Food, passion and marginalised young people: technologies of the self in *Jamie’s Kitchen*

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**Abstract**  
A passion for food that is understood in certain ways – slow, organic, not industrialised – plays a central role in the drama of the successful and popular *Jamie’s Kitchen* (2002) and *Jamie’s Kitchen Australia* (2006). Large parts of the drama in these shows revolve around an apparent lack of passion that is displayed by the marginalised, unemployed young people that are the central characters in this story. In this paper I examine the ways in which these accounts of food, passion, and the training of marginalised young people expose some of the challenges and opportunities faced by marginalised young people as they seek to transition into the uncertain and risky labour markets of 21st century capitalism.  
I argue that Michel Foucault’s (1988) concept of technologies of the self enables us to understand passion, and its particular manifestations in *Jamie’s Kitchen*, and in the training of marginalised young people, as a powerful technology of self transformation. The drama of *Jamie’s Kitchen* suggests that as a technology of the self passion for food promises to provide precarious, possibly temporary, forms of salvation, meaning and purpose for the young people engaged in the Fifteen Foundation’s social enterprise transitional labour market program.

**Keywords:** Jamie’s Kitchen, Marginalised Young People, Foucault, Food, Passion, Technologies of the Self

**Introduction**

I found myself thinking of Mrs Waters’s seduction of Tom Jones, in the Henry Fielding novel. Actually, I see the movie version with the young Albert Finney, where “passions and appetites” blur and Mrs Waters’s soft sighs commingle with Tom’s energetic consumption of a vast piece of roast beef. Food has always had erotic associations... (Bill Buford, 2006, *Heat*: 33)

A passion for food that is understood in certain ways – slow, organic, not industrialised or rationalised – plays a central role in the drama of the two reality TV shows *Jamie’s Kitchen* and *Jamie’s Kitchen Australia* (Kelly and Harrison 2009). Large parts of the drama revolve around an apparent lack of passion that is displayed
by the marginalised, unemployed young people that are the central characters in this story. Passion’s starring role in Jamie’s Kitchen can enable me to identify and analyse some of the challenges and opportunities faced by marginalised young people as they seek to transition into the uncertain and risky labour markets of globalised, flexible, 21st century capitalism (Bauman 2004; Beck 2000; Kelly 2009; Sennett 2006).

Following a brief account of the training programs captured in these TV shows, and located in the broader, ongoing programs conducted by the Fifteen Foundation as a social enterprise, I will argue that Michel Foucault’s (1988) concept of technologies of the self enables us to understand passion, and its particular manifestations in Jamie’s Kitchen and in the training of marginalised young people, as a powerful technology of self transformation. As a technology of the self, passion for food is analysable along the following axes:

- It emerges from particular forms of knowledge and ways of knowing the self, training, paid work and food.
- It is produced and regulated within relations of power that emerge from and give structure/shape to particular fields of possibilities.
- It seeks to provoke and produce certain practices of the self – understood in terms of the development and performance of an entrepreneurial, passionate self.

What the drama of Jamie’s Kitchen illustrates is that as a technology of the self passion for food promises to provide precarious, possibly temporary, forms of salvation, meaning and purpose for young people who risk the material and social oblivion that Beck (1992) and Bauman (2004) argue awaits those who are denied access to labour markets.
Jamie’s Kitchen, the Fifteen Foundation and the Problem of Youth

The successful and popular Jamie’s Kitchen screened on the UK’s Channel 4 in 2002. It was broadcast a year later on free to air television (Channel 10) in Australia over five weeks (Smith, 2006). In the series celebrity chef Jamie Oliver took fifteen unemployed young Londoners and tried to turn them into trainee chefs who had the capacity to work in his new London restaurant called, appropriately, Fifteen. The original series was followed by Jamie’s Kitchen Australia - a 13 part series that was screened on Channel 10 during September – November 2006. This series tracked the opening of the Fifteen franchise in Melbourne. Since the initial TV series there have been larger, yearly, cohorts of trainees, and in 2004 the Fifteen Foundation was established as a for-profit social enterprise. The Fifteen Foundation has since opened restaurants in Cornwall (UK), Amsterdam (Holland), and Melbourne. In these endeavours the Foundation claims to be ‘driving forward our dream of building Fifteen into a global social enterprise brand inspiring young people all over the world’. As a social enterprise the Foundation claims that it ‘exists to inspire disadvantaged young people to believe that they can create for themselves great careers in the restaurant industry’ (Fifteen Foundation 2007).

