



From Scratch: Inside the Food Network

Allen Salkin

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Big personalities, high drama—the extraordinary behind-the-scenes story of the Food Network, now about to celebrate its twentieth anniversary: the business, media, and cultural juggernaut that changed the way America thinks about food.

In October 1993, a tiny start-up called the Food Network debuted to little notice. Twenty years later, it is in 100 million homes, approaches a billion dollars a year in revenue, and features a galaxy of stars whose faces and names are as familiar to us as our own family's.

But what we don't know about them, and the people behind them, could fill a book.

Based upon extensive inside access, documents, and interviews with hundreds of executives, stars, and employees all up and down the ladder, Allen Salkin's book is an exhilarating roller-coaster ride from chaos to conquest (and sometimes back). As Salkin takes us inside the conference rooms, studios, homes, restaurants, and after-hours meetings, we see a salty Julia Child lording it over the early network performers; a fragile Emeril Lagasse staggering from the sudden public shock of cancellation; a very green Rachael Ray nearly burning down the set on her first day; a torn Tyler Florence accepting the Applebee's job he knows he can't refuse, but with a chill running down his spine; a determined Bobby Flay reinventing himself once again to survive.

Paula Deen, Tom Colicchio, Anthony Bourdain, Mario Batali, Jamie Oliver, Martha Stewart, Guy Fieri, Cat Cora: Salkin illuminates the people we thought we knew, and the ones we never knew about, in this irresistible story of the intersection between business, television, pop culture, food—and us.

From Scratch: Inside the Food Network Details

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From Reader Review From Scratch: Inside the Food Network for online ebook

Monica says

It's more a business case study than a tasty dish. And the case is pretty interesting. It's a wonder that the network ever happened at all given the vague concept to begin with, the difficulties in finding investors, and the conflicts between management factions, to say nothing of the three changes in ownership in as many years and the ever changing terrain of the cable universe.

These aspects are well handled and make up much of the book, but I think I would rather watch sausage being made than hear quite so much about ownership shares and the changing demographics of the ideal target audience. Or target. It is a business after all, market shares and PE ratios are more important than programming unless the programming makes a measurable contribution to them.

I do wish there had been more about the network content - how the shows are made, how hosts and contestants are selected - and a bit less about the shifts in management personnel. Given the number of high profile, big personalities involved, this is a surprisingly flat book.

Heather says

I was disappointed by this book. I had hoped it would be stories from the personalities that Food Network has made famous but it's much more about the business of starting a cable network and the people who did all the behind the scenes work. I guess those are the only people that the author could get to talk to him but it's too bad because I don't think very many people are interested in the excruciating (to me at least) details of the business deals that went into starting the Food Network and keeping it going all these years. There are some tidbits about the names you know and recognize but they are really few and far between. Without those powerful personalities guiding the story, I had trouble remembering who was who because honestly I didn't really care. There were a lot of behind the scenes stories that seemed to be building up to something and then they just ended with nothing dramatic happening. It was like the author only got a few good stories and so he wanted to include them all, whether or not they added to the narrative or supported a point he was trying to make. Another reviewer compared this to the oral history of SNL that came out a few years ago and I don't think this book comes even close to that. The SNL book was full of stories from the main players about what it was like to work on the show in the early years and this book has almost none of that. I wonder if it's because the Food Network stars are mostly professional chefs who were doing this in addition to running restaurants and selling cookware so it wasn't a huge part of their lives like SNL was for its cast. In any case, this was not an interesting book and I'm sorry that my sister saw it on my amazon wish list and bought it for me in hardcover for my birthday. She should have saved her money.

Ashley says

Reading the reviews, I knew what I was getting into. While the title is admittedly misleading, it's important to focus on the "From Scratch" part of it. Rather than a trashy gossip rag about the network's stars, this book details the Food Network from its conception to where it stands now.

I really enjoyed learning about how the idea of a 24-hour food channel went from being almost universally rejected to the incredible business it is now. I had no idea that the original sets were right out of OSHA's nightmares, that the original hosts were... washed up TV stars, or that there were so many financial challenges from inside and outside.

Plus, while I was a huge fan of the network (I prefer the earlier programming of 5-10 years ago), I never really liked Rachel Ray or Sandra Lee. However, after reading more about their back stories, I have much more respect for how hard they've worked and where they came from. I also never realized how much Emeril and Bobby have done for the network, and it was refreshing to read about the people who worked/work so hard behind-the-scenes. Lastly, I realized that I have a tendency to read headlines and skim articles so this book did give a little more information about some of the Food Network scandals, namely the Paula Deen controversy.

My only criticism is that the book often jumped around without finishing its train of thought. I suppose this is a factor of writing about the wide range of shows and the huge number of events happening simultaneously. Nevertheless, it sometimes felt like the author introduced a character or show then moved to a different topic before completing the story.

