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MEDIA DISH

Chef's blogs -- even sharper than their knives

Foodies have been doing it for years. But now some pretty big names are logging on to the bandwagon.

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WHO knew chefs see macarons in Christian Louboutin colors? Who knew restaurant plates and saucers are sold like hot dogs and buns, in mismatching quantities? And who would ever expect chefs to be as proficient with a keyboard as they are with a knife?

The answer: Anyone who has noticed chefs are suddenly taking to blogging as if it were the foam of 2008. In the last few months some of the bigger names in food across the country have joined the online chattering class, posting their innermost thoughts, with photos and recipes, just as home cooks have been doing for years.

And the trend is a welcome antidote to the flood of cyber-treacle. Rather than nattering about what they fed their boyfriends last night, or fuzzily photographing their latest batch of heart-shaped cookies, chefs tend to focus on the story behind the food, on the thought process that original cooking entails. And because they are hard-wired to be tool freaks, they treat digital photography as one step up from sous vide -- first they master it, then they get competitive.

A look at what's coming

LAURENT GRAS, an Alain Ducasse protégé and former executive chef at the Fifth Floor in San Francisco, is now blogging almost daily at [L.2o Blog](#) on the run-up to the opening of his own restaurant in Chicago (he used the latest \$5,500-plus Leica to photograph a new food dehydrator and fresh sea urchin).

In suburban Philadelphia, Alison Barshak [L.2o Blogis](#) essentially producing a cyber-tutorial on designing, equipping and staffing a restaurant through her blog.

In New York, [Michael Laiskonis](#), the pastry chef at Le Bernardin, started blogging in January, and his lengthy disquisitions on desserts and how he creates them are windows with photos into a wildly creative and contemplative mind.

Then there is Michael Symon of Lola and Lolita in Cleveland, who is sharing his 15 minutes of fame as a winner of “[The Next Iron Chef](#)” by blogging exuberantly (and saltily) at [Symon Says](#), where the comments section will almost restore your faith in the food world. (What do readers want? Substance.)

Other chefs have latched on to the apron strings of established websites -- Traci des Jardins of Jardiniere in

San Francisco and Rick Bayless of Topolabampo in Chicago both blog for the [Epi-log](#) at [Epicurious](#). And untold others are adding blogs to their hyper-designed restaurant websites, although you might want to get out a big bowl of sea salt before delving into them -- the idea that a chef with 20 or more establishments is actually sitting down and typing strains credulity even in a world where "Top Chef" is sold as reality.

Even chefs who once were bashers are now blogging. Mario Batali, like many these days, started out lambasting food bloggers but began posting his own blog in less time than it takes to cure *guanciale*. These days, the erstwhile [Food Network](#) celebrity sporadically maintains a grammatically correct [Unclogged](#) blog at [Serious Eats](#) ("Our Acapulco-born babysitter, Leo, makes some of my favorite things to eat") while playing chef-gone-wild-with-text-messaging on a second blog on his own website, [mariobatali.com](#) ("415 call time dad on time meets the crew we head to merca in madrid 25 yrs old and HUUUUUGE").

Chefs here and there, of course, have been blogging since way before the [iHam](#). Tamara Murphy of Brasa in Seattle made cyberwaves in 2006 with [Life of a Pig](#), blogging in words and pictures on the short life and noble death of pigs she cooks.

But as Des Jardins notes, keeping up with a blog is the hard part. She has been writing for Epicurious since December and says she is loving the freedom of expression, with editing only to "clean up my bad grammar," but has seen chefs let blogs "get old and stale."

The old guard

THE role model is [Ideas in Food](#), the blog where Aki Kamozaawa and H. Alexander Talbot have built a following since 2004 by writing in detail on their experiments in flavor and composition. The two have bounced around the country cooking and now work as personal chefs in New York, but they were made for new media, not to mention for molecular gastronomy. Their recent posts describe discoveries as over the top as the unlikely combination of tarragon and screw pine needles and as non-threatening as meat loaf, even when it is baked in a Bundt pan.

