

Camera ready

Thanks to Canadian culinary programs, such chefs as Mark McEwan (Bymark, North 44°) and Guy Rubino (Rain, Zoom) are a red-hot TV commodity

ON A SATURDAY MORNING LAST SUMMER, as I inched along with the crowds in the St. Lawrence Market, fingers ribbed red and white with the weight of shopping bags, I turned a corner by the fish stalls and ran into Michael and Guy Rubino, complete with their television crew.

Chatting with the Rubino brothers is always a pleasure. They invariably have a bouquet of fascinating and intensely stressful projects in hand, but still manage to view life's absurdities with a wry detachment. I had eaten at Rain a couple of weeks earlier and wanted to ask how Guy could be putting out the best food of his career while he and his brother were simultaneously running their other place, Zoom; conducting a lawsuit with the Hôtel Le Germain; and in the midst of production of a new television series called *Made to Order*. But the camera was rolling, so instead we talked about shopping. I had just bought some extraordinary raw-milk cheeses made by a New Brunswick dairy called La Bergerie aux Quatre Vents; Guy was looking (unsuccessfully) for live baby eels to be used in tomorrow's episode.

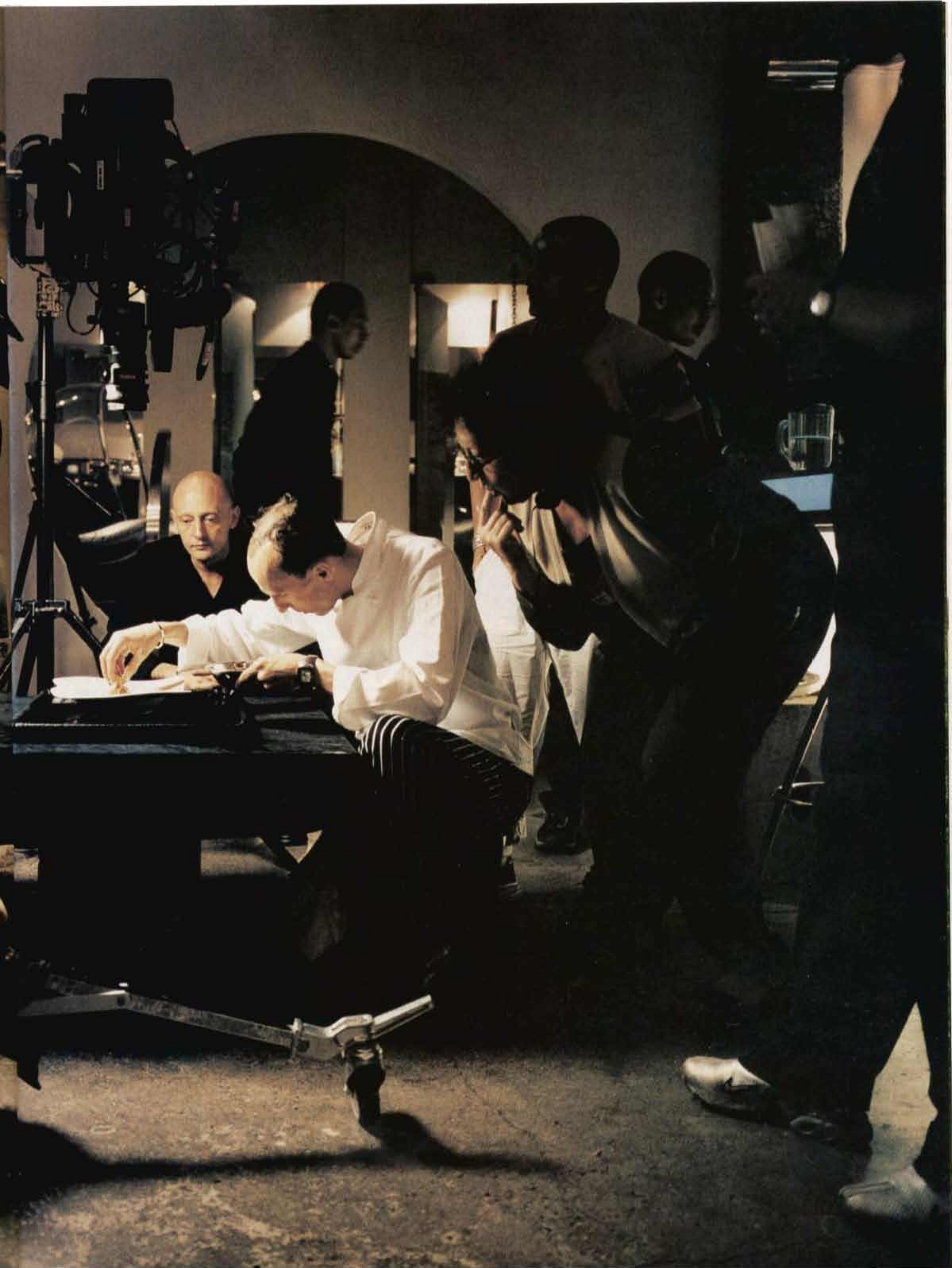
"And you're filming the quest," I observed, and instantly wished I hadn't. I had probably spoiled everything by acknowledging the presence of the camera, ruined the make-believe of the moment. "I shouldn't have said that," I gasped, compounding the sin.

