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Perhaps unfounded, perhaps unfair but I think that it is time for a little a rant. As we head into summer it seems like all the networks are proclaiming winners and announcing more to come. It could be my own fault. It most probably is my own fault. But I don't get it. What is this strange, alternative universe commonly known as reality TV? And more important, how do these shows manage to reel in huge audiences? Tell me, what's the appeal? As far as I can figure, reality television comes in a couple of flavors:

First there are the contests. Attractive and sometimes not-so-attractive people fight for survival on desert islands, race around the world, wheel and deal and sing their hearts out. I don't deny that at least some these contests require skill or talent or guts. Call me crazy but I have no interest in watching people eat bugs, scheme and connive. The whole idea of the cattle calls also known as The Bachelor and The Bachelorette makes me cringe.

Okay, I confess to taking a peak or two at American Idol but I soon lost interest. There was too much chatter and not enough singing. And I admit to tuning in The Apprentice for a few seasons. It didn't take long before the backstabbing and The Donald's pontifications got on my nerves.

And then there are the day-in-the-life shows. Cameras follow people around for weeks on end. While these people are more or less like you, me and the neighbors, they've got something to set them apart. What's that something? A brilliant mind? An incredible talent. Hardly. More often than not, it's just a little bit of melo- to go with life's daily drama.

Instead of having the average two-point-one children, reality television families have eight or ten or nineteen. Or mom is a teenager. Or it's multigenerational family with a grandparent who mutters vaguely funny witticisms and a cousin who is as dumb as a stone. In some cases, the program showcases an unusual family business and their colorful clients. In others, an abundance of children or cluelessness creates enough pandemonium to keep the show on the air for a couple of years.

Not all day-in-the-life shows follow families. Some find a group of friends or throw a bunch of strangers together. Perhaps you've seen the housewives with more money than sense and the twenty-somethings with no sense at all. Conflict, real, imagined or invented, is stirred into the pot along with shots of tequila or bottles of champagne. Sooner or later, usually sooner, shouts erupt and tears flow. If the sponsors are lucky, a full blown brawl ensues

Both the contests and the day-in-the-life programs have a special variation. Instead of people that look very much like you, me and the family next door, the participants are celebrities. Or, more likely, they used to be celebrities with high hopes for a second chance at fame. More than a few have earned their notoriety on other reality shows. Who could have guessed that reality television could be a career choice and even make you a star?

So with apologies to devoted fans and the various networks, I will continue to pass on reality television. I plan to spend my summer evenings watching the moon come over the mountain and the loons swim on Pleasant Lake.

That's the end of my rant. Bon appétit!



Orzo & Grilled Asparagus Salad

Perfect with grilled fish, bring this pasta salad to your next beach cookout. Watch the loons, count the stars and enjoy!

Serves 6-8

Lemon Vinaigrette (recipe follows)

8 ounces orzo pasta

8 ounces feta cheese, crumbled

1/2 medium red onion, finely chopped

Grated zest of 1 lemon

1 1/2 pounds asparagus, trimmed

1/2 European cucumber, peeled, seeded and chopped

1 tablespoon fresh thyme

1/4 cup pine nuts or chopped walnuts, toasted

Make the vinaigrette – recipe follows.

Preheat a charcoal or gas grill to medium-high.

Cook the pasta according to package directions, less 1 minute. Drain well and put the warm pasta in a large bowl, add the feta, onion, lemon zest and enough vinaigrette to coat and gently toss to combine. Tossing a few times, cool the pasta to room temperature.

Meanwhile, put the asparagus in a large flat dish, drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with salt and pepper and toss to evenly coat.

Arrange the asparagus on the grill and cook for 1-3 minutes. Don't overcook, the asparagus should be tender-crisp. Cool to room temperature and cut into bite-sized pieces.

When orzo and asparagus have cooled, add the asparagus, cucumber, thyme and pine nuts to the pasta and gently toss to combine. If the pasta seems dry, add more vinaigrette and toss again. Cover and refrigerate for a few hours to combine the flavors. Remove from the refrigerator about 45 minutes before serving and serve at room temperature.

Lemon Vinaigrette

2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

2 garlic cloves

1 teaspoon anchovy paste

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Extra-virgin olive oil

Put the lemon juice, vinegar, garlic and anchovy paste in a blender, season with salt and pepper and process to combine. With the motor running, slowly add olive oil to taste and continue processing until the vinaigrette is thick and well combined.

