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I Can't Believe I Ate the Whole Thing!

Adam Richman takes a seat in the dining room of Jethro's Barbeque in Des Moines, Iowa, to take on his next extreme eating challenge. With the crowd cheering Richman on, a waiter carries out his newest culinary nemesis: the Adam Emmenecker challenge, named for one of Drake University's star basketball players during the 2008 season. Richman has fifteen minutes to eat a five-pound sandwich stacked with a deep-fried pork tenderloin, a hearty burger patty, slices of beef brisket, bacon, buffalo chicken strips, and blocks of deep-fried cheese, all smothered in molten cheese sauce. The sandwich stands just shy of a foot high and is so stuffed that it has to be held together with two wooden skewers. It's intimidating, but I've seen Richman tackle more imposing challenges on his hit series "Man v. Food." Yet despite his best efforts and the encouragement of the crowd, he falls short, like he has in many previous challenges. But his losses don't deter him from his cross-country quest for culinary greatness.

Every week, fans like me tune in to watch Richman attempt outrageous eating feats. Some of them are a kid's dream come true, like a fifteen milkshake challenge and an eight-scoop sundae called "The Kitchen Sink," which is literally served in a bowl that looks like a kitchen sink. Some are almost cruel, like a big bowl of super-spicy curry and face-numbing chicken wings. And some are just plain stupid, like a seventy-two ounce steak with sides and a twelve-egg omelet with hash browns and toast. It's foolish. It's gluttonous. It's disgusting. And I can't get enough of it. Eating

has become a spectacle in this country, and "Man v. Food" is one of the more extreme examples of this phenomenon.

Our standards of "normal" servings of food have reached obscene proportions, and we have probably all experienced this in some way. Many times I have received a small soft drink from fast food restaurants and have had to double-check my receipt to make sure that I didn't get a medium by mistake. I (stupidly) promised one of my friends that I would someday eat one of Kentucky Fried Chicken's already infamous Double Down sandwiches, which consists of cheese, bacon, and sauce stuffed between two grilled or fried chicken breasts. I have yet to follow through on my promise; maybe by the time I get around to it, KFC will have discontinued the item. And I know it's not good for me, but I love digging into Chipotle's overstuffed burritos, bursting at the seams with meat, beans, rice, and cheese. In response to the out-of-control portion sizes and calorie counts of our meals, countless diet regimes have sprung up, and doctors are constantly warning us of the dangers of eating too much. Restaurants have added menu items with less fat and sodium to accommodate the more health-conscious among us. But many restaurants ignore doctors' warnings; in fact, they actually celebrate our love of huge portions and high-calorie helpings. For example, the much-criticized Heart Attack Grill allows patrons who weigh over 350 pounds to eat for free. Their menu features items like Triple Bypass Burgers, fries cooked in pure lard, and milkshakes made with butter fat. And every town seems to have that pig-out spot that visitors and locals just have to try. There's no denying that our love of big food is growing, and the trend of extreme eating has spread, thanks to the magic of television.

The Travel Channel, the home network of "Man v. Food," has a few shows that allow viewers to enjoy gastronomic adventures from their living rooms. One series, called "Food Paradise," searches for the best places across the country to pig out on favorites like ice cream, burgers, hot dogs, steaks, and pizza. This show features a few places similar to the spots that Adam Richman visits on his series, places that dish up outrageous portions as challenges for hungry patrons. Even the Food Network, a channel that I've always associated with the preparation of food, has jumped on the extreme eating bandwagon. I would think that the satisfaction of cooking a great dish would outweigh the satisfaction of eating a huge portion of food, but that hasn't stopped the channel from adding shows like "Outrageous Food" and "Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives" that showcase unique and over-the-top dishes. In one episode of "Outrageous Food," host Tom Pizzica visited a restaurant that dishes up a breakfast dish so massive that

it has to be served on a pizza tray instead of a plate. It consists of mounds of hash browns, at least six eggs, every breakfast meat you can think of, a chicken-fried steak, two biscuits, ladles of country gravy, and fistfuls of shredded cheese that come together to create the Mount Everest of breakfast dishes, unconquerable by most people who try to scale its heights.