The central roles played by a passion for slow, seasonal, fresh food produced, prepared and presented outside of industrialised, rationalised, globalised supply chains were apparent from the first episodes of the series. The candidates were chosen from a pool of thousands of hopefuls who turned up for interviews in response to advertisements. In episode one each candidate sat in front of a camera and talked about what food they liked, and why they wanted to become chefs. Most of the young people seen in this video footage were nervous and/or inarticulate and this technique
made many look stupid. Although some appeared more passionate, articulate and convincing than others, it was apparent that many lacked understandings of, and passion for, food in the ways imagined by Oliver and his team.

At this point in the drama of Jamie’s Kitchen we see and hear about an apparent lack of passion, of energy, of excitement, of entrepreneurial flair in the young people making the first steps in trying to become employed. The possibility of self transformation, of being somebody different, of doing something different within the space of a year is held out to these young people. And this possibility is something that can be realised if they embrace food in the ways that Oliver imagines it. We also see an emphasis on the individual as the figure who must recognise their deficits and lacks, who must understand themselves as being an agent who can transform their own life and circumstances through their own efforts.

These understandings are mapped out in a document titled What’s Right With These Young People, where the Fifteen Foundation aims to inform potential franchisees ‘about what goes on with our young people during their time with us’ (Fifteen Foundation 2005:2-6). In this document it suggests that: ‘Fifteen exists to reach out to young people who are disregarded in society – the focus all too often is on what’s wrong with them’. Embedded in this discourse are references to social understandings of the type of young person that Fifteen targets – understandings that are often negative and which attach themselves to a variety of problem behaviours, histories and relationships. As a consequence of these issues many of the trainees present with ‘low self esteem, self defeating patterns of behaviour, and social networks that serve to keep them locked in to poverty and underachievement’.

The widespread focus on what is wrong with young people in these circumstances – by schools, businesses and managers, state and non-government authorities and
agencies – is something the Foundation is explicit about. Yet the Foundation is also keen to be seen as realistic about its potential for fixing the young people they target: ‘We are under no illusions that we can ‘fix’ them. We cannot sort out family problems, undo a criminal record or compel them to give up smoking weed’. Instead, the Foundation suggests that: ‘What we can do is provide them with more choices, open doors to new networks and opportunities and invite them to step through, helping them develop new skills to deal with their old problems’. This logic suggests that new opportunities, new responsibilities, new relationships will provide the possibility for young people to transform themselves: ‘This involves a unique encounter with food and Jamie’s inspiring approach to cooking and service. But Fifteen is so much more than a chef training project. Food and cooking are the means to the end. The purpose is personal transformation for each young person’.

In this sense the Foundation positions certain understandings of food, of its production, preparation, presentation and consumption, as a technology of self transformation. The purpose is not so much to train chefs, but to utilise food, cooking and the work environment of a commercial kitchen that thinks about, prepares and presents food in particular ways, as a means to transform the opportunities, choices and self understandings of young people previously at risk of living and leading wasted lives (Bauman 2004).