Overall, the book was fun to read. I recommend it for fans of the network who are interested in the origins and development of the network. However, if you're hoping for a bunch of tell-alls or behind-the-scenes of the current shows (I was), this isn't the book for you.

Lyndsie says

I was so excited to get this from the library, because Food Network is big around my house. But this book wasn't what i really expected at all. I guess if you want to know about cable company execs and their conversations then this is the book for you. I guess I just wanted more of the shows and chefs I watch. I ended up reading about a third of the book before skimming and ultimately just using the index to look up what appealed. Disappointing for me. I did learn a few things but it turns out I would rather watch Food Network than read this very longwinded account about it.

Marianne Meyers says

So this book is marketed as a tell-all about the wild and crazy personalities and celebrity chefs at the Food Network. Really what it is is a history of the Food Network and the behind-the-scenes folks, the ones who made the decisions to hire/fire. What shows do you market? What works? Who works? Some scary descriptions of very dirty, barely usable test kitchens. Certain chefs come away shining, like Emeril (who is a REAL chef and knows what that means), and Mario, who learned how to adapt quickly by talking about all the differences in regional Italian cooking. Alton Brown is barely talked about other than the fact that he is unique and brilliant and very talented. Bobby Flay is an opportunist and that has worked for him, Tyler "Food 911" made the mistake of working with Applebees (for A LOT of money) and had to recover, Anthony Bourdain never sold out and was always himself. Paula Deen blew it by handling things remarkably badly, but we all know that. The folks who aren't really chefs and became stars are the ones that the Food Network went with much of the time, looking for younger, fresh-faced personalities as they changed their image. I stopped watching when there was no more Emeril or Mario, I really enjoyed them, and I continue to marvel

at Alton Brown. I really could care less about who were the executives when and why they made decisions the decisions they did. While there was a bit of dirt there wasn't as much as advertised, so I skimmed through most of the book to get to it.

Orsolya says

Cooking has always been a passion of mine. From purchasing unique ingredients and recipe creation, to presentation and currently compiling a cookbook; it relaxes me and obviously makes the tummies of those around me happy. I remember when the Food Network began (then called TVFN) and have watched it grow since its inception. Allen Salkin exposes the creation of the channel to its current status in "From Scratch: Inside the Tumultuous Billion Dollar World of the Food Network".

I was initially worried with "From Scratch" as Salkin's Preface (before his Prologue) contained two editing/grammar errors, questioning the credibility of his writing. However, this dissolved quickly as Salkin introduced his massive amount of research and insider information which makes "From Scratch" worth reading.

"From Scratch" is incredibly entertaining and yet informative on a whole other level. Combining investigative journalism, business, exposes, advertising/branding topics, some celebrity gossip, and never-before-heard developmental stories; Salkin reveals Food Network to both fans of the channel and simply those interested in television branding. In fact, "From Scratch" is not some raunchy tabloid of juicy chef gossip but is rather a business book focusing on the network itself (the book is much recommended for those interested in advertising). Even though "From Scratch" is not a spotlight on individual network "stars", it still manages to reveal personalities and behind-the-scenes information in a classy way, satisfying the gossip searchers. Again though, the main plot is the business end of things and will disappoint those readers expecting a sole celebrity focus. Yet, Salkin is a genius at not boring the reader with too much business and mixing the text up with lighter fare.

Salkin's writing contains incredible prose, intelligence, and accessibility; along with a slight hint of style and comedy. The pace is steady but builds almost like a fictional narrative. I have read many business exposes but "From Scratch" is incomparable and stands out on the crowded book shelves. "From Scratch" does suffer from some slower moments but this is not because of poor writing or content but rather because there is so much information, that sometimes a break is needed in order to process it all.

On a negative side, Salkin sometimes is too eager to tell *every single* detail regarding the Food Network, resulting in some choppiness and jumps in chronology. Also noticeable is a more-than-obvious focus on Emeril Lagasse. Yes, he was the channel's first star; but he overpopulates the pages. Despite these complaints, "From Scratch" is still strong and a joy to read.

One of the most striking features of "From Scratch" is that Salkin's writing is passionate about the subject but yet unbiased; and is therefore a perfect journalistic piece revealing various angles, figures, and views. Being both impressive and thorough; Salkin truly carries the book well. Salkin's main strength is bringing the Food Network alive. Those who are fans of the network will see events unravel simultaneously with how they remember it on air; while also learning about the corporate culture. "From Scratch" unveils the precise moment when the channel evolved from instructional cooking to its current food-based reality show programming (similar to when MTV stopped playing music).

