

The Lifestyle Report

FYI Bets on Food, Fashion And Fixer- uppers

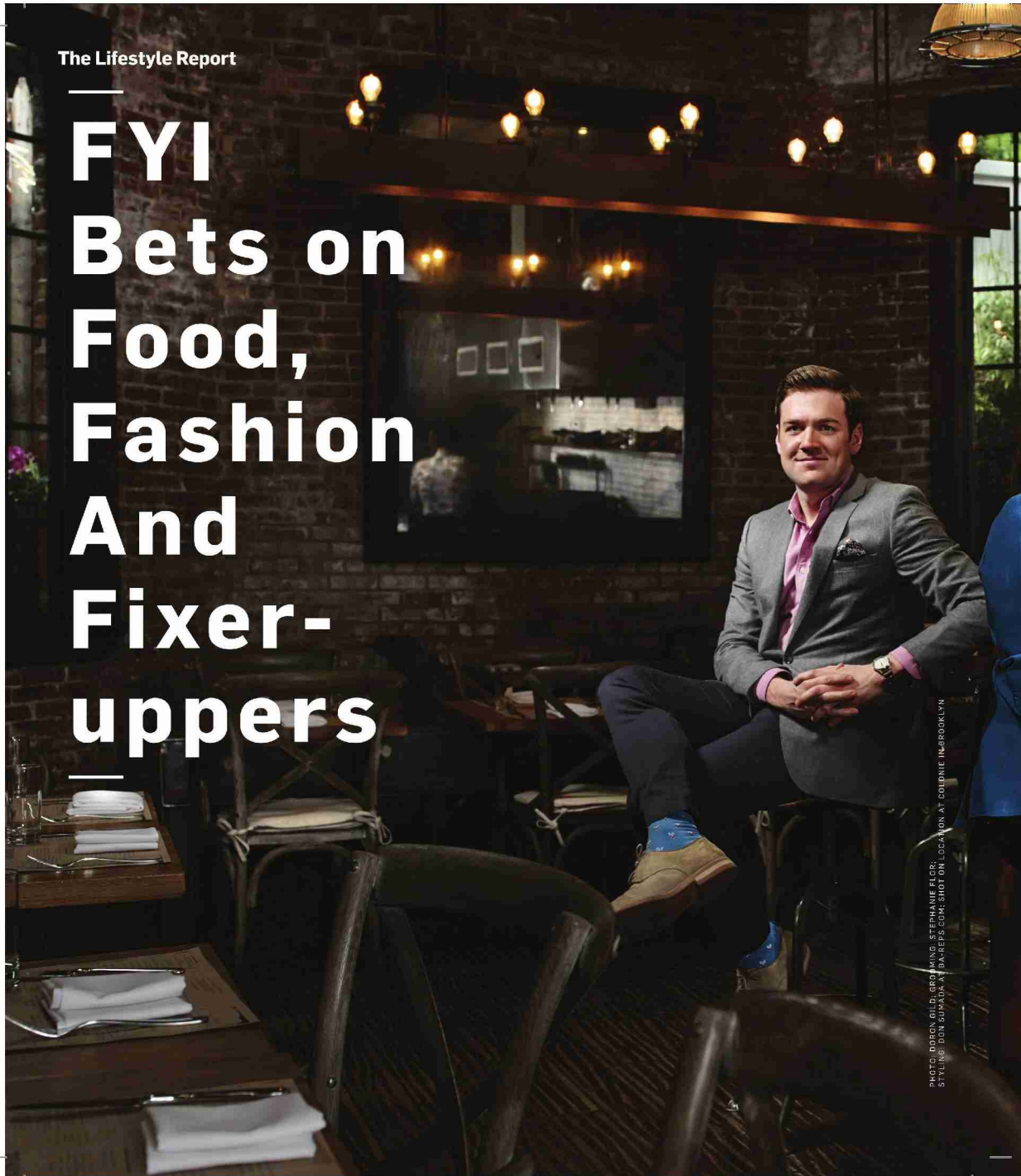
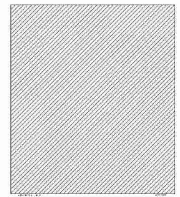


PHOTO: DOBSON GUILD, GETTY IMAGES; STEPHANIE FLOP; STYLING: DON SUMADA AT BA-REPS.COM; SHOT ON LOCATION AT COGNIE IN BROOKLYN





THE LAUNCH

Making use of Bio's 70 million subscribers, the new service launches July 7.

THE FEED

(L. to r.) Comedian Max Silvestri, Top Chef's Gail Simmons and chef Marcus Samuelsson together tackle food, foodies and food culture.

PHOTO: DORIN GOLD; GROOMING: STEPHANIE FLOR; STYLING: DORA SUPATAVA; HAIR: P.S. 504; SHOES: TON LOCCA; COAT: AT CORBINIE; MAKEUP: KATYA

A+E Networks' newest lifestyle channel takes on the Scripps behemoth using homegrown talent and recognizable stars.

By T.L. Stanley

Its nickname is the Little Bread Corvette, and it's an edible car, though it might not be appetizing to anyone other than the quirky characters behind the YouTube megahit videos, Epic Meal Time. After all, its wheels are made of Rice Krispies treats, it has a working barbecue in the trunk, and the exterior is dotted with food pairings as incongruous as cupcakes and fried chicken.

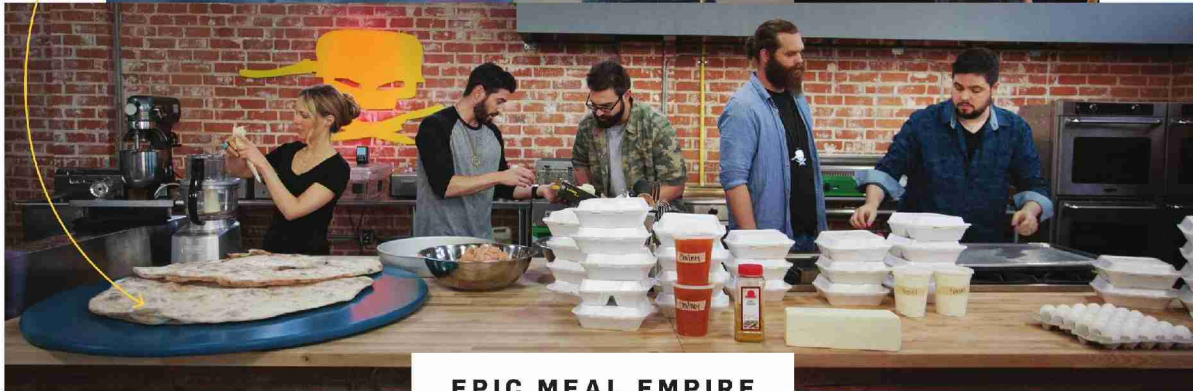
Luckily for Harley Morestein, better known as Epic Meal Time's Sauce Boss, he and his crew have cast-iron stomachs. They also have supersize imaginations that will have room to expand in their first television show on the new FYI network. The food-stuffed car, which seats five, will appear in one installment of a 16-episode series that's now dubbed Epic Meal Empire.

"Because people will be watching on their TVs instead of a laptop or a smartphone, we've made everything bigger," explains Morestein.

Epic Meal Empire, complete with the jaw-dropping calorie counter that online fans have come to love, is one of the flagship shows on the A+E-owned channel, a wholesale redo of the former low-rated Bio (which does reach 70 million subscribers). And it may be a potential viewer's first indication that this will not be a typical food, shelter, do-it-yourself and makeover network. Don't expect to find formal French cooking or Better Homes and Gardens-style sensibilities when the channel debuