

IMPOSSIBLE FANTASIES

Sports and cooking, viewed from the armchair

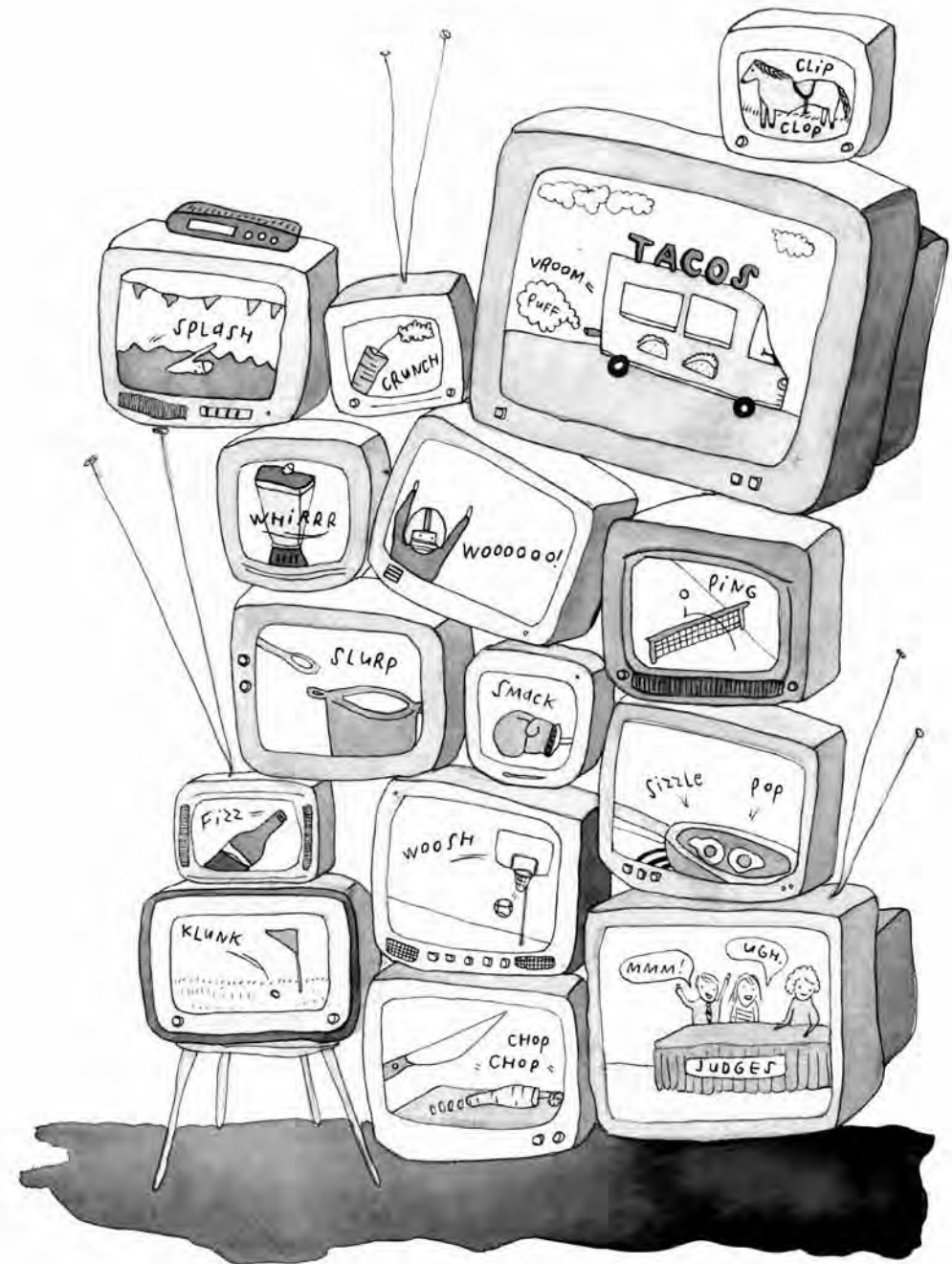
by Chris Jones

MY TV VIEWING HABITS consist almost entirely of two distinct genres: live sports and competitive food shows. Sure, there are surface similarities—there is usually some sort of manufactured pressure, some ticking clock; there are moments of genius and beauty but also calamitous failure; there is often vicious duplicity set against a backdrop of underlying brotherhood; and for some reason, at least on TV, most of the growling, tattooed participants in both football games and cook-offs are total assholes. (I don't believe all of you are assholes. Just most of you.) But the truth is, on some deeper level, I watch them for totally, totally different reasons.

I've played sports. I understand sports and their mechanics. I've talked to hundreds of athletes, and I like to think that I know what they're thinking and how they do what they do. I watch sports because watching sports makes me feel competent. It is a world in which I somehow feel as though I belong.

And that makes no sense. That particularly rarefied universe couldn't be farther removed from me. When I was younger, I subscribed to the usual male fantasy that if only I'd practiced more, if only my dad had pushed me a little harder, I could have been a professional athlete. After years of writing about sports, now I know: I never had a chance of being one of those guys. They are fundamentally different machines. And yet there I sit, nodding.

Cooks and cooking represent the opposite intellectual experience. I once lived in an apartment with two other guys for nearly





three years, and I made exactly one meal. Apart from the plate of slimy pasta I made on my first night there, I ate every single meal out. I am baffled by even the most basic act of applying heat to food. (Would that be toasting? Boiling? I have no idea.)

Just this morning, I waddled down to the hotel buffet and marveled at the waffle iron; I couldn't have been more impressed by an alien spacecraft. I took the prescribed cup of yellow goo—a completely inedible substance, as far as I can tell—and put it in this machine, and out came a fluffy, delicious waffle. I have no explanation for how that happened. I don't know what goes into waffle batter, and I don't know why making it hot transforms it into something so good. No joke, I have a better chance of explaining the physics of black holes than the alchemy of waffles.

And you, you assholes who can make waffles and all sorts of other tasty things out of oil and flocks of dead birds and maybe some kind of root vegetable? You are strange and glorious wizards.

You might think I'm making fun of you at this point, but I'm being completely sincere. When I watch sports, I sit back and revel in my understanding, in my perceived (and wrong-headed) closeness to the participants. When I watch food shows, I sit there mystified and salivating, like a dog that doesn't understand how his bowl keeps getting magically filled. And even though I have a far, far greater chance of becoming a decent cook than I do of becoming even a remotely passable athlete—every house has a kitchen, including mine for some reason—I am wedded to the illusion that hitting a home run makes perfect sense, and turning an octopus into something not only edible but amazing is the product of an elusive witchcraft.

We all need our impossible fantasies.

I watch you because I will never be you. 🍷

Chris Jones is a writer for *Esquire* and the winner of two National Magazine Awards.

ILLUSTRATION, PAGE 3 by Emily Wallace.

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