"Don't worry about it," said Michael, smiling. "Come to Rain tomorrow at six, and you can be in the show."

I hastened home with my cheese, hurried along by a sudden, personal interest in Canadian culinary television, and also by the realization that I knew nothing at all of the subject. I'm not a great TV fan. I watch hockey and baseball but very little else—certainly not cooking shows. I've always felt the point of food is to eat it, not look at it on TV. Videotapes sent to me from time to time by Food Network Canada languish unplayed in a cupboard. The

capering antics of Emeril leave me cold. That said, you'd have to be totally unplugged not to know that chefs in the past three years have become a red-hot TV commodity. It's hard to think of a Toronto toque who hasn't done telly time. Even such notoriously private men as Keith Froggett of Scaramouche and Chris McDonald of Avalon have been glimpsed in front of the cameras. Determined to challenge my ignorance, I dug out the stack of videotapes and settled down to watch.

Fast-forward eight or nine hours. Cut to me, dazed, on the sofa. Cue montage of images. Michael Bonacini in *Cook Like a Chef*, sitting on a spotlighted stool in a darkened studio as if he were about to sing a ballad. Instead he speaks of his love and admiration for eggs. Anna Olson in *Sugar*, looking sharp in pink and a cloud of cocoa. Christine Cushing *Live*, savvy, a little bit edgy, remembering to find a smile for even the most bizarre phone-in questions. Donna Doohar on *The Cookworks*, endlessly patient with her sextets of unskilled but camera-ready students. Mark McEwan sharing the creation of Byemark with *Opening Soon*, a show that has nothing to do with food, everything to do with anxiety. *Restaurant*, an American reality series on Global TV, set in a genuine Manhattan eatery called Rocco's, where every single person from owner to dishwasher is so vain, pretentious and thoroughly unpleasant as to stretch credulity. No restaurant so dysfunctional, hemorrhaging money through its own ineptitude, could possibly hope to survive (but survive it does, to this day, making me think the conflict may have been engineered for the cameras). And finally back to Bonacini, at the stove this time, cooking and talking and thanking his two assistants with the sort of elaborate good manners never heard in a professional kitchen, while black-clad men with cameras peer over his shoulder and a floor manager counts down the seconds, all in plain view.



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Eat me. Drink me. The overwhelming impression is of Alice through a dozen looking glasses—layer upon voyeuristic layer—a chef's hands observed by a camera that is seen by another camera, points of view flipping back and forth at the whim of a man in a booth, edited by an editor, maybe watched by a studio audience who watch themselves on a monitor as I watch them as my cat over there on the piano stool watches me watching it all. The pastry in the chef's hands seems a very long way away.

How clean food writing feels by comparison, how free of perceptual conundrums. Even if I pry apart these printed words for a moment, gentle reader, and show you myself sitting at a desk on August 3, typing a sentence you won't see for many weeks, wondering if my editor will

they will be motivated to watch the show again next week."

