

Sustainability and Food Waste in Cooking Shows

On-Screen and Off-Screen Practices in *MasterChef Italia*¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the integration of sustainability and food waste reduction themes in the program *MasterChef Italia*, the Italian installment of the global franchise, situating it within the broader context of lifestyle television's growing responsibility to promote sustainable practices. First, we provide an overview of the history and formal features of food television and cooking shows, investigating how they can influence everyday practices and cultural norms; second, we explore the issue of food waste and sustainability related to the cooking shows genre; third, we focus on the case study and we analyze the program's normative attitude towards what is "good" and "bad"; fourth, we detail its on-screen and off-screen sustainable practices and examine how these are portrayed to educate and influence both contestants and viewers. In so doing, we illustrate how *MasterChef Italia* positions itself as an exemplar within the framework of sustainable shows, embodying a normative approach to civic engagement. By turning sustainability into a best practice, the show highlights the potential of lifestyle television, particularly cooking shows, to promote environmental awareness and responsible living.

KEYWORDS

Lifestyle TV; cooking shows; MasterChef Italia; food waste; sustainability.

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Introduction

As public awareness of environmental issues grows, there is an increasing expectation for media and entertainment to reflect and address these concerns, also highlighting the significant role that media can play in shaping public attitudes and behaviors. In particular, television, and the genre of lifestyle TV – which encompasses a wide range of programs focused on aspects of daily living such as cooking, home improvement, fashion, dating, marriage, etc. – not only entertains but also shapes cultural norms and influences viewers' everyday practices. That is why the responsibility of lifestyle programs to promote sustainable practices is growing and the conceptualization of lifestyle TV as a space of potential civic engagement is becoming crucial (Lewis 2008; Oulette and Hay 2008).

Within the genre of lifestyle television, cooking shows hold a unique position. They can impact viewers' food-related behaviors and choices, from the types of ingredients they purchase to the methods they use in their kitchens, and they have the potential to either perpetuate wasteful habits or encourage more sustainable food practices. Food waste, in particular, is a critical issue within this context and it is getting growing attention both in the industry and viewers' side. Cooking shows can be broadly categorized into two types based on their approach to sustainability: activist and non-activist (Bell et al. 2015). On the one hand, activist cooking shows, often niche and targeted at specific audiences, are dedicated to promoting sustainability and environmental consciousness. These programs explicitly focus on reducing food waste, using ethically sourced ingredients, and advocating for eco-friendly cooking practices. On the other, non-activist cooking shows primarily aim to entertain and captivate a broad audience without a specific pedagogical or moral agenda. However, in the last few years, many of these shows have increasingly incorporated themes of sustainability within their content; one notable example is the *MasterChef*fran-

chise which, in its various editions, reaches a broad international audience and can thus hold substantial cultural influence. With a keen awareness of the environmental and social impact of food waste, the franchise has implemented off-screen and on-screen strategies to minimize wastage throughout its production process, turning to a semi-activist text (van Ryn 2018).

This paper explores the integration of sustainability and food waste reduction themes in *MasterChef Italia*, the Italian version of the franchise, situating it within the broader context of lifestyle television's growing responsibility to promote sustainable practices. *MasterChef Italia* features amateur chefs competing in various culinary challenges, which frequently result in substantial amounts of food waste – ingredients that are not utilized, dishes that do not meet competition standards that are thrown away, and leftovers from elaborate presentations all contribute to the issue. However, the show has also begun to address these concerns by incorporating segments and practices that highlight sustainability and the fight against food waste. Given its extensive viewership and cultural impact, this could have significant implications, both in terms of reputation of the show itself and in terms of influence on the viewers' habits and behaviors. First, we draw an overview of the history and formal features of food television and cooking show, investigating how they can influence everyday practices and cultural norms; second, we explore the issue of food waste and sustainability related to the cooking shows genre; third, we focus on the case study and we analyse the program's normative attitude towards what is "good" and "bad"; fourth, we detail its on-screen and off-screen sustainable practices and examines how these are portrayed to educate and influence both contestants and viewers. In so doing, we illustrate how *MasterChef Italia* positions itself as an exemplar within the framework of sustainable shows, embodying a normative approach to civic engagement.

