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### **Hungry Girls?: Consuming Female Food Personalities**

Nigella Lawson and Lisa Lillien are both self-proclaimed food lovers who have translated their branded personalities from cookbooks to television. Each has a vastly different relationship with food, which extends from the types of ingredients they use to how they talk about and prepare meals. These distinctions exemplify the power cooking shows have in reinforcing hegemonic views of femininity as well as the complex cultural discourses revolving around “proper” relationships with food. Whereas Lillien exemplifies restraint, guilt, and synthetic substitutions in her relationship with food, Lawson embodies pleasure and indulgence in consuming food as well as the female form.

Each has successfully combined professional media skills (Lawson penned newspaper columns and socialized with Britain’s glitterati, and Lillien headed digital content at Nickelodeon) with an interest in food. In their transitions to television, each incorporates aesthetics from her previous works in order to proliferate the women’s brands. Lawson infuses sensuality into cooking through a highly sexualized persona that focuses on her ample cleavage and extreme physicality when cooking. As a result, her physical appearance has played a more instrumental role in her success than for Lillien, primarily because Lillien’s public body before her cooking show has been animated. Originating as an Internet logo, Hungry Girl is not shown cooking, but represents the nonthreatening, healthy, fun lifestyle put forth by Lillien.

Although each has extensive media platforms ripe for deconstruction, today I will focus specifically on the different personalities presented within each woman's most recent foray into television, with Lillien's *Hungry Girl* on the Cooking Channel and Lawson's *Nigella Kitchen* originally broadcast on BBC in the UK and on the Food Network in America. Let's briefly examine how these personas within the context of their shows reinforce western societal desire for women to simultaneously embody aspects of both Lawson's sensual indulgence and Lillien's girlish restraint in their own relationships to food and femininity.

### ***Hungry Girl***

Before her very recent foray into television, Lillien translated web and marketing skills encouraging readers to make "healthier" choices by utilizing low-fat processed ingredients. Lillien's recipes are based on substituting brand name diet ingredients in order to replicate foods her users likely already eat. Lillien advocates for the pleasure of eating without guilt, but doesn't acknowledge the larger issues that associate eating with guilt to begin with.

Premiering in January 2011, the *Hungry Girl* television show replicates the tone and easy low calorie recipes and tips for grocery shopping and eating in restaurants Lillien offers in her daily email service and cookbooks. Lillien's *Hungry Girl* alter ego is prominently featured as artwork throughout the kitchen and helps transition Lillien from an animated character to human presence. Lillien's television kitchen features white counters and brightly colored appliances. Even though she has a full-sized kitchen at her disposal, in the premiere episode, she only uses the stovetop burners on the front most counter suggesting the ease of food. The lighting

on the show is extremely harsh, and compounds the starkness of the kitchen and highlights the little-used appliances needed to cook her recipes.

Despite being a cooking show, *Hungry Girl's* primary objective is instructing viewers about healthier eating choices through creative ingredient swapping. For example, in the pilot episode, "You Wanna Pizza Me," Lillien repeatedly reminds viewers to avoid carbohydrates and fattening ingredients like meat and cheese. Moreover, she encourages prepackaged ingredients over fresh flavors. Lillien feeds into diet marketing advocating the use of certain products but ignores their potential health risks or the benefits of using real ingredients in moderation. Throughout her various media enterprises, brand named products matter, and Lillien outwardly states her preferences for products like Laughing Cow cheese wedges and Fiber One cereal. Although she does not suggest specific products as frequently on her show, Lillien includes specific product suggestions on the show's webpage. In the shopping portion of the show, Lillien features mainstream branded products with the words on the labels omitted. However, the color and design of the packaging clearly allows viewers to know her preferences.

Within the show, the time Lillien spends making the recipes seems to approximate how quick and easy they are for viewer at home to recreate. Rather than watching Lillien complete all the steps from inception to plating, the show repeatedly cuts to quickly rotating pre-plated examples of her food. Moreover, there are extremely rough transitions between recipes and segments, which creates a disjointed frenzied pace. I suspect this frantic pace results from wanting to incorporate as many recipe and tip segments as possible, but this decision further

detracts focus from the food. Furthermore, this editing choice also suggests that eating is an activity one needs to get through rather than savor and enjoy.

Throughout all segments of the show, Lillien is shown alone and prepares single serving recipes. This suggests intimacy between Lillien and her viewers, but also that cooking and eating are isolated endeavors mapped onto particular individuals. It inherently underscores that she is merely substituting and approximating for foods that may taste better rather than offering or introducing different ways of eating. This establishes the idea that real food is best, and that Lillien's is the best for less which implies how women sacrifice their own pleasure in pursuit of body conformity. Moreover, isolating Lillien and the viewer from communal cooking and eating also reinforces the hidden effort women need to exert in order to balance indulgence and pleasure with the societal pressure to look a certain way as representative of beauty and health.

