It's Fun to Eat: Forgotten Television
Dana Polan

From the original edition of How to Watch Television published in 2013 by New York University Press
Edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell

Accessed at nyupress.org/9781479898817

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND).
Abstract: Though select television programs are celebrated in their time and later canonized via reruns on cable channels and in critical anthologies like this one, much television remains ephemeral. In this essay on a forgotten yet unique cooking show, Dana Polan provides a model for researching (and reconstructing) a television program that barely remains accessible—and may never have made much of an impression to begin with.

On the web, there survives a curious bit of early local television programming: a short clip (little more than eleven minutes) showing Latina chef Elena Zelayeta from her 1950s cooking show, *It’s Fun to Eat*. Aided by her teenage son Billy, with whom she engages in light comic banter, Elena prepares pickled tuna and cheese biscuits. Billy ends the segment with a plug for the sponsor’s product, the Fresherator.

In many ways, *It’s Fun to Eat* is typical of the unassuming fare that filled up daytime hours at local stations in the first years of postwar commercial television. This was modest, even minimal, television: modest and minimal in instructional ambition (here just a few simple recipes offered in real time), in visual style (in this case, long shots of the overall action broken up by closer views), and in dramatic quality. Down to the somewhat awkward way in which the transition is made to the plug for the Fresherator, *It’s Fun to Eat* looks like what a lot of average daytime television would have looked like at the time. We might think of this as the realm of “forgettable television”—programming designed to be forgotten at virtually the very moment of its original viewing, as most TV was, and thus destined to be forgotten in historical accounts that typically single out canonic and classic shows. That is, this forgettable fare was planned for immediate consumption and assumed to possess no enduring impact. Such evanescent television represents an aspect of television history that we both could stand to learn more
about (since it did comprise so much of what was on the daytime airwaves at the time), and yet have a hard time learning about (since its very impermanence means that it generally left few researchable traces behind).

In the case of *It's Fun to Eat*, the desire to know more is amplified no doubt by a striking particularity of the show: Elena did her cooking and instructing as a *blind* person, and this fact can turn the seeming ordinariness of her show into something quite extraordinary. While running a successful San Francisco restaurant in the 1930s, Elena had fully lost vision in both eyes, and retrained herself to cook sightless. Our recognition of the show’s unassuming qualities as forgettable daytime programming has to be tempered by a certain admiration for Elena’s ability to play to the audience and create an affable persona for cameras she could not see; she evidently was aided in this task a bit by strings attached to her ankles that the crew would tug on so she would know which way to look when there was a cut from one camera to the other. The very premise of this show is pretty amazing. Maybe *It's Fun to Eat* is not so forgettable after all.

The astounding uniqueness of a blind cook working in a medium that is so much about visibility—to the extent that in the clip when Elena plates up a dish, she can ask the viewers without evident irony “Now doesn’t that look perfectly beautiful?” as if she and the viewers shared in the vision—in itself makes *It’s Fun to Eat* a seductive object for historical analysis. Unfortunately, for the historian, the Internet clip of *It’s Fun to Eat* seems to constitute the only surviving footage from the show. There’s a lesson here about the vulnerability of so much early television: until 1947, there was no effective mechanism to make recordings of live TV shows, and even after that, generally only night-time programming—for example, successful national network shows, for which copying allowed reruns and syndication and nationwide broadcast across time zones—was deemed to merit preservation. Ephemeral daytime television, such as cooking shows which were often considered lowbrow feminine entertainment, was not so deemed. Thus, it was often only by chance that storage copies of this or that early daytime television were produced, and it is rare that they survive down to the present and sometimes get found by a researcher or archivist.

In the case at hand, the footage from *It’s Fun to Eat* was discovered in the underground parking garage of KPIX-TV studios, and here too there’s a lesson about early television and its study. As Alex Cherian, archivist at the San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive wryly, albeit sadly, explained to me, “TV stations tend to put equipment and assets in their parking garages when they have no space left. It’s usually an unofficial staging ground for stuff which is about to be dumped.”