Food TV and Cooking Shows

Since food is an expression of a certain culture, in recent years programs dedicated to food have assumed great importance in the television offering, enriching the schedules with content declined through the use of different genres. On TV people cook and eat everything, from cakes (*Bake Squad*, *Cake Boss*) to insects (*Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern*), from sophisticated dishes and gourmet products (*MasterChef*, *The Chef's Table*) to products that contain cannabis (*Cooked with Cannabis*, *Cooking on High*).

From the earliest regular BBC broadcasts, starting in 1936, cooking programs are present in the schedule and contribute to the formation of the new medium's audience. Cooking programs, in fact, were (and still are) capable of fulfilling two of the main functions of the newborn television: they entertain the viewer in a light and pleasant way and, at the same time, they perform an educational function with respect to food, nutrition, and the use of edible products. The three public service pillars (Grasso and Scaglioni, 2003) formulated by John Reith, BBC general manager from 1927 to 1938, that is to say, to educate, to inform and to entertain the audience, are therefore well accomplished by cooking shows.

Meanwhile, in the US, the television production of the early days drew on the inexpensive and easy-to-produce cooking instructions that had populated radio schedules. In the mid-1940s, food TV was an excellent space for advertisers: cooking from scratch was not on the priority list and most of the ingredients consisted of canned or semi-processed foods. Until the mid-Sixties cooking shows were mostly demonstrations of exceptionally simple and inexpensive recipes and the tips and tricks revealed to the audience how to open cans without getting hurt.

For Italian television, the first encounter between food and viewers occurred through the form of the travel documentary thanks to *Viaggio nella valle del Po* by Mario Soldati, which aired for the first time in 1957. This is a unique program in the history of Italian television, which recounts with care and details the industrial revolution in the food sector, but also the small productions and local excellence, putting together travel documentaries and parts filmed in the studio set in which Soldati introduces the topic of the episode and the geographical area he is going to explore. Only in one episode, entitled *Le specialità di Cherasco* (*The Specialties of Cherasco*), the preparation of a dish takes place inside the television studio, and it is immediately clear that kitchen time cannot coexist with television time without a significant amount of tricks (Gallio and Martina 2014: 24).

In fact, cooking on television needs continuous ellipses and cuts to condense otherwise very long processes into a short time: leavening, fermentation, steeping, and cooking cannot be shown in full as they would take too much time. Thus, cooking programs developed a peculiar language based on the use of semi-processed products, pre-set preparations, and leavening that have already been carried out in order to show viewers the final result of the processes necessary to prepare the dish (Barra et al. 2024: chapter 9). This peculiar trait of cooking shows is sometimes

subverted in order to create a stronger sense of urgency in the audience as well as to stress the complexity and time-consuming nature of food preparation. It happens, for instance, in the show *30 Minute Meals* aired from 2001 to 2012 on the theme channel Food Network and hosted by Rachel Ray. This show:

differentiates itself from the other cooking programs on this network through the use of a real-time aesthetic. Rather than use editing to abbreviate domestic tasks, the television program depicts household labor in its complete duration. This real-time aesthetic serves to authenticate Ray's tasks, presumably revealing the entirety of the cooking process. It also serves to invoke a sense of urgency about the passage of time, turning time itself into a spectacle (Nathanson 2009, 318).

Contemporary food TV fits into the bigger genre of lifestyle television, which encompasses a wide range of diverse shows that share the aim to inform and guide audiences' behaviors and tastes. Types of lifestyle television are distinguished by their ability to isolate and thematize aspects of everyday life, putting them under the microscope, and analyzing certain details with an excess of specialization. The hyper-fragmentation of genres coexists with the hybridization typical of contemporary television: the game or challenge is intertwined, for example, with the tutorial and advice. This makes television programs more usable by different audiences since these kinds of TV shows operate as a guide within complex universes. The most basic function of lifestyle television is to provide the viewers with advice for everyday life, educating them on the purchase and use of specific products. This goal has to be reached in a dynamic and entertaining form, often characterized by the playful dimension of games and challenges between competitors (Innocenti 2013; 2014).

