Miss America pageant, chefs are scored in five categories, which are weighted in the same way Miss America weights its categories. (See "The Judging" on page 100.) From those five categories, a weighted tally is obtained.

For example, Alton Brown got a 79.75.

From there, the NFL quarterback ranking takes over. First, we reduced the Miss America-style number by 25 percent and

then converted that number into a single-digit figure. Alton's 79.75, in this conversion, became a 5.98. This was necessary to give us the equivalent of the single digits by which the NFL obtains its ratings.

Next, again per the NFL, we divided the rating number by six and then multiplied it by 100. This gave us the final rating. In Alton's case, that became a 99.68. That would be very good, though not exceptional, for an NFL passer. Top QBs often score above 100.

Got all that? Good. There will not be a quiz.

8. Alton Brown

TV CHEF RATING: 99.68

SHOW: *Good Eats*, Food Network

SCHTICK: Alton exposes the science behind cooking. To him, recipes are almost secondary. It's like high school chemistry class with bacon.

WHY WE LIKE HIM: Alton says cooking shows are boring, and in most cases he's right. So we're happy to see his reinvention of the format. Trips to onion farms, visits from food historians, testing of kitchen gadgets, cornball skits, and *Parker Lewis Can't Lose*-style sound effects keep *Good Eats* from ever being dull.

HOW HE RATED: Provocative his recipes are not. But *Poise* and *Presence* this former actor definitely has.

WE COOKED: Pizza dough. Dough is all about a chemical reaction, right? And Alton's recipe was good. But the process was too technical for our tastes, thus zapping the passion. Put it this way: His instructions say that to know when the dough has been kneaded enough, we should tear off a small piece, stretch it, and hold it up to the light to see if a "semi-transparent membrane" has formed. We've always followed a simpler method, taught by our Italian grandma. She says the dough is done when it feels like a baby's behind.



9. Ming Tsai

TV CHEF RATING: 99.5

SHOW: *Simply Ming*, PBS

SCHTICK: One of the earliest adopters of Asian fusion, the French-trained Ming cooks some kind of Asian-inspired dish, then welcomes a guest chef to his kitchen and cooks whatever the guest likes. He's so nice.

WHY WE LIKE HIM: Seriously, he's nice. And even though Asian food freaks us out, Ming's easy-going style and slow, steady instructions convinced us to give several dishes a try.

HOW HE RATED: Sadly, nice guys finish near the bottom of the best. Ming's rating suffered in *Poise* and *Presence* because his pleasant style sometimes doesn't demand attention. And, when he has guest chefs visit, the show can devolve into pointless chitchat.

WE COOKED: Asian banana split. Honestly, it didn't seem too Asian to us, outside of the Tahitian vanilla ice cream. Still, we're never buying chocolate sauce again. Ming's bitter-sweet chocolate ganache is one of the easiest things we've ever made — it was ready in 10 minutes — and would be a perfect topping for many desserts.



Cooking-Show Stuff We'd Get Rid Of

Morning TV show cooking segments: Ninety seconds with a professional chef who barely has time to mention his ingredients, much less cook anything does no good for anyone. Well, except maybe Campbell Brown. At least she gets to eat.

The "I'm so talented" tasting: You want to stick your finger in a pan and tell us whether the dish needs more salt? Fine. But once the cooking is done, don't take a big bite and then tell us, "The arugula is still crisp, and the gorgonzola is beautifully melted. It's delicious." It's supposed to be delicious. Get back to cooking.

The "And remember" tagline: It's one thing for Julia Child to say, "Bon appétit." But why is it that two-thirds of today's TV chefs end with some callback to their show's title? "And remember, a delicious meal is never more than 30 minutes away." "And remember, make it fast, make it simple, make it semi-homemade." Please, just make it stop.

Cooking-Show Stuff We Want More Of

Jamie Oliver: Jamie would have easily made our top 10 list, except that he's not really cooking on TV in the States anymore. Yes, he does pop up from time to time at 4 a.m. on the Food Network, but his shows are not in regular rotation. And, also, we are too sleepy to cook at that hour. Get this cheeky monkey some airtime.

Anthony Bourdain: It seems like there's already enough of the former chef at Les Halles on TV. He has an old Food Network show that still comes on from time to time, has a new show on the Travel Channel called *No Reservations*, and his definitive, behind-the-scenes book about life in the restaurant biz, *Kitchen Confidential*, inspired a Fox sitcom of the same name. Still, we want more. We want to see Anthony cook. He's the only TV chef who never gets into the kitchen, which is too bad. Because even though we like that *No Reservations* is not derivative of other cooking shows or of other food-inspired travel shows, it would be nice to see Anthony take his classical, French training into some rustic Sicilian kitchen and see where the two worlds meet. He'd have to stop talking about how awesome he is to do so, of course. But no one is going to complain about that.