Given that this one clip is all we have of *It’s Fun to Eat*, there’s a lot about it that remains shrouded in mystery, and there’s very little in the historical record
It’s Fun to Eat

Figure 37.1. Though often appearing mundane in content and formal strategies, “forgotten television” like the obscure cooking show *It’s Fun to Eat* can produce insights into media culture.

to help us out. Not only was most daytime programming not felt worthy of preservation, but even at the moment of its initial airing, it was often not given much more than passing attention. On the production end, channels simply needed to fill up their airwaves. With their goal being simply to get anything out on the air, the production staff usually didn’t register anything memorable in what they were doing. Moreover, supporting materials, like studio records, were often thrown out. Likewise, on the reception end, spectators might single out some particular show as a favorite (and bit by bit, some series started becoming classics fondly remembered years later) but especially in the early days of television set acquisition, most viewers were content just to have any images whatsoever, and could consume hours of quickly forgotten fare. Consequently, when (or if) the researcher finds someone who worked on the show—or watched it—the researcher may discover that this person may not have accurate memories of it (or even any memories of it at all), not because it was entirely forgotten but because it never really made an impression in the first place.

*It’s not even clear from the website or from the program content when *It’s Fun to Eat actually aired, and Elena’s published autobiography isn’t helpful on the matter either: even to Elena herself, her efforts in television don’t seem to have had much impact on the overall course of an eventful life. Here, too, there’s a lesson for the historian: with some concerted effort, it might be possible to track down the broadcast dates for *It’s Fun to Eat*, but the researcher has to make a serious decision about whether that effort would be worth it. Perhaps, for instance, some local newspaper might have the information in its TV listings, although such listings were quite sporadic for newspapers in local TV markets and they were often inaccurate since shows were moved around or cancelled with little advance notice. Maybe, then, it’s enough to know the approximate period of the show to gesture toward its general fit into its historical moment.
The historian then has to be quite imaginative and creative, within the limits of time, energy, and resources. In this particular case, I followed a number of possible research paths. Predictably perhaps, I started with web searches on “It’s Fun to Eat” (along with the names of the people associated with its production) and on “Elena Zelayeta” (which led me to six books she authored, including her autobiography), and I even tracked down William Zelayeta (the Billy of the clip), who at age seventy-seven graciously agreed to an interview. But even the best intentions don’t matter if the archival material or participant memories aren’t there. Thus, there were virtually no hits for the terms online; Elena’s books are, as noted, skimpy on details of her television work; and, most important, William Zelayeta had few concrete recollections of the program, in large part because he had been a rambunctious teenager at the time with other things on his mind.

Perhaps with more time and resources, one could follow some other research paths. For instance, in her book Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory, British film historian Annette Kuhn explains how she learned a lot about what spectators made of the movies they saw in the 1930s by interviewing people from the era who were now in retirement homes. In similar fashion, perhaps one could interview elderly people in San Francisco or Los Angeles to see if they remember Elena’s shows and what their specific recollections are. But, truth be told, that seems to be quite a long shot. Who might remember an ephemeral daytime show from around sixty years ago? In the absence of memories and documentary material, to try to imagine what the television experience of It’s Fun to Eat might have been like, one needs to move to the context of other comparable programs to reconstruct what television was generally like at the time. Once we know some of the general conventions of television style at the time, we can examine how this show worked with them or, perhaps, went off instead in other directions.

Many factors would encourage an overall regularity in the look of 1950s daytime television, especially in the instructional domain. For instance, if the goal is to teach steps in a process such as cooking, it makes sense to proceed chronologically (do this, then do that). And when shooting in real time and transmitting live, as was the case for much of the local daytime programming of the era, chronology seems all the more called for. For example, once a recipe gets going and the food starts to be transformed, it is hard to interrupt the action to go back or forward in time. (But it’s not impossible: there are indeed ways of “cheating” chronology, as when Elena explains that her short program doesn’t provide time to show the actual, real-time baking of her biscuits so she has made some up in advance.)