Since cooking shows are highly hybridized with all the genres typical of television schedule, one of the peculiar traits that many programs take on is to be able to move out of the spaces of the kitchen, the restaurant, or the studio and become itinerant, hybridizing with the travel documentary and moving up and down cities or countries in a messy geography made up of local specialties, restaurants with generous portions, and colorful street food. The narrative of cooking on television sets up a rich dialogue with different television genres by declining the same topic in very different programs. Food finds a place in documentaries and travel documentaries (*Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*), but also in news programs where it

carves out special timing, such as *Cotto e mangiato*, which from 2008 to the present occupies a space within the Italia 1 news program *Studio Aperto*.

Finally, in the complex contemporary media ecosystem, cooking shows adopt formats that encourage transmedia circulation (Jenkins 2007; Pescatore, 2018; Brembilla 2023). Many contemporary audiovisual products are part of a transmedia franchise and thus products that can be replicated and adapted on different media platforms. A transmedia narrative is made up of many components that start with a concept that is presented to consumers in, for example, a TV program, and is then enriched and expanded through the use of other media objects such as apps, comics, movies, books, etc. Each fragment of this narrative is accessible and usable independently of the others, still representing an entry point into the entire narrative universe. In this wide category, we will elaborate on our case study.

Hygiene, Food Waste and Sustainability in Cooking Shows

As we have underlined, cooking shows have a double goal: on the one hand, they have to entertain and amuse the audience, but on the other hand, these shows maintain a strong educational component: for instance “they are excellent vehicles for delivering food safety information to young people” (Borda et al. 2014: 1653). As such, they occupy a unique position where they can both educate and misinform viewers regarding food handling, waste management, and sustainable cooking practices. Therefore, cooking shows need to pay attention while navigating the delicate balance between entertainment and responsibility.

Cooking shows often emphasize the importance of hygiene in the kitchen through various means. Hosts and contestants might demonstrate proper handwashing techniques, the use of separate cutting boards for different ingredients, and the importance of regularly sanitizing cooking surfaces and utensils. Additionally, shows can emphasize the significance of storing food at proper temperatures to prevent bacterial growth and contamination. This focus on hygiene serves to educate viewers on fundamental food safety practices, promoting a culture of cleanliness and responsibility in the kitchen. Hygiene in the kitchen is crucial in shows like *Ramsay’s Kitchen Nightmares* where popular chef and TV host Gordon Ramsay thoroughly inspects restaurant kitchens, uncovering dangerous misbehavior and filth. In general,

because of the educational role cooking shows have, it is crucial to pay attention to the issue of hygiene, which might need to be taken into consideration as a topic for future productions. As pointed out in the paper by Borda et al. “unsafe handling of food or lack of preventive measures to reduce the likelihood of food poisoning is frequent in European TV cooking shows, either instructive or competitive. Time pressure, which is high in cooking competitions, should not be an excuse for mistakes regarding hygiene rules and food safety practices” (Borda et al. 2014: 1664).

Cooking shows also address the issue of food waste in various ways, aiming to promote responsible consumption and minimize the disposal of edible resources. One common approach is through the emphasis on efficient meal planning and utilization of ingredients. Contestants are often tasked with creating dishes using a limited set of ingredients or with repurposing leftovers, challenging them to think creatively and minimize waste. By showcasing these strategies, cooking shows educate viewers on practical methods to make the most out of their ingredients and reduce unnecessary food wastage in their own kitchens. This is the case, in Italian television, of the show *Cucina economica*, available on the channel Food Network as well as on the Food Network website. The show started on Sunday November 27th, 2022, at 3 pm and anticipated for a few days the release of a new book authored by its host Csaba dalla Zorza. The show has the goal of introducing the audience to “ethical, modern and sustainable cooking” as the show itself states.