### ***Nigella Kitchen***

In complete opposition to Lillien's *Hungry Girl*, Nigella Lawson shows no concern for portion size or caloric intake in *Nigella Kitchen*. Whereas Lillien advocates restraint in her relationship to food, for Lawson, a pleasurable experience trumps everything else. Colloquially referred to as "the queen of food porn" by the press and a "domestic goddess" through her own branding machine, Lawson's persona represents the extreme polarities between the expectations put upon women to fulfill domestic tasks and be sexual objects (Sands, *Daily Mail*). Lawson is aware of her sexualized image and capitalizes on it. In an interview for *60 Minutes* she says, "Food has to appeal. It has to, if you want, [to] arouse appetite. I mean, I

don't mind if I'm accused of a, you know, culinary come-on." (Kohn, *60 Minutes*).

Despite her visual appeal to male viewers, her warm personality appeals to female viewers, especially when she speaks about her family, and constantly striving to juggle domestic and work responsibilities. This strategy allows female viewers to relate to Lawson and in turn replicate her persona with her recipes.

*Nigella Kitchen* also differs radically from *Hungry Girl* as its central focus is on cooking. Lawson's personality and overt sensuality are communicated formally through costuming, long takes, smooth transitions, soft lighting, and the use of voiceover. Whereas Lillien packs her show with segments, Lawson allows viewers time and space to take pleasure in looking at her and her food throughout its creation. For example, Lawson speaks slowly and the camera lingers on the food as she prepares and serves it. Moreover, *Nigella Kitchen* removes Lawson from the frame entirely as it focuses on images of the example dishes. Although the food is the primary visual focus, Lawson's voiceover explanations, allow viewers to focus on the food without severing their connection from her rich luxurious voice. In addition to smoothly describing food to viewers, the lighting and atmosphere of the show presents Lawson and her kitchen in warm soft light (accentuated with white Christmas lights), which makes her and the food look richer than Lillien does in the harsh bright lighting on the soundstage. Moreover, viewers can see how Lawson's kitchen extends into other domestic spaces, creating the sense that this kitchen is in a home rather than a soundstage.

Lawson indulges in culinary pleasures without any regard for nutrition, cost, or portion size and subtly equates food and cooking with love as opposed to a

necessary chore. She values ingredient choices, which allows her food to have more depth and variety than Lillien's. She frequently features fresh, high quality ingredients, suggesting that viewers also need to procure the highest quality ingredients to best replicate what they see. Unlike Lillien, who cooks in isolation and focuses on single-servings, Lawson frequently speaks about whom she cooks for while preparing her food. Portion control is ignored as Lawson incorporates extra servings in her recipes anticipating her guests will want more. Moreover, Lawson takes joy in leftovers and regularly features dishes incorporating remnants of earlier recipes. Lillien barely tastes her finished products, but Lawson is frequently shown setting her table or bringing food to friends and then enjoying her cooking as a group. Lawson cooks for others, but her own pleasure is at the root of her actions. This can be seen in the ending shot of every episode, which depicts Lawson sneaking into her kitchen at night to indulge in another serving of one of her leftover dishes (usually the most decadent one).

## **Conclusion**

Although each woman loves food, each has a staunchly different approach to interacting with it. Lawson lingers in her kitchen and savors her own pleasure in cooking and eating whereas Lillien constantly balances the lowest calorie count with the greatest volume of food. Whereas Lawson repeatedly uses words like pleasure to describe her cooking/eating experience, Lillien considers "guilt-free" and "calorie bargains" as the apex of a successful dish. Consuming Lillien and Lawson's shows, recipes, personalities, and brands speaks to a larger idea of being what one eats. Julie Guthman argues that "eating becomes the embodiment of that which today's

society holds sacred: consumption. We buy and eat to be good subjects, to prop up a fragile capitalism.” (Guthman 193). Consuming a certain branded personality translates into an articulation of a particular lifestyle. In both cases, viewers choose to buy/consume the cooks, their recipes, and their lifestyles in order to articulate to others how they see themselves in the world as well as their relationship to food. How viewers want to eat translates into what ingredients they purchase. There is room for both personalities within the foodscape and, especially within the same person. Moreover, each cook represents a completely different lifestyle and relationship to food symbolizing the constant conflicts female viewers have with eating, their bodies, and the steps necessary to perform femininity. Because there are so many conflicting ideas about food, and femininity, viewers may indulge with Nigella and be overcome by guilt in resorting to Lillien.

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