For the most part, cooking shows are highly conventionalized in structure (chronological demonstration in real time) and in style (functional alternation of
long shots and close-ups to give both the overall picture and the instructive detail). In fact, for all their seeming dynamism (fast, even frenetic cutting), today’s cooking shows often are not that far from these conventions set in place early on in instructional television’s history. For instance, a randomly chosen episode of Giada De Laurentiis’s Everyday Italian (Food Network, 2003–2008) about cooking for a beach party ends with a highly edited exterior scene where Giada plays volleyball with her friends. But while she is in the kitchen preparing their picnic, the editing pattern alternating long shots of the whole kitchen and close-ups of her busy hands is the norm just as it was in instructional television’s earliest years.8

Across its history, instructional television has often been caught in a tension between providing viewers with familiar fare (experiences that were comfortable because they were conventional) and with keeping interest going by adding a touch of the different, the daring, the unique, the special. Although it may at first seem paradoxical, I would argue that in fact it’s the very uniqueness of It’s Fun to Eat—the seemingly sole example of a television show built around a blind cook—that contributes to its qualities of average, everyday, ordinary television. Elena’s blindness is exceptional for cooking shows, no doubt, but it is often useful for any TV cook to have traits that make their instruction stand out and seem special within the unfolding regularity and ordinariness of so much what’s on the air. (In the case of Everyday Italian, to return to that more contemporary example for a moment, what’s being sold is not just a regularized culinary experience, but the supposed stand-out specialness of a host who, as Michael Newman points out in his essay in this volume, combines cheerfulness with sexiness.)

Certainly, in the case of Elena Zelayeta, it might well be that in concentrating on Mexican and Spanish-inflected dishes, she already stood out from a pedagogy more commonly focused on commonplace American cuisine. Postwar home cooking, and the instructional cooking shows typically devoted to it, had two different responsibilities. On the one hand, with suburbanization, romantic ideologies that were pushing women to marry young (what proto-feminist Betty Friedan would later term “the feminine mystique”), and new modes of mobility (from the new car culture to commercial air travel), more newlywed brides were living away from their mothers and thereby needed instruction in the sorts of domestic activities that in prior times they would likely have learned at home. Thus, it’s not surprising that early twentieth-century cookbooks generally included no recipes for anodyne staples like bread since it was assumed that these would naturally be part of a housewife’s repertoire, whereas mid-twentieth-century cookbooks went to great lengths to spell out every step in making such seemingly basic food items. In such a context, culinary instructors stepped in to offer average citizens lessons in the ordinary practices of everyday life.
On the other hand, there was quite a lot about everyday postwar American middle-class life that had to do with anxieties about one's social standing and with coming off well in the eyes of others. For instance, one narrative motif in the period, common to cooking shows as well as fictional dramas and comedies, had to do with the last-minute guest (often one's boss) who is coming unexpectedly to dinner but who anticipates a great meal, which, if not provided, means the family could be missing out on that raise in salary it has been hoping for. Whether or not real-life social and work-place status was actually decided in this fashion, the pervasiveness of the motif in fiction suggests that even in the seemingly domestic space of the kitchen, concerns about standing and career advancement were being played out.

In such a context, it mattered not only to know how to cook ordinary American fare, but also to create more distinctive, standout dishes. Thus, to take an important example, at the beginning of the 1960s, Julia Child would tap into an American mythology of French culture as a high culture whose practices could grant an average person distinction; both her book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and her television show *The French Chef* (WGBH, 1963–1973) served to offer Americans ways to achieve status through haute cuisine. Child functioned as what we might term a “cultural mediator” whose task it was to introduce average citizens to new practices of modernity (in this case, practices of the domestic realm responding to new postwar roles for both men and women at home) and perform a delicate balancing act in which something new was presented, but not something so new as to be frightening—for instance, as late as the 1960s, Julia Child was still persuading average Americans to not be wary of garlic as a taste enhancer.