Storytelling is disseminated by best practices mainly in the shape of tips and tricks that Csaba spreads along both seasons of the show. For instance, she shares with her audience many tips, like ways to recycle leftover vegetables (the vegetable soup jar to which she makes constant reference in season 1), as well as tricks to waste less energy in the process of cooking food (cut vegetables in small pieces so they cook faster, never leave fires on without something cooking on it etc.). In fact, cooking shows frequently highlight the value of utilizing all parts of an ingredient, including stems, peels, and scraps, to maximize flavor and minimize waste. Techniques such as vegetable peeling, stock-making from leftover bones and vegetable trimmings, and utilizing “ugly” produce that might otherwise be discarded are often featured to illustrate the potential for turning overlooked ingredients into delicious meals. Three Michelin star chef Massimo Bottura is particularly engaged with the issue of food waste, as he very well underlines with an effective catchphrase that promotes the web series *Why Waste?* in

collaboration with Fine Dining Lovers: “Where people see leftovers, we see potential.”²

Additionally, as we will see with the *MasterChefItalia* case, some cooking shows incorporate segments or challenges specifically focused on reducing food waste, where contestants are tasked with creating dishes using ingredients that are nearing expiration or incorporating commonly discarded food items. These segments serve to raise awareness about the issue of food waste and inspire viewers to adopt more sustainable practices in their own cooking routines, as it is well shown in shows like *Unomattina in famiglia* (airing in Italy since 1989) where a specific segment named *Chi fa da sé*, with host Lucia Cuffaro food communicator and activist for degrowth, is dedicated to self-production and anti-waste recipes and tricks.

With hygiene and food waste, environmental sustainability is the third topic concerning which cooking shows play a significant role, an issue that is often narrated as well as a theme that requires building audience awareness. Cooking shows often display practices and techniques that align with environmentally conscious principles. One prominent way cooking shows promote sustainability is by featuring ingredients that are locally sourced, organic, or sustainably produced. By highlighting the importance of supporting local farmers and producers, cooking shows like the *River Cottage* franchise with TV chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall demonstrate how consumers can make environmentally responsible choices when selecting ingredients for their meals. Another important contribution is offered by British chef and TV celebrity Jamie Oliver, whose show *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution* narrates the effort Oliver made while trying to redesign the US school lunch programs, with the purpose of fighting obesity and promoting healthier eating habits.

Furthermore, cooking shows often emphasize the use of seasonal produce, showcasing dishes that celebrate the flavors of each season while minimizing the environmental impact associated with importing out-of-season ingredients. Shows like *The Great British Bake Off* (better known as *Bake Off* in its more than 20 local adaptations) and *Top Chef* frequently incorporate seasonal challenges, encouraging contestants to work with ingredients that are readily available and in peak freshness.

Cooking shows may also feature episodes or segments dedicated to highlighting environmental issues and promoting sustainable lifestyle choices.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGMBP-iyCcw>

Shows like *Chef's Table* and *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* often explore the relationship between food, culture, and the environment, raising awareness about sustainability issues and inspiring viewers to adopt more eco-friendly practices in their own lives. Overall, cooking shows serve as powerful platforms for promoting sustainability and encouraging viewers to make informed choices that benefit both their health and the planet.

Cooking shows may promote sustainable cooking practices such as reducing food waste, conserving energy, and minimizing water usage. As we will see in the next paragraph, *MasterChef Italia* has implemented several initiatives to reduce food waste on set by encouraging contestants to repurpose leftovers and use ingredients efficiently.

MasterChef Italia: a Normative Framework

The *MasterChef* franchise stands as a hallmark in the television industry, captivating audiences worldwide with a blend of gastronomic expertise, intense competition, and compelling storytelling. The format, created by producer Frank Roddam, originated in the UK in 1990 and was then revived and updated by production company Banijay for the BBC in 2005. Since then, the format has been exported around the world and it is now produced locally in more than 50 countries, among which Italy. Each iteration of the franchise maintains a core structure comprising aspiring home cooks showcasing their culinary skills under the scrutiny of professional chefs/judges. A series of challenges are designed to test the contestants' creativity, technical skills, and ability to handle pressure in the kitchen, with each episode driven by a compelling narrative that mixes culinary artistry and dramatic flair.