I am often dumbstruck by these celebrations of excess and glorifications of gluttony. What could be motivating those people to eat so much? Much of the time, the prize for such challenges is something small like a t-shirt and a picture on the restaurant's wall of fame. Sometimes I catch myself thinking, "You moron, why would you do that to yourself for a stupid t-shirt?" But I might have an answer to why shows like "Man v. Food" have become popular and why many Americans feel compelled to eat so much at restaurants, and it's quite simple. You have probably heard many people use the excuse "because I can" when asked why they did something, and I think that's why people choose to go all out when it comes to food. "Because I can." It's not a very good reason, but it works. Sometimes, we don't need a reason other than just being able to say that we finished that plate of pasta or that sandwich the size of our face. It's about bragging rights, personal glory, and being able to point to your smiling face on the wall of fame to say, "See that? That's me. I beat that challenge."

The trend seems very fitting for America. Americans like big things: big TVs, big trucks, big houses, and everything in between. Of course, we don't *need* everything to be super-sized, but so what? Why drive a little fuel-efficient Toyota when you can drive a big Hummer? Why settle for a two-bedroom, two-bathroom flat when you can live in three-story home with way more bedrooms than you'll ever need? We pride ourselves not just on the big, but the unnecessary; we buy things for the sheer pleasure of owning them. Do you *really* need an iPad, or do you just want to be able to say that you own an iPad? I think the same can be said about food. Of course we don't need seven breakfast tacos or four pounds of steak to satisfy our hunger, but if it's being offered to us, why not try it? It might require us to pay more than we normally would for a meal, and it may put us in a food coma for the rest of the day, but if it's there, we might as well go for it. Why? Because this is America, the land of freedom and of big things, and that's often the only reason we need.

Of course, not all of us have iron stomachs or the courage to eat mountains of food, and I think that is a part of why eating shows like "Man v. Food" have become popular. Just as some of us get caught up in the spectacle and competition of sports and live vicariously through our favorite athletes, people like me enjoy

watching others stuff their faces and wishing that they had the stomach capacity to do the same. We like competition. And we like food. We cheer for our favorite team during a football game or our favorite athlete during the Olympics because we want them to win. Why not cheer on someone who is trying to take down an entire three-foot pizza by himself? I'll admit, it makes more sense for someone to idolize an athlete or a celebrity, but food, a non-living, impersonal force, has a strong hold in not only our culture, but across the world.

Food is powerful. It brings us together. Preparing it and eating it gives us pleasure. You have likely noticed that the kitchen is the gathering place for holiday celebrations and the social hub for get-togethers. And just like athletics or the arts, food offers people the opportunity to achieve greatness and to out-do the competition. Many restaurants strive to make the best burger, pizza, or sub sandwich in town, a perfect marriage of our love of food and competition. And it's not just the preparation of food that serves as a form of rivalry; eating food has become a popular "sport," too. Every year, festivals are held all across the country in honor of a single food item, and often, these festivals include—you guessed it—an eating competition. People train for these events, and for extreme eating challenges at restaurants, like they would for a marathon and give it their all on competition day. Just like any other contest, extreme eating gives some of us a goal to strive for, although holding a title that essentially means "The World's Biggest Pig" is questionable compared to a title like "Best Actor" or "Most Valuable Player." I do find it odd that people would try to master eating rather than acting, singing, dancing, playing an instrument, or art. Maybe some people choose eating because it's a rather unique talent, or maybe it's because they feel that they don't have a "knack" for art, music, or athleticism. Regardless of the reason, as long as food is such a strong part of our lives, I think the trend of food competition and gluttony is here to stay. And while I may never be able to eat a six-tier burger or a three-and-a-half pound chili cheese dog, it's always fun to sit back and watch someone else do it. I'll stick to my single cheeseburger and small order of fries.