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COOKING SHOWS AND HEALTHY RECIPES

Reality Bites

Our favorite TV chefs cook up healthy meals even a rookie can master

Celeste Perron

Some of the most-hyped cooking-show hosts don't give a Swedish meatball if their recipes are loaded with fat or nearly impossible to duplicate (that's right, Paula Deen, we're talking about your 16-ingredient, 2-hour cinnamon rolls). And that's fine if you're watching purely for entertainment. But if you're hungry for tips on cooking better, faster, and healthier, you need to tune in to a *WH*-approved food guru.

To find kitchen role models who won't make you fat or drive you crazy, we sat through countless hours of recipe-centric TV and rated each show based on how nutritious the ingredients were (we looked for lean meats, healthy fats, and lots of fresh produce), how easy the recipes were to make (no weird tools or advanced techniques), and how much fun the show was to watch (it is TV, after all). The following shows stood out in every category, but the better a show was, the more stars we gave it (four being tops). Whether you're a dedicated foodie or a culinary virgin, here's what to TIVO.

A Lyon in the Kitchen - Discovery Health

Nathan Lyon, a Los Angeles-based chef, farmers' market fanatic, and 2006 finalist on *The Next Food Network Star*, is on a mission to get viewers to use seasonal, organic, locally grown ingredients (don't worry, his recipes will taste just as good if you shop at a normal grocery store). We love his high-energy vibe -- those muscular arms and pretty eyes don't hurt, either.

Catchphrase "Great food starts fresh."**Why it's worthy** Lyon starts each show at a California farmers' market or specialty shop, giving tips on how to find the freshest herbs and produce. His ingredients of choice can leave your wallet a little lighter, but Lyon's other motto is "Get the good stuff. You're worth it."

Afterward, he takes it all home and guides viewers through recipes that, though easy, often have one too many steps. Counting calories isn't his thing, but his all-natural meals are free of chemicals and additives. And he's too in love with fresh food to drown it in fattening sauces.

Typical recipes Spice-rubbed turkey breast with maple-root vegetables; warm tri-beet salad with hand-torn croutons**Takeaway tip** Examine the bottoms of cauliflower and broccoli for dry cracks or brown spots -- two signs that the veggies are going bad.

RATINGS

**** good-for-you factor

** yes, you can make it

*** spills & thrills

Healthy Appetite with Ellie Krieger - Food Network

Krieger, a no-nonsense nutritionist, will remind you of your ninth-grade health teacher: perky and eager to share her passion for vitamins and fiber.

Catchphrase "Eating healthy can be hard when you're juggling everyday life."**Why it's worthy** Krieger's dishes taste so rich (think peach French toast and warm spinach-and-artichoke dip), you'll forget you ever lusted for a Big Mac. She keeps it simple (one recent show focused on five-ingredient recipes) but doesn't rely on stuff from jars and bags to save steps. Some of her advice is a bit too basic ("Fish is not only good for you, it's delicious"), but she'll usually follow up a clunker with a totally surprising tip that will help you save calories and boost nutrients (one good example: steam veggies whole or in large pieces to retain the most vitamins and minerals).**Typical recipes** Saffron chicken; boiled lemon and green bean salad; snow pea, scallion, and radish salad**Takeaway tip** Use soft goat cheese in place of standard cow's-milk cheeses -- it has one third less fat.

RATINGS

*** good-for-you factor

*** yes, you can make it

** spills & thrills

Healthy Flavors - PBS

Down-to-earth, practical chef Jim Coleman is a poster boy for the belly-?flattening perks of healthy eating: He lost an impressive 45 pounds after learning to lighten up his cooking style. For this popular PBS show, he teams up with the American Dietetic Association to put together low-cal, low-fat, nutrient-dense meals that will still satisfy sophisticated foodies. (He also has a weekly radio show called *A Chef's Table* that's downloadable at audible.com.)

Catchphrase "The best way to fight heart disease and diabetes is to go on the offensive."**Why it's worthy** Now *this* is a healthy-cooking show. But, like so many other PBS endeavors, it can get weighed down by too much information -- Coleman loves to explain why every single ingredient and technique he uses will help keep you out of the doctor's office.Thank God he shakes things up from time to time with a few random food factoids (like explaining the etymology of *shitake*, describing it as "tree mushroom"). As you'd expect, Coleman's dietician-sanctioned dishes are packed with whole grains, lean protein, and high-fiber veggies, so they definitely won't leave you hungry. They're also easy to make, and the subtle, natural flavors taste far richer than you'd expect.**Typical recipes** Chicken breasts stuffed with apples and bulgur; whole-wheat linguine with walnut-spinach pesto; grilled tuna and cannellini-bean salad**Takeaway tip** When making pie filling (like chocolate mousse), replace eggs with pre-whipped silken tofu to save on saturated fat and cholesterol.

RATINGS

**** good-for-you factor
 *** yes, you can make it
 * spills & thrills

Quick Fix Meals with Robin Miller - Food Network

The Energizer Bunny-esque Miller is someone who could train for a marathon, manage a mutual fund, volunteer at a soup kitchen, and cook for her kids.