MasterChef Italia debuted on September 21, 2011, on Cielo, the free-to-air digital channel of pay multiplex Sky – a successful move that helped attract a broad audience and build a dedicated viewer base. Following the success of the first season, the show moved to Sky Uno, Sky's flagship pay-TV channel, starting from its second season. This shift to a subscription-based platform was likely intended to capitalize on the show's growing popularity and to provide a more exclusive viewing experience for its audience. The move also aligned with Sky's strategy to enhance its pay content offerings with high-quality, engaging programming. Reruns were also aired on Cielo, still allowing for a broader audience reach. The original panel of judges comprised three influential figures in the culinary world: Bruno Barbieri,

known for his Michelin-starred restaurants, brought extensive expertise and a critical eye; Carlo Cracco, another Michelin-starred chef, was renowned for his innovative approach to Italian cuisine; Joe Bastianich, a restaurateur with a significant presence in the United States, added an international perspective and business acumen to the judging panel. Over time, the judging panel of *MasterChef Italia* has seen several changes. In 2015, Carlo Cracco left the show and was replaced by Antonino Cannavacciuolo, a Neapolitan chef known for his robust personality and two-Michelin-star restaurant. In 2018, Joe Bastianich stepped down from his role, making way for Giorgio Locatelli, an acclaimed chef with a Michelin-starred restaurant in London. The casting of judges is crucial: they need to be charismatic enough to become celebrities in their own right, drawing viewers not only for the culinary competition but also for their engaging personalities – this adds a layer of entertainment beyond the cooking challenges, creating memorable moments that resonate with the viewers and foster social discourses. It is important to note that these judges transcend their roles on the show to become celebrities, appearing in other media and public events, thereby enhancing the show's brand and reach by attracting a diverse viewer base, including those who might not be initially interested in cooking. Simultaneously, they must be authoritative in their expertise, serving as credible and respected models for both contestants and the audience. This credibility is crucial for the show's integrity, as viewers trust that the judges' critiques and advice are grounded in actual culinary knowledge and experience.

This is important to underline because *MasterChef Italia*, like its counterparts around the world and according to the unwritten rules of lifestyle television, operates with a strong normative attitude towards cuisine, manifesting this behavior through various mechanisms including verbal feedback, scoring systems, elimination decisions, and role modeling by judges. Particularly, the judges articulate standards of taste and quality against which contestants' performances are evaluated, they communicate the importance of mastering technical aspects of cooking as essential prerequisites for producing high-quality dishes, and demonstrate the normative standards of culinary excellence through their own actions, preferences, and critiques. These practices establish a sort of authority to which not only aspiring chefs but also viewers should attain to. In this framework, the show's growing engagement towards issues of sustainability, responsible culinary practices, and mindful consumption becomes crucial, as yet another theme on which it can establish and reinforce norms of good and bad practice. However,

MasterChef does not set itself as an activist show right from the beginning. As Luke van Ryn notes analyzing *MasterChef Australia*: “While food waste may appear to be an inevitable outcome of the opulent aesthetic of the programme, it is in fact a product of programme design” (2018: 218). As such, policies enacted in the context of creation and production do impact the show’s stance of sustainability. Critics have noted instances where large quantities of food are used in challenges and then discarded, or when less attention is given to food waste management in certain episodes. For instance, Joe Bastianich, known for his tough and sometimes harsh judging style, has been a controversial figure on the show. His actions, such as dramatically throwing away dishes to emphasize poor quality, have been criticized for promoting wasteful behavior for the sake of entertainment, a critique that can be seen as undermining the show’s broader sustainability message. However, in the last few editions, things have changed: the show has started to switch from non-activist to semi-activist, being more explicit about its sustainability stances by enacting specific production policies, designing ad-hoc challenges, and producing ancillary texts focused on the theme.