It sounds so contrived—the scripted surprise, the carefully rehearsed ad libs—but that's only because it is. Acting natural calls for quite a performance, even for someone as smooth and fluent as Michael Bonacini, widely hailed by television's nabobs as one of gastronomy's few "naturals." "I get butterflies whenever I have to speak in public," he admits, "even when I'm talking to the staff at one of our restaurants. But it's probably a good thing. Keeps me on my toes." Far from being a natural fit for a chef, the experience of cooking in a studio kitchen is different in every conceivable way from the reality of a restaurant, he finds. "In a restaurant, I have all the support of sous-chefs, the whole brigade, and we're cooking things we have cooked many times before. On

ACTING NATURALLY ON CAMERA CALLS FOR QUITE A PERFORMANCE, EVEN FOR SOMEONE AS SMOOTH AND FLUENT AS MICHAEL BONACINI, WIDELY HAILED BY TV'S NABOBS AS ONE OF GASTRONOMY'S FEW NATURALS

want to cut this whole self-conscious paragraph, I think we can agree that print journalism doesn't come close to the innate artifice of reality television.

But let's push aside that half-baked idea and bring out another observation that I prepared earlier. We can marvel at how much talent is out there and how inventive the medium has become, how much more creative since the days of the *Galloping Gourmet*, when they just pointed a camera and let the guy cook—but that may be missing the point. Graham Kerr's driving force was precisely the same fuel that powers today's more evolved cheffy vehicles: the exaggerated enthusiasm of the presenter.

"I call it the PEF principal," says Lou Ekus, an American consultant who has carved out a niche as a coach for chefs on television, first on the U.S. Food Network, more recently on Canada's. "That stands for passion, energy and fun." Ekus polishes new talent, teaching chefs how to break their professional habit of working intently, head down and silent, how they can make sure the food is always visible to the camera, how to find words that are more vivid and evocative than "delicious" or "tasty." Above all, he strives to imbue his charges with the precepts of PEF: "I can show each trainee exactly where the passion, energy and fun reside in their segment—where they can insert each of those things into the show. Passion is the ultimate motivational force for human beings. It is also contagious. If the viewers can catch the passion from the presenter,

television, you generally have only one kick at the can."

"There is one thing that's the same," says Anna Olson. "The adrenalin rush of doing a show is the same rush you get after a busy night's service—and that feeling of having survived, of success and exhaustion at the same time when you come down at the end."

Is that the reason so many chefs go on television? The danger? The thrill? It certainly isn't the money. Even a seasoned performer like Bonacini is unpaid for his live appearances on Citytv and receives what he describes as "peanuts" for *Cook Like a Chef*.

"I think any chef or restaurateur will tell you that they do it so that people will be coming pouring into their restaurant," he explains, "and my TV work has been good for me personally and for the company. Also, I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy those times when someone taps you on the shoulder and says, 'Aren't you Michael Bonacini? I've seen you on TV.'"

Ah, yes, the allure of celebrity. Even the ink-stained wretches of the food world's print media are invited from time to time to sit down in front of the cameras and expound on some trend or other. A fee is rarely, if ever, offered. Producers simply assume that everyone longs to be on TV and will be grateful for the opportunity.

There is certainly no sign of the chef pool drying up for Food Network Canada. I had always seen the company as some kind of insatiable leviathan, sucking an endless stream of chefs from their kitch-

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ens and into the studio. "It's actually the other way around," says Karen Gelbart, Food Network Canada's vice-president of programming. "We are deluged with interest on the part of chefs and independent producers, but we have this happy dilemma of having so many successful programs we want to renew that we have to be strategic. We can only choose five or six new stars a year, if that. There are several ways it can happen. Sometimes we think of a concept for a show and then have a casting call, bringing in dozens of chefs, asking them to prepare a recipe and seeing how they perform. That's how we found Anna Olson, for example. She came in with a fresh take on tarte tatin. She was clear, charming; she had the credentials; she made me, up in the booth, feel 'I could make that.'"

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Anna Olson also remembers the audition: "I had a cold that day and virtually no voice. I had done the same recipe earlier in the afternoon for a class at the Good Earth Cooking School, so that was a great rehearsal; then I drove in to Toronto. I was alone in the studio, talking to the camera—an odd feeling."

"We can create celebrities," says Gelbart. "Or sometimes we start with a star and create a show around him or her."

Occasionally, the network is approached by an independent with a whole series of shows already shot, edited and in the can. That was the case with Michael Stadtländer's 2002 series, *Stadtländer: Adventures in Dining*. The chef saw television as a way of sharing his dramatic, eco-friendly culinary vision with a much wider audience. His own camera crew followed him for years, at Eigensinn Farm and across Canada in his converted school bus, filming everything, then editing it into a series with Food Network Canada. "I'm so glad we did it that way," he told me once. "If we had pre-sold the idea, they would have said, 'Do this, don't do that,' and it would have ended up as some kind of Mickey Mouse thing. But they didn't want the bus trip, even though there was some amazing footage, people getting lost in the forest, crying because they were afraid of bears, cooking road-kill, doing a six-course dinner on a canoe route in Temagami. They wouldn't even look at it. TV is nothing like gastronomy or the restaurant business—or real life. It's 'TV World,' you know? They assume

the audience is stupid, and so you have to become stupid, too."