**Food and Passion: Technologies of the Self**

The ideas about passion that circulate in contemporary management discourses, and which suggest – as Debra King’s (2005, 2006) analysis indicates – that passion is a vital ingredient in understanding and promoting performance, productivity, and
motivation, should be approached and analysed as being problematic, as being particular truths that in certain contexts seek to produce particular outcomes. I want to suggest that passion, and its intimate relationship to food that is produced, prepared and presented in particular ways, can be understood as a technology of the self. In his later work Foucault (1985; 1986; 1988; 1991; 2000a; 2000b) developed certain concepts to open up the field of historical analysis of the forms that the self, power and knowledge assumed at particular moments. In analysing the forms that the self and self knowledge have taken at different times Foucault (2000b:87-88) argued that the sorts of studies that he undertook were guided by the concept of technologies of the self: those ‘procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of mastery or self knowledge’. The self, in this frame, has no originary or ultimate essence, but takes, instead, a number of forms that emerge in particular ways, in particular contexts, in relation to particular purposes. For Foucault, an analysis of these technologies of the self could be guided by questions of the following type: ‘What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self? How should one “govern oneself” by performing actions in which one is oneself the objective of those actions, the domain in which they are brought to bear, the instrument they employ, and the subject that acts?’ From this perspective we can analyse passion, and the characteristics it assumes in Jamie’s Kitchen and in the training of marginalised young people, as a powerful technology of self transformation. In this setting passion is analysable along the following three axes.
First, passion emerges from and frames particular forms of knowledge and ways of knowing the self, vocational training, paid work, the restaurant industry, food. So,
marginalised young people are understood in certain ways, and as requiring certain processes and practices to be put in place to enable a passion to emerge or develop from an initial sense of self that is anything but passionate (at least in relation to the ends that the training program has in mind). In the time and spaces spanned by the original series, the emergence of a vision to develop Fifteen as a global social enterprise brand, and the Australian series, *truths* about how to achieve this vision have been reflexively reformulated to produce, for example, different ways of understanding the entering behaviours of these young people. Early in the first series we get a sense that trainees ought to enter the program with evident, pre-existing and substantial levels of passion. Passion in this time/space is largely seen as intrinsic. It is something you bring with you (King 2005).

Ruth Watson: What do you want? What kind of people are you looking for?
Jamie Oliver: I just want people that are observing what is happening. If the food is burning I want them to take it off. We are looking for an inner instinctiveness about food. They don’t have to be able to cook. They just have to feel it. Do you know what I mean?...All I know is that they’re not employed and not in education. But I’m not sure I need to know too much about them really – I think this is about spending quality time and a bit of inspiration and encouragement really (*Jamie’s Kitchen*, Episode One, Broadcast in Australia on Channel 10, 21 July 2003)

Late in the *Jamie’s Kitchen Australia* series there is evidence of a different, not unproblematic, understanding of why some trainees might struggle with the demands and expectations of the program, why some of the trainees might not appear as passionate as they should.

Jamie Oliver: I came from a very middle class background where everything was perfect and nothing went wrong. Most of the students we have haven’t got fathers so it is mainly single families. The stability at home is very questionable…if there is any at all. I’ve never been through any of that so who am I to judge really? (*Jamie’s Kitchen Australia*, Episode Four, Broadcast in Australia on Channel 10, 5 October 2006)
Knowledge here also has as its objects the sorts of understandings of food that Jamie Oliver is famous for (Smith 2006). Food, understood in these ways, is something to get passionate about. It can excite the passions. It can be produced, prepared, presented and consumed with passion. Because food is understood in these ways the work that goes on in a restaurant kitchen is also something to be passionate about.

Second, passion is produced, regulated and managed within relations of power - sovereignty, discipline and government - that emerge from and give structure/shape to particular fields of possibilities (Foucault 1991; 2000a). In the context of this training program - undertaken in various spaces including training colleges and restaurant kitchens - sovereignty represents the relationship of power which locates authority in the hierarchy of chefs, cooks, assistants that characterise the restaurant kitchen. In these spaces military metaphors are often used to identify command and control structures that are understood as being vital to the task of preparing and presenting substantial amounts of food, to order, and on time (Bourdain 2000; Buford 2006; Cadwalladr 2007). Sovereignty resides in the capacity to order someone to do something, and to the required consistency and quality. Throughout both series, in kitchens, in off-the-job training spaces, we witness the exercise of sovereignty by Head Chefs, trainers and teachers, at the same time as we witness trainees resisting, or choosing to conform, to these demands. The aim of the exercise of sovereignty is to establish the field, and its limits, in which appropriate forms of passion might emerge. Sovereign power can’t will passion into existence, but it might establish the conditions in which it emerges or is uncovered.