On-Screen and Off-Screen Sustainability

The basic mechanism of the show implicitly teaches the value of making the most out of available resources, aligning with sustainable cooking practices as contestants must create dishes using a limited selection of ingredients, encouraging creativity and resourcefulness. Furthermore, the judges’ authority allows them to effectively advocate for sustainable practices through their critiques and mentorship, emphasizing the importance of reducing food waste, using seasonal and locally sourced ingredients, and employing eco-friendly cooking methods. Occasionally, the show invites guest judges or incorporates themes that highlight sustainability, such as farm-to-table cooking or zero-waste challenges. An example of on-screen depiction of sustainability issues in *MasterChef Italia* occurred in Season 13, episodes 17 and 18, aired on Sky Uno on February 8, 2024. In episode 17, the focus was on eco-sustainability through the “Golden Mystery Box” challenge, which required contestants to create dishes using only sustainable, eco-friendly, and vegan ingredients, including molded legume steak, deactivated yeast, coconut oil, Pleurotus mushrooms, dulse seaweed, oyster leaf, potato milk, aquafaba, chickpea flour, almond cottage cheese. In episode 18, the “Skill

Test” theme was environmental protection: the contestants had to come up with a dish starring two alien species of the Mediterranean, the blue crab and the veined rapa whelk. As they have the potential to disrupt native ecosystems and biodiversity, several Italian cooks have been creative in incorporating them into their cuisine over the previous few months as a way to both manage their population and utilize a potentially invasive species as a food resource. One of those chefs, Chiara Pavan, served as a guest judge and consultant for the challenge, thus bringing to the fore the issues to the Italian viewers too.

Besides moments of the shows and challenges explicitly designed to thematize certain issues, the context of production has been working to build a reliable and consistent frame to implement sustainability through off-screen practices as well. *MasterChef Italia* has been adopting a plastic-free and eco-friendly approach: food-related consumer products like plates, glasses, cutlery, trays, and napkins are compostable, while tote bags and textile products are made by Essent’ial, a Made in Italy brand based on Ecodesign. Regarding food waste, the production team has been employing advanced planning and forecasting techniques to minimize overproduction and avoid excess food spoilage by carefully managing inventory and production schedules, thus maintaining a balance between meeting the demands of the competition and minimizing food waste. The program also started collaborating with food banks and charitable organizations to redistribute surplus food to those in need. Excess ingredients from challenges and filming sessions are carefully collected and donated, ensuring that edible food is put to good use rather than being discarded. In fact, Banco Alimentare and Last Minute Market do recover surplus left unused during the recording of the episodes in favor of the non-profit organization “Opera Cardinal Ferrari”, which runs a canteen for people in difficulty in Milan, where the program is shot. These actions contributed to *MasterChef Italia* being the first reality show in the world to obtain, in 2022, an actual certification of its work on sustainability, as the production worked to perfect the processes of purchasing, disposal, and recovery of products, as well as to implement a streamlined and efficient management system for food waste. In so doing, it obtained the “Food Waste Management System” certification from Bureau Veritas – a private holding accredited by more than 60 international bodies, that offers verification, certification, and audit services in the areas of Quality, Health, Safety, Environment, and Social Responsibility. In addition, Bureau Veritas also certified the proper application of the “Green Audiovisual” protocol,

which attests to the ability of the production to manage environmental sustainability, decrease consumption and environmental impact.³ Interestingly, all of these actions are strongly promoted on the show's website, promotional materials, and social network channels, as well as during the program itself. In fact, *MasterChef* underscores its commitment to sustainability by including a statement at the beginning of each episode and after commercial breaks, explaining what happens to the food used during filming and therefore promoting its sustainable policies. Additionally, the judges occasionally reiterate this commitment, reinforcing the message to viewers. In so doing, *MasterChef's* sustainable production practices not only serve as behind-the-scenes operations but also become integral elements of the show's narrative, thereby transitioning from non-representation to representation. The show elevates sustainable practices from logistical considerations to thematic motifs that resonate with viewers on a deeper level, both highlighting its dedication to reducing food waste but also educating the audience about its responsible practices, enhancing its role (and reputation) as a socially conscious and ethical culinary program.

The MasterChef Italia Narrative Ecosystem: Cucina Antispreco – MasterChef Magazine

In the past 20 years, television content went under a very significant transformation with important changes that affected formats and narrative, production and distribution, consumption, and circulation of TV shows. Nowadays, TV shows are at the center of a mutation and hybridization process, moreover, TV narrations last for many years and are able to branch out across different media, as per the model of transmedia storytelling, thereby generating other texts in different media environments. This capacity “to overflow across the media landscape is the result of a mutation: we are dealing with objects that are no longer self-conclusive and finished texts, but instead have become long-lasting transmedia phenomena” (Innocenti and Pescatore 2017: 165).