In these terms, Elena Zelayeta could be said to be a cultural mediator, too. She saw Mexican/Spanish food as offering a celebratory quality that could well contribute to parties and other forms of socializing. Revealingly, her second cookbook is entitled *Elena’s Festive Recipes* (1952), while her first, a general introduction entitled *Elena’s Famous Mexican and Spanish Recipes* (1944), included special sections on “Company Dinners” and “Fiesta Menus”—with the latter explaining how to make one’s table attractive to others by placing green, white, and red carnations on it to emulate the Mexican flag or drawing little pictures of sombreros, cacti, and so on as place settings. Even in the brief *It’s Fun to Eat* clip, key moments are dedicated to plating up the food in style. Food here is not only sustenance but also visual seduction. No doubt, Mexican food lacked much of the cultural cachet of haute French cuisine, as Mexican cooking was often imagined to be more boldly spicy than aesthetically subtle, but it was nonetheless an exotic, even exciting, cuisine that could add pizzazz to common American fare.
Still, Elena insisted on the ways that Mexican food was not so different as to be unachievable by American cooks or unappreciated by American consumers. Just as Julia Child would “translate” French food into an American vernacular—for instance, “boeuf bourguignon,” she insisted, was just another name for good old American beef stew—Elena insisted on the translatability of Mexican food. As she put it in the beginning pages of *Elena’s Famous Mexican and Spanish Recipes*, “along with giving recipes for traditional Mexican dishes, I have included many American adaptations—easy to prepare, easy to serve.”1 When she explains, for instance, how to make enchiladas, she clarifies that “Typical Mexican enchiladas are not served with a great deal of sauce; however, in my experience of cooking for American people, I have found that they like plenty of sauce and somewhat thicker [preparations]. . . . For them I would suggest that this recipe for sauce be doubled.”

So we can sum up *It’s Fun to Eat* as a show that was “in between”: in between in its subject matter, which has to do both with satisfying American culinary tastes and yet also with opening them up to new cultural horizons; in between in the mix of its quite ordinary, even quite minimalist style (or rather non-style) and the stand-out appeal of a distinctive host who, although blind, could still play well to the cameras and foster a sense of personality and intimacy; in between in its status as a transitional show between the ephemeral, even forgettable fare of daytime postwar television and later, more celebrated celebrity-driven series, such as Julia Child’s *The French Chef* in the 1960s. And as a mysterious, incomplete object for historical research, it also exists somewhere in between all the shows that have been fully forgotten in the ravages of time and those for which we have rich and varied stores of information.13 In both its typicality and its seeming uniqueness, *It’s Fun to Eat* epitomizes so much of what everyday television has been about, and that is what makes it such an enticing object of investigation for the historian.

NOTES

1. The clip can be viewed on the San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive website, where it has been digitized for posterity: https://diva.sfsu.edu/bundles/189406.
2. Personal correspondence with author, September 26, 2011.
3. One researcher, a historian of San Francisco life and lore, Meredith Eliassen, has located in the San Francisco History Center of the San Francisco Public Library a brief clipping about *It’s Fun to Eat*, from the February 3, 1953, issue of the *San Francisco Examiner* (no page is indicated). This article (which Eliassen has described to me in an email as a mere “snippet”) asserts that *It’s Fun to Eat* was filmed in San Francisco, Elena’s place of residence, but for distribution to Los Angeles. But even the details of this production history of the show remain unclear (and unconfirmed).
5. From Billy’s appearance on camera compared to his birth-date (1934), we can guess that the show aired sometime in the early 1950s.
6. I have been much inspired here by British television scholar Jason Jacobs’s excellent study *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama* (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 2000). Starting from the fact that almost no British shows survive from before the mid-1950s, Jacobs sets himself the deliberate challenge of trying to figure out what the earliest programming might have looked like, given the absence of the shows themselves. He tries to reconstruct their look and style from production records, autobiographical accounts, journalistic reviews, and other secondary data. It is impressive how much he is able to come up with.
7. At the same time, though, it’s often part of an effective instructional strategy to show an example of the finished product at the beginning of the operation to hold out the promise of what the payoff will be if one follows the lesson through to its conclusion. Cooking shows might include a glimpse in the opening moments of a finished dish.
8. For more on *Everyday Italian*, see Michael Newman’s essay in this volume.
9. For example, on the TV series *Bewitched*, Darren is constantly bringing his boss, Larry, home for dinner at the last minute, leaving Samantha with the conundrum of deciding whether to use her witch powers or not to get the meal on the table expeditiously.
12. Ibid., 37.
13. To take just one example, if you want today to study the classic series *The Twilight Zone* (analyzed in this volume by Derek Kompare), you have at your disposal several different DVD box sets (with lots of supplementary material), scholarly books on the show, detailed episode guides, Rod Serling biographies, and on and on.

Further Reading