Graphics: Great TV cooking is all about information. The more you tell us home cooks, the better off we'll be. And, while we're awfully grateful to see recipes posted online, we'd also like TV cooking shows to get into this decade and start putting info up on screen, too. Wouldn't it be nice to see a list of ingredients on screen, continually updated, as a chef is assembling a dish? And, couldn't they superimpose the name of the menu or the theme of the show on the bottom of the screen, the way CNN does "Wolf Blitzer," or both? And, finally, would it be possible to run a scroll of tips at the bottom of the screen the way ESPN runs score updates? Seriously, people, throw us a bone here.

LEFT: © ELISE AMENDOLA/AP PHOTO; RIGHT: © GREGORY SMITH/AP PHOTO



Tina Nordström

The Numbers

Here's how the top TV chefs rated in each of our five weighted categories.* (Note: Scores of other chefs we looked at did not make the list for various reasons, usually because they are either bad on TV or we didn't like their food.)

Jacques Pépin

1. 13.5
2. 9.2
3. 13.2
4. 27.3 Instructional Talent
5. 27.6

Weighted total: 90.8

Quarterback conversion: 113.5

Emeril Lagasse

1. 12.9
2. 8.9
3. 14.25
4. 26.4
5. 27.9 Cookability of Recipes

Weighted total: 90.35

Quarterback conversion: 112.93

G. Garvin

1. 13.5 Casual Ingredients
2. 7
3. 14.5 Poise and Presence
4. 25.5
5. 26.7

Weighted total: 87.2

Quarterback conversion: 109

Lidia Bastianich

1. 12.45
2. 8.5
3. 10.5
4. 26.1
5. 26.4

Weighted total: 83.95

Quarterback conversion: 104.93

Wolfgang Puck

1. 12.6
2. 8.3
3. 12.75
4. 25.8
5. 23.4

Weighted total: 82.85

Quarterback conversion: 103.56

Tina Nordström

1. 9.6
2. 8.8
3. 12.5
4. 24
5. 26.7

Weighted total: 81.6

Quarterback conversion: 102

Mario Batali

1. 9.3
2. 9.3 Provocative Recipes
3. 11.7
4. 23.1
5. 27.6

Weighted total: 81

Quarterback conversion: 101.25

Alton Brown

1. 13.35
2. 7
3. 12.6
4. 25.5
5. 21.3

Weighted total: 79.75

Quarterback conversion: 99.68

Ming Tsai

1. 10.5
2. 8.8
3. 10.8
4. 24.9
5. 24.6

Weighted total: 79.6

Quarterback conversion: 99.5

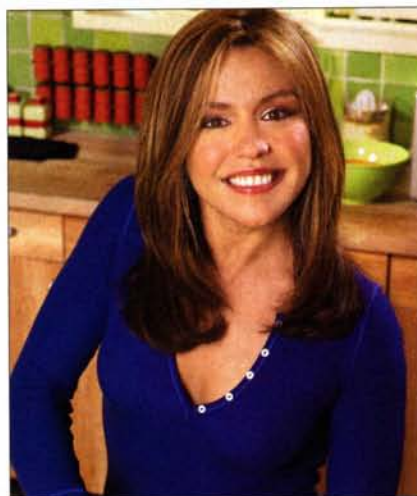
Rachael Ray

1. 13.5 Casual Ingredients
2. 6.1
3. 13.8
4. 20.1
5. 19.8

Weighted total: 73.3

Quarterback conversion: 91.62

*For a complete description of each category, see page 100.



10. Rachael Ray

TV CHEF RATING: 91.62

SHOW: *30 Minute Meals*, *\$40 a Day*, Food Network

SCHTICK: A cute and perky host makes "a complete meal in under 30 minutes."

WHY WE LIKE HER: Some snob chefs say because she cooks the way most people do (takes cooking shortcuts, doesn't mind using ingredients from a can) that she is overrated. But our rating system adores her, and we do, too. It's not just about being a good cook; it's also about being good on TV, and Rachael is. She's one of us.

HOW SHE RATED: Casual Ingredients and Poise and Presence put Rachael on this list. There is no denying that she is magnetic. Even if we don't always love her dishes, we regularly watch Rachael's cooking and travel shows, and we'll probably watch her talk show when that comes out, and will likely buy her *Every Day With Rachael Ray* magazine, too.

WE COOKED: Chicken or turkey spanakopita burgers, and fries with yogurt dip. This is where she falls behind some of the other chefs who are more demanding about using fresh ingredients. These burgers were especially worn down by the inclusion of frozen spinach, which, once wrung dry, never tastes as good as the real stuff. Granted, her background in food service does allow her insight into how most people really shop, which is part of her appeal. But we think you should cheat the other way and use fresh spinach. If you are willing to take just a little more time with your preparation, you'll be as happy as she always is. ☺

Spirit senior editor Joseph Guinto plans to make Mario Batali's calf's brain ravioli just as soon as he figures out where to score some calf's brains.

LEFT: COURTESY TINA NORDSTRÖM; RIGHT: COURTESY FOOD NETWORK