In this landscape, it is relevant to focus on ancillary content belonging to the *MasterChef Italia* ecosystem, particularly on *MasterChef Magazine*, a

³ <https://www.bureauveritas.it/newsroom/masterchef-italia-il-vero-talent-culinar-io-non-spreca-cibo>

a brief daily format featuring contestants and judges from the main show, chefs, experts, and guest celebrities. This format aims to fill in the gaps between weekly episodes to boost engagement, providing daily content that reminds viewers of *MasterChef*'s ongoing airing by adding extra content to it. To achieve this goal, *MasterChef Magazine* capitalizes on the show's most appreciated personalities, such as Bruno Barbieri and pastry chef Iginio Massari, and on the presence of the program's contestants who, outside of the competition, can find a way to express their personalities, skills, and potential as micro-celebrities.

Six episodes of the *MasterChef Magazine* format directly address the issue of sustainability: in occasion of the tenth season of the show (2020-2021), chef and environmental activist Franco Aliberti hosts *Cucina Antispreco – MasterChef Magazine*, dedicated to food waste reduction. Aliberti introduces himself as an “anti-waste cook”, powerfully stating on his website: “The future is the present, we need to set a good example now to improve what will become the future”.⁴ Nowadays, Aliberti is an independent chef and “food innovator”, with almost seventy thousand followers on Instagram (October 2024), while when *Cucina Antispreco* aired he was already well renowned as a content creator in the field of food and waste management.

The collaboration between *MasterChef* and Aliberti in season 2020-2021 is a first stance of the show production toward the issue of food waste and sustainability in the culinary industry. In contrast to the competitive format of *MasterChef*, *Cucina Antispreco* focuses specifically on fighting food waste through innovative cooking techniques and educational segments. While *MasterChef* captivates audiences with high-stakes challenges and culinary artistry, *Cucina Antispreco* takes a more didactic approach to inform and inspire viewers to adopt sustainable practices in their kitchens. *Cucina Antispreco* shares with *MasterChef* a common ground in the effort to promote responsible cooking and reduce food waste: both shows underscore the importance of using ingredients efficiently and creatively, albeit through distinct lenses. *MasterChef* may feature occasional challenges centered around minimizing food waste, while *Cucina Antispreco* dedicates its entire premise to this mission – this aspect emerges, particularly, with its practical attitude. Embracing the tutorial format, which is concise and effective, this ancillary show becomes more than just a cooking program; evolving into a

⁴ <https://www.francoaliberti.com/chi-sono>

first step within culinary education, emphasizing the importance of minimizing waste while maximizing flavor and creativity.

According to the European Community monitoring:

In 2021, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, around 131 kilogrammes (kg) of food waste per inhabitant were generated in the EU. Households generated 54 % of food waste, accounting for 70 kg per inhabitant. The remaining 46 % was waste generated upwards in the food supply chain. Household food waste is nearly twice the amount of food waste arising from the sectors of primary production and manufacture of food products and beverages (11 kg and 28 kg per inhabitant; 9 % and 21 %, respectively), sectors in which strategies exist for reducing food waste, for instance with the use of discarded parts as by-products.⁵

The show's tutorial format is thus instrumental in trying to achieve educational goals. Each episode is structured around practical demonstrations and step-by-step instructions, allowing viewers to follow along and replicate the techniques in their own kitchens and every recipe turns out to be a lesson in resourcefulness and creativity. By showcasing innovative ways to transform seemingly mundane ingredients into delicious meals, *Cucina Antispreco* empowers its audience to rethink their approach to cooking and waste management. Chef Aliberti's motto is: "Sustainability, circularity, and use of materials that are usually considered waste."⁶ Moved by this philosophy, the chef prepares dishes often made with one ingredient only, using parts that normally would be thrown away: peels, seeds and stems become dignified and necessary products to create dishes that are sustainable but also surprising.