While Kamozaawa and Talbot have been evolving, other chefs have been realizing how valuable a blog is to a traditional website, an even more sure route to extending a brand than publishing a cookbook. Repeat traffic is virtual money in the bank to prove interest in a project or, to put it crudely, move product. Certainly it has been a way for Chris Cosentino, the chef of Incanto in San Francisco, to beat the drums for his line of *salumi* by posting at [offalgood.com](#) on his obsession with the nasty bits -- recent posts have discussed "using fish guts" and "tuna spines."

Among the other new stand-alone blogs, the one recently started by Laurent Gras, L.2o, offers a little something for both chef wanna-bes and readers who are happy just to eat vicariously -- anyone who wants to build an empire may be enthralled by the posts on the equipment he is buying (a Pavaillar steam-injected pizza oven from France); anyone who just wants to sit down and virtually dig into a perfectly egg-shaped orange meringue made with carrot juice will find visual gratification. But his post on brousse, a fresh cheese that can be made from the buttermilk left from churning fresh butter, is simultaneously educational and seductive.

Gras, who is married to a relatively well-known food blogger, Jennifer Leuzzi of the blog [Snack](#), says he writes and shoots everything himself, with occasional help from his sous chef, although a casual reader might wonder about his fascination with Louboutin pumps the color of flaming red macarons. What appeals to him most is the "conversation" it generates with readers.

Some writing help

BY contrast, Barshak, in Blue Bell, Pa., admits her publicist is helping her craft her posts on the search for the ideal chair (perfection still needs upholstering, it turns out) the most comfortable sound level (somewhere between bedlam and the grave), the right china to showcase her seafood-centric cooking (basic white, big enough to hold everything in the center). "I tell her what I want to say, she writes it and then it goes back and forth a couple of times," the chef explained in an e-mail. "Sometimes it's easy and other times it's like pulling teeth."

Barshak, whose Alison Two restaurant is under conceptualization in Fort Washington, Pa., said she generally moderates the comments on the blog herself. "It's a good process for me, since I don't have business partners or investors to discuss things with. The blog forces me to take the time to think about things I am going through and explain them to others."

Laiskonis, however, says he started out trying to "provide useful content" online once a week and now finds that "the quest for good blog material now influences my experiments" in real time (taking Hot Tamales candy as the inspiration to add sweet heat to a Caribbean dessert made with pineapple and mango). He likens blogs to the zines he grew up reading in the age of underground punk rock. They bring out, he says, "the same do-it-yourself spirit." And so he types it all on his own.

The question of authorship and authenticity is always a big one in the blogosphere, but in the chef realm maybe not so much. For the last two decades chefs have been cranking out endless cookbooks with collaborators if not ghostwriters; is there anyone who still believes Bobby Flay is personally rhapsodizing about green tomatoes? Presumably the cyber-stars are at least approving what is blogged in their names.

And in some cases, you have to think their genius might be in their personnel management, just as it is in their staffing of kitchens in far-flung restaurants. A blogger for hire who can hurl verbal bombs like Gordon Ramsay could be just as much in demand as one who can cross a high-schooler's text message with Harold McGee and make it sound believable. (A parodist does a pretty good job at [News Groper](#) with the former with [Gordon Ramsay's Blog](#).)

Now it gets personal

MAYBE the great battle of the Internet will be between personal and corporate. Consider the contrast between [Kitchen Confidence](#) and [Marriott in the Kitchen](#). The first was recently started by Matthew Tivy, a New York City chef with a couple of neighborhood restaurant to his credits. On it he shows gauzy photographs of himself as a child and as a chef while posting recipes in the form of heartfelt cooking lessons on essential preparations such as *beurre blanc*. But the Marriott blog is as slick as a hotel brochure, although much more entertaining (can anyone aside from Donald Rumsfeld ever resist a virtual trip to Paris?).

Even if blogs do not totally eliminate the middleman, whether agent or collaborator, they do seem to liberate chefs. The trick, as always with the brave new virtual newsstand, will be getting noticed. This revolution is not being indexed.

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