In this training environment disciplinary power takes a form that requires trainees to submit to the often menial, mundane tasks of cleaning, of maintaining a work place/space and utensils such as pots, pans, knives. It also involves learning,
repeating, mastering the mechanics of food preparation. At one level this cleaning, sweeping, tidying, dicing, slicing treadmill seeks to develop essential skills. At another it also promises to develop new forms of self awareness: as someone who can discipline themselves: can conform to the demands of rationalised clock time: can become passionate about doing these things well through a sense that they have a purpose, and that this purpose contributes to a larger project which can deliver feelings and understandings of self worth, competence, ability. Again, discipline cannot will passion into existence, but these forms and relations of power promise to produce a skill, knowledge and attitude base from which passion might be uncovered or emerge.

Finally, governmental, pastoral forms of power seek to develop a form of well regulated autonomy, a capacity for passionate, self regulation, via an encouragement to develop new forms of self knowledge and self awareness. These new ways of knowing the self – as passionate, as skilled, as capable, as self governing - will, so the programs promise, emerge as a consequence of developing skills, capacities, behaviours and dispositions from fields in which the self has submitted to the demands and discipline of others such as Jamie Oliver.

Third, passion seeks to produce certain practices of the self. In addition, these practices promise to energise the development and performance of an entrepreneurial, passionate self. These practices take their shape from the field of possibilities structured by the relationships between knowledge and relations of power outlined above. In Jamie's Kitchen and in the Fifteen program these practices of the self include such things as: attendance requirements at both college and in work placements: the mundane, menial tasks of cleaning work benches, ovens, grills and hotplates, floors and utensils: learning how to correctly dice, slice and generally
prepare and present ingredients so that dishes can be cooked, assembled and presented for consumption – the seemingly endless practice of diverse skills and techniques that are vital to food preparation in the chaotic context of commercial kitchens: tasting and testing of foods in ways that develop new vocabularies, understandings and orientations to food and its possibilities: shopping and sourcing expeditions to develop and practice skills necessary to knowing food as having different origins, different qualities, different possibilities in terms of preparation and as ingredients for particular dishes: team building excursions to test the limits of the self, to locate the self in different fields where different understandings of the self, and of others, and of a team might be encouraged to form and emerge.

**Conclusion**

There is evidence that the training and development processes of social enterprises such as the Fifteen Foundation offer possibilities for continuing numbers of young people to develop and practise passionate forms of selfhood: forms of selfhood that might enable them to imagine and secure a different future. A social audit of Fifteen (London), for example, suggests that in 2004 14 of 24 young people graduated from the 18 month program. In 2007 10 of these graduates were still chefs and only 1 was unemployed (JustAssurance 2007). In addition, the social enterprise transitional labour market program made famous by Jamie’s Kitchen is a model adopted by others – including Mission Australia (Lauder 2009). These practices of the self are not unproblematic. They emerge in fields of possibilities that have certain limits and certain relationships to other fields. But they do offer these young people a different set of options, choices, futures to the fields they currently practise their freedom in.
The evidence from *Jamie’s Kitchen* and from the Fifteen program is that passion has the capacity to transform the self, to be a vital ingredient in processes of salvation (however precarious these may be). Marginalised young people, may not appear as passionate, may not approach a variety of tasks, activities and skill development processes with much passion – at least not initially. Passion, as a vital ingredient in processes of salvation, needs to be disciplined and exercised by a self capable of exercising a well regulated, self governing, autonomy. The self here needs to be *made* passionate via a variety of practices of the self. Passion, in this sense, is a vital ingredient in salvation.

References