With its established reputation for culinary excellence, *MasterChef* provides a solid foundation for *Cucina Antispreco* to reach its audience and influence culinary trends. Nevertheless, the magazine remains an ancillary production to the main program, whose highlight is the weekly prime time. The *MasterChef* brand guarantees for the quality of content, but the magazine's popularity is limited and reserved mainly for Sky Italia's subscribers and the *MasterChef*'s website users, probably a smaller audience than that of the prime time weekly episode.

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Food_waste_and_food_waste_prevention_-_estimates#Amounts_of_food_waste_at_EU_level

⁶ <https://MasterChef.sky.it/video/cucina-antispreco-con-franco-aliberti-640636>

Considering the relationship between the two shows, it's evident that they complement each other within the broader landscape of food television. While *MasterChef* dazzles with its competitive flair and gastronomic feats, *Cucina Antispreco* offers a vital counterbalance, reminding viewers of the imperative to cook sustainably and conscientiously. Together, they contribute to a more holistic understanding of cooking and its implications for both individuals and the planet. In today's media landscape, where entertainment often comes at the expense of environmental consciousness, *Cucina Antispreco* reminds us that educational content can be both informative and engaging, capturing the imagination of viewers while instilling valuable lessons. As more people embrace the philosophy of "reduce, reuse, and recycle" in their daily lives, the impact of initiatives like *Cucina Antispreco* extends far beyond the boundaries of the kitchen, inspiring positive change on a wide scale.

Conclusions

MasterChef Italia's shift towards addressing issues of food waste management and sustainability can be attributed to a confluence of factors, including rising societal awareness and corporate responsibility initiatives. As public concern about environmental issues grows, television programs, particularly in the lifestyle genre, are increasingly expected to reflect these values and *MasterChef Italia* has adeptly responded to this trend by integrating sustainability into both its on-screen content and off-screen practices. This integration serves multiple strategic purposes. TV shows perceived as socially responsible and ethically conscious are more likely to garner positive attention, build trust with audiences, and enhance their brand reputation. This translates into increased viewership, higher advertising revenue, and greater opportunities for sponsorship and partnerships. In fact, advertisers are particularly keen to align their brands with content that reflects positively on their image, recognizing the growing consumer preference for ethical and sustainable products. The behind-the-scenes operations of *MasterChef Italia* play a crucial role in reinforcing the values portrayed to the audience. By ensuring that sustainable practices are not only featured on-screen but also rigorously implemented off-screen, the show maintains authenticity and strengthens its commitment to environmental stewardship. This alignment between production decisions and broadcast content underscores the pro-

gram's dedication to sustainability and sets a standard for the industry. Furthermore, by showcasing its sustainable production practices on-screen, *MasterChef Italia* exerts considerable influence in promoting these practices as a benchmark of excellence in the culinary world. Contestants are encouraged to adopt sustainable cooking methods, and viewers are inspired to incorporate these practices into their daily lives. This goal can be achieved through an ecosystemic integration between the main program's perspective and ancillary paratexts and shows, such as the *MasterChef Magazine* in its different forms (e.g. *Cucina Antispreco* and *Cucina Green* with chef Mariangela Susigan, a two-Michelin star chef known for her environmentally sustainable approach). This amplification of sustainable values beyond the boundaries of the competition enhances the show's impact, contributing to a broader cultural shift towards more responsible and eco-friendly culinary practices. In conclusion, *MasterChef Italia*'s focus on sustainability and food waste management not only aligns with current societal values but also enhances its brand and marketability. By weaving these themes into the fabric of its programming and production, the show demonstrates that entertainment can be a powerful vehicle for promoting environmental responsibility and influencing positive change.

Yet, as Oulette and Hay argue in their study on the relationship between reality television and welfare: "the impetus to facilitate, improve and make-over people's health, happiness and success through television programming is tied to distinctly 'neoliberal' reasoning about governance and social welfare." (2008: 471) This raises questions about the 'privatization' and 'commercialization' of issues such as sustainability, which require legislative action at national and supranational levels of governance. While a program like *MasterChef* may indeed have a positive impact on individual lifestyles, achieving real and meaningful change at a systemic level remains an open question.

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