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## Tom Colicchio's Overcooked Politics

By Julie Kelly

**D**espite dozens of TV shows, hundreds of cookbooks and thousands of news articles, most of today's culinary world remains largely out of touch with the people it purports to want to reach. The current poster boy for this chasm is celebrity chef Tom Colicchio.

Mr. Colicchio is a restaurateur who earned fame as the head judge on the cooking show "Top Chef." As a devotee of the program, I found his charm and culinary knowledge appealing.

Until I saw him on MSNBC earlier this month complaining about the 2014 congressional farm bill.

Mr. Colicchio—perhaps weary of selling \$105 rib-eyes and \$260 Waygu Kobe filet at his CraftSteak restaurant in Las Vegas, or criticizing aspiring chefs on national television—now sits on the board of an organization called Food Policy Action. FPA keeps a "National Food Score Card" on how senators and congressmen vote on food-related legislation.

According to its website, FPA wants to "promote policies that support healthy diets, reduce hunger at home and abroad, improve food access and affordability, uphold the rights and dignity of food and farm workers . . . support local and regional food systems, protect and maintain sustainable fisheries, treat farm animals humanely." Etc.

That's not all. Mr. Colicchio insists in a letter posted on the FPA website that voters must be "as informed about food policy . . . as they are about job creation, foreign policy and social issues." The FPA website also tracks congressional votes on nonfood legislation such as the minimum wage, immigration and equal pay.

**The "Top Chef" judge and other foodies insist that we go on a strict diet of progressivism.**

The organization is still boiling about the 2014 farm bill, which President Obama signed in February. The legislation is a \$1 trillion behemoth that cut \$8 billion over the next decade from the food-stamp program or SNAP. Mr. Colicchio referred to SNAP in a May article on N.J. com as "one of the best-run programs in the country."

So the celebrity chef is trying to carve up Republicans who wanted an even bigger reduction in food-stamp spending. The Food Policy Action group he serves announced this month that it would spend up to \$100,000 against Florida Rep. Steve Southerland, who had the audacity to propose work requirements for food-stamp recipients. Rep. Tom Cotton—in a tight race for the

Arkansas Senate seat—is also a top FPA target.

This is all about promoting the "food movement," as Mr. Colicchio explained at the TEDx Manhattan conference in March. It "isn't about some elite food movement only accessible to people who can afford it," he said. Mr. Colicchio followed this comment by ticking off a long list of food issues—beloved by elites and costly to implement—such as labeling genetically modified products, eliminating antibiotics in food and promoting local food systems (although the sea urchin and crab ragout he talked about afterward sounded yummy).

Culinary elites—like political elites—profess to want to help ordinary Americans, but their efforts often miss the mark as they aim to be the smartest guy at the food and wine festival. They come across as condescending scolds finding fault in nearly everything that ordinary people buy and eat, without offering them the help they really need.

Demanding that government cough up ever more money might salve the guilt complex of the rich and famous, but it only adds to the burden of average taxpayers. More food stamps for more people—sure why not? Never mind that 47 million Americans now receive food stamps, twice as many as 10 years ago. Or that SNAP costs \$80 billion a year, a 100% increase in five years. Or that food prices are at an all-time high, fur-

ther stretching millions of families.

To be truly useful, a food movement shouldn't be about politics. It should be about food: what to cook and how to cook it without breaking the family budget. I teach suburban moms how to cook at home. They voice frustration, confusion and even fear about the conflicting information they hear about food. Organic or nonorganic? Farm-raised or wild? Grass-fed or corn-fed? Gluten-free or no? It is a strange paradox that so many people now suffer from information overload about food but have very little practical knowledge about how to cook it properly.

Most home cooks need instruction, not more reasons to worry. They need to know how to make a quick marinara, not whether the tomatoes were locally sourced by kindly area farmers who overpay their migrant workers. They need to know how to season and cook a steak, not whether the steer ate genetically modified corn feed. They see food as a necessity, not a political cause or "about values and justice" as Mr. Colicchio said at TEDx.

So, Tom, with all due respect, please stick to your pots and pans. You actually have something to offer. If you want to advance the food movement, educate people on how to cook food. Period. And leave the proselytizing to the politicians.

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