In the last quarter of "From Scratch", Salkin begins to incorporate thought-provoking ideas of the psychological merit and 'foodie' effect of the channel. This flows naturally and eases into the study/expose, adding depth and richness (and actually makes sense). The conclusion of "From Scratch" was noticeably weaker than the preceding portions of the book while feeling rushed. Plus, it felt like Salkin was ending his manuscript when the Paula Deen debacle hit the media and therefore he re-grabbed his pen to insert the news resulting in a shuffled and unmemorable ending.

Despite the less attractive ending; "From Scratch" is remarkable with terrific writing, a clear and concise aim with mounds of backing research, and a well-paced, compelling story. Salkin is clearly a talented writer and "From Scratch" is recommended for foodies and all fans of the Food Network. You will never look at the channel the same again!

Laura says

This book was everything I expected it to be - and the bar was set pretty high. It chronicled the life of the Food Network (and Cooking Channel), giving behind-the-scenes looks at both the business and talent side.

At times, the business side could be a little dry. However, I thought it was critical it include this information, since it so deeply effected the talent side. But as someone who has watched the Network for most of it's life, it gave some insight into certain shows (like how Ina and Giada's shows were shot differently) that made sense to me.

On the personality side, it's not a full bio of every chef. There are a few paragraphs for the major talents, explaining their rise and how they came to be on the Network. There is some good dish here, though nothing unexpected. Obviously, if you want an in-depth look at a particular chef, most of them have their own books. I thought this was a good background. Ina Garten and Paula Deen come off pretty harsh here; that's not too surprising. The author doesn't editorialize too much, but it's difficult to stay neutral when covering such distinct personalities - which most of these chefs/cooks are.

If you like the Food Network - and millions do - this is a pretty interesting and entertaining look at why it's become so popular.

Ali says

Disjointed and unfocused, like the author couldn't decide whether he was writing an entertaining behind the scenes tell-all or a dry blow by blow of the Food Network's business decisions. Much of the book focused on things like shifting shares of the company and the struggle to get cable networks to carry the network, which might be interesting to business students or stock market junkies, but not the average Food Network viewer.

The cover of the book promised "big personalities and high drama" and featured photo's of the network's biggest stars, but actual stories about the chefs were relatively sparse. I wanted much more of segments like the brief one about a day in the life of Anne's show vs one of Rachael's, for example. They focused a fair amount on Emeril and his rising/waning stardom, which was somewhat interesting.

The writing style was very choppy and amateurish for someone with an apparently long writing career. Maybe his style is more suited to shorter column pieces. There were many instances in which an apparently unrelated anecdote was tacked on to the end of a chapter, as if he had gathered a bunch of them while researching the book and didn't want them to go to waste no matter how off topic they were. (Why end the book with Ina Garten visiting Bob Tuschman in the hospital and giving him a blanket? How does that tie the network's story together in any way? That they care about each other? Very odd choice.)

In the end, I learned a bit more about the network that I spent a lot of time watching for many years, but not really the aspects that I was most interested in.

Lynda says

I really enjoyed this book,

Jeff Peterson-davis says

I cannot fault the book for its focus on details that are fairly uninteresting to me -- early cable network distribution issues, corporate hirings and firings, management personnel, etc. The author may have different interests than mine. I was hoping to learn about the on-screen personalities and their backstories, stories of both the best episodes and the worst episodes of some of my favorite shows, some opportunities to laugh and cry with some of the stars, and to learn about how the network has evolved over the years. This just wasn't the book for that.

What I can fault the book for is a style of writing that is more appropriate for short newspaper reports or brief blog post than full-length book. Subject matter from paragraph to paragraph changes unexpectedly. Narratives are rarely complete stories. There is no cohesiveness within chapters nor any real sense of why there are chapter breaks at all. It reads more like a journalist's notes simply strung together rather than a book with an overall purpose, movement, and storytelling. Rather than develop themes, a plot, or characters, the writer puts into print scattered details in a somewhat chronological order without regard for creating a narrative flow. It leaves the reader bored, confused by unrelated details, and ultimately turning to write reviews in amazon that are not very flattering.

I hoped for so much more.

Lynn says

I bought this because I enjoy watching Food Network and thought there would be a lot of interesting behind the scenes information. Well, the first half of the book is filled with business related minutia regarding the start of Food Network and cable companies...a LOT about cable companies. More than I ever wanted to know. The book only started getting interesting in the last half to third, when the author started writing about the Food Network that we have all come to know and enjoy. This is not a book that I would recommend unless you want to learn how to start a niche cable channel. For Food Network fans: it's not what you expect. If you want to read it, borrow it and skip the first half of the book. Be prepared to skim a lot. :-)

Kate says

Things I learned while reading this book:

- The Food Network was conceived by a regular dude in New England who gets no credit or money.
- Emeril first started saying "Bam!" because his cameramen were falling asleep.
- One of the Food Network's first broadcasts was a Thanksgiving show that featured Robin Leach suggestively fisting a turkey.
- "Whoever says 'fuck' first at a meeting controls the meeting."
- TV executives get fired all the time and it is not a career-ender for them.
- "You don't get rich going to work, you get rich going to the mailbox."
- The concept of a 'rockstar' chef was apparently invented by Alice Cooper's agent, who was impressed by Roger Verge.
- The Food Network stopped being interesting after an executive from Lifetime took over. She has since left, but they can't get the zing back.