Harsh words, and I'm not sure I agree—not totally. I have a feeling that the Rubinos' new show will be as smart and funny as they are themselves. Each episode is filmed at Rain, and also around town on shopping expeditions and other ancillary missions; and each one has a plot, a particular challenge offered to the restaurant by a customer. When we met at the market, Michael had outlined the storyline of the morrow, a challenge based on an actual event. It seems Meg Ryan's minder once called Rain to book a table for the star and her entourage. Ms. Ryan, he explained, liked to eat many different dishes, but each one had to be very small—somewhere between an ounce and an ounce and a half in weight. If the kitchen wanted to put several of these

mouthfuls on the same plate, that was fine, but there had to be an odd number of them: one or three or even five, perhaps, on the plate, but never two or four.

The evening had turned out well, but when Michael called Meg Ryan a year later to ask if she wanted to play herself in *Made to Order's* dramatization of the occasion, she had not returned his calls. Luckily, Toronto's own comedic diva, Carla Collins, agreed to step in, appearing as Carla Collins and volunteering to bring an entourage of her own. It was all going to be filmed on the Sunday night, with the kitchen working as usual and the restaurant full of invited friends and acquaintances (myself among them) doubling as the normal Rain clientele.

There was a time in my life when I made a small living as an extra in films and television commercials: a smocked peasant in a British Airways ad, an unpopular monk in a movie of Brecht's *Galileo*, a singing redneck farm boy in the straight-to-video sequel to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*—carefree long-ago days of coarse acting and bacon-and-ketchup sandwiches catered from a truck. Tonight's dinner promised much more.

The evening sun was shining as I strolled down Mercer Street. I was idly asking myself what might happen if the restaurant critic from *NOW* magazine were ever to read this column. He once accused me of accepting a free meal at Rain, and now here I was, about to dine as a guest of the Rubinos. Life imitating libel.

Just across the road from my desti-

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nation, the soaring windows of the Hôtel Le Germain's restaurant space were still lined with brown paper. Its owners had signed an astonishingly generous 20-year contract with the Rubinos, by which the brothers would build and operate a restaurant and a bar in the hotel with complete control over all food services. At the 11th hour, the hoteliers changed their minds and started to cast about for other tenants. It all ended up in court. Waiting out on the sidewalk while the crew filmed a scene in Rain's lobby, Michael Rubino was wreathed in smiles. He had just heard that the judge had ruled in his and Guy's favour. They could go ahead with the hotel project after all.

We went inside, stepping over cables and tracks. Producer Henry Less had assembled enough equipment to shoot a prime-time movie. Michael explained that every weekend of the summer has been taken up with the project: Friday establishing the culinary *mise en place* for the filming, Saturday searching for ingredients, Sunday morning and afternoon filming the cooking in Rain's kitchen, Sunday night the actual event. Meanwhile, Rain has been open as usual on Friday and Saturday nights. On Monday mornings, Guy goes down to Alliance Atlantis, looking at rushes and discussing the editing. Busy times for the Rubinos.

So the evening progressed. We were all called to table just before Carla Collins and her party arrived; then dinner began. In many respects, it was no different from any evening at Rain—the regular staff in attendance, as courteous and efficient as ever, the food delicious, the cameras so discreet we quickly forgot they were there. Playing a man having dinner at a restaurant was, frankly, not much of a stretch. I wondered how it would all appear on this semi-reality show, what percentage of the experience the camera could hope to pick up. The things I remembered next day—the cold, smooth weight of my martini, the myriad aromas as the elaborately plated morsels were brought to the table, the soft and crisp textures of the food, the harmony of flavours, the surrender of the flesh as I bit into a tender octopus ceviche, the whole hugely complex sensory adventure known as eating—cannot be conveyed by television. Then again, at least you can see what the chef has achieved—the glossy surface of a plump shrimp, the colours, the architecture of the presentation—and you can hear the sound of the sizzle. A lot more immediacy than is offered by, say, a magazine article. Could it be I'm in the wrong business? ■