Catchphrase "I've got strategies for getting weeknight meals to the table--fast."

Why it's worthy Aiming her show at superwomen everywhere, Miller strives for healthy eating and efficiency, using carefully chosen packaged ingredients--sliced beets from a jar, frozen peas, dried mushrooms--to save time and money. Though she can seem high-strung, her cooking confidence is contagious. Watch her make a mouthwatering reduced-fat spaghetti carbonara in minutes, and you'll want to scurry to the kitchen.

Typical recipes Curried butternut squash soup; wild mushrooms with sage; vegetarian fricassee

Takeaway tip After you cook meat, let it rest for 10 minutes before slicing or the juices will rush out and you'll lose flavor.

RATINGS

*** good-for-you factor
 **** yes, you can make it
 ** spills & thrills

Simply Delicioso - Food Network

Colombian-born Ingrid Hoffmann combines South American cuisine with a large helping of party-girl attitude.

Catchphrase "If I can do it, you can do it!"

Why it's worthy Some call this domestic goddess the Latin American Martha Stewart, but we think otherwise: Can you imagine Martha serving rum Jell-O shots in place of dessert? Hoffmann wears retro prints, uses *baby* as an all-purpose noun (on salad dressing: "Let's shake this baby up"), and gives nearly as much airtime to mixing drinks as to prepping food. Many of the simple dishes she prepares combine healthy ingredients (arugula, avocado, and fennel salad; fish tacos with salsa), and she usually kicks up the flavor with fruit and spices instead of fat.

Typical recipes Spicy scallop ceviche; mango, jicama, and radish salad with peanut dressing

Takeaway tip Use ground turkey instead of ground beef to save calories -- just add extra seasoning.

RATINGS

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Just Cook This - Discovery Health

With his frat-boy-turned-suburban-dad persona, Sam Zien can help any kitchen newbie learn how to cook.

Catchphrase "I don't want to spend hours in the kitchen making really complicated stuff -- that's not how I roll."

Why it's worthy Zien's guy-next-door shtick is charming, not phony. He's low-key and spontaneous (he'll ask the cameraman to test the food), yet his meals plate up pretty enough to serve at a holiday party. Though he doesn't make "diet food," he does address the issue of calories and cholesterol, offering healthier versions of fattening faves (he slims down his beloved "fat-boy spicy-sausage pasta" by using nonfat evaporated milk and whole-wheat pasta).

Typical recipes Gazpacho; vanilla-pudding cr me br lee

Takeaway tip Rely on garlic and red-pepper flakes to pump up the taste when cutting out fat.

RATINGS

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<!--pagebreak>Take Home Chef - TLC

Towering, bleached-blond Aussie Curtis Stone ambushes strangers in the supermarket and convinces them to take him home. Between his accent, his blinding smile, and his promise to "chef up" a delicious meal, they can't resist.

Catchphrase "We'll come up with a menu, I'll pay for the food, then we'll cook a beautiful dinner together."

Why it's worthy Yes, the gimmick factor is through the roof, but Stone's passion for impromptu dinner parties is inspiring (you'll be planning a get-together within minutes). His special-occasion meals use seasonal ingredients, and they're relatively low-fat and surprisingly easy, considering they look and taste so high-end -- marinated skirt steak and ginger-poached striped bass are faves. (Note: His ingredients can be pricey -- and Stone's not picking up the tab for you.) He whips up a multicourse meal in limited time, so he usually has a few dishes going at once, but things never feel too frantic to keep up.

Typical recipes Spinach-and-ricotta ravioli with porcini; grilled pineapple skewers with coconut caramel sauce

Takeaway tip Instead of slaving over a gooey dessert, serve artisanal cheese and fruit after dinner.

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Simply Ming - American Public Television

Ming Tsai is an Asian-American chef from Dayton, Ohio, who grew up helping his parents cook in their Chinese restaurant. He later got an engineering degree from Yale University, spent a summer at Le Cordon Bleu culinary school, and worked in restaurants in Paris and Osaka. His specialty: sauces that work with everything.

Catchphrase "Successful East-West cooking needs to harmoniously combine two distinct culinary approaches."

Why it's worthy Easygoing Tsai is all about flexibility. In each show, he often highlights a typically low-fat, low-cal sauce, rub, or vinaigrette (recent examples: spicy almond sauce, garlic-ginger-soy syrup, and cranberry-lemongrass sauce) that will add exotic flavor to anything you have in your fridge, from chicken breasts to salmon fillets. For added fun, celebrity chefs like Ted Allen and Todd English stop by to combine their favorite ingredients with Tsai's fusion cooking techniques. For beginners, Tsai shares techniques the pros use to mince

garlic, julienne leeks, slice onions...

Typical recipes Seared scallops with maitake-ginger-garlic cream; Kaffir lime-avocado pur?

Takeaway tip For perfect seared scallops, make sure they're dry (blot with paper towels) and the oil is super-hot.

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