So, if you've read this review, I think I've saved you some time and you can skip the actual book. But if you do read it, don't miss the paragraph in the four-page acknowledgements section that the author devotes to thanking his yoga instructors.

Leigh says

Disclaimer: I have received an ARC copy of this book.

The book is a detailed look at the beginnings of what was then a radical idea: an entire cable channel devoted to food and cooking. The book profiles the determined and resourceful folk who created the Food Network and the many challenges they needed to overcome. There are plenty of interviews and some great stories as they experimented with ideas that might make the new channel successful. There are also detailed biographies of various Food Network stars such as Rachael Ray and Emeril Agasse.

The book is an interesting read and would be especially appealing to anyone in the TV business. It details what to do and what NOT to do if you are trying to create something both big and original. One minor flaw, the book was written before Paula Deens fell from grace and so it is somewhat out of date. There is mention of her diabetes drug endorsement but that was a minor stumble compared to what happened later. And it was fascinating to read how difficult it was to get Food Network started, you would think in hindsight that it was obvious there was (and is) a strong market for shows about food and cooking.

Sara says

Big personalities, high drama - the extraordinary behind the scenes story...

This is how Allen Salkin describes his book. It couldn't be further from the truth. This is not a book about the "big personalities" of Food Network, at least not the ones you know and love. This is not a book about the stars. This is not a book for a casual fan, or even a devoted fan who watches for the food. This book is probably not what you're expecting.

So what is *From Scratch*?

It's a laundry list of name drops. The author discusses, at length, who he spoke to when he was writing the book. He also lists who he briefly interviewed and who refused to speak with him. He will go into painstaking detail about who he talked to and when. This carries on throughout the book and crops up again in the very lengthy acknowledgements section at the end.

It's a biography of Emeril Lagasse. As far as the chefs go, Emeril is the main focus. We follow him from the day he was hired to the day he was fired. Not much is left to the imagination. Anecdotes about Emeril are injected into nearly every page, even when they don't fit. Yes, every Food Network fan knows who Emeril is, but that doesn't mean that his name needs to appear on every page of the book.

It's a "what not to do" for starting a business. Salkin goes into depth about how stupid the management was when Food Network started. At one point, staff members were found sleeping on the job and stealing petty cash. The management obviously didn't like that, so they installed cameras to obtain proof and take action. The staff didn't like it, so they got rid of the cameras. Clearly, no problems were solved.

It's an unorganized mess. Nothing is tied together. There are no transitions. When he's actually talking about the chefs, he jumps from Bobby Flay to Tyler Florence to Alton Brown to Ming Tsai and back again with absolutely no connections.

There's a lot wrong with this book. Salkin's insistence on using first names only (except, apparently, when it comes to Nigella Lawson) drove me crazy. It was especially confusing when he was writing about Paula Deen's sons, Bobby and Jamie, around the same time he had been writing about Bobby Flay and Jamie Oliver. He will describe what an executive was wearing in minute detail, from the way her hair was styled to the color of her nail polish to her choice of footwear, but he'll just gloss over that time when Rachael Ray accidentally set Emeril's set on fire. And the ending - Salkin writes a perfect conclusion to the book, then writes a good ten to fifteen pages about the most recent Paula Deen debacle, as if it happened so close to publication that he couldn't even be bothered to work it in to the story. Then there's a half-hearted, completely unsatisfying conclusion involving Ina Garten visiting Bob Tuschman in the hospital and Joe Langan eating pizza. I literally rolled my eyes upon reading the last page - that's how bad it was.

Nearly everything in this book is irrelevant. It could have been half the length without losing anything important. It's extremely dry reading, to the point where it was a struggle to knock out ten or fifteen pages a night. The only reason I'm giving it two stars is that I learned one good fact - Food Network was started by a regular guy who gets absolutely no credit and absolutely no profits.

I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Helen Dunn says

This is a completely uninspiring book - mostly It is a list of facts and name dropping with a couple of offset

quotes to liven things up. That said, I enjoyed reading it but only because I have been a loyal viewer since almost the beginning of the network.

If you know the TV personalities and their names and remember the old shows like "Ready Set Cook" and "Hot Off the Grill" and the rise (and fall) of "Emeril Live!" you may find it worthwhile.

I think it was really interesting to see how/why the focus of the network changed over the years and to see where on the spectrum my own tastes are.

Bottom line: good for hardcore, longtime Food Network viewers only and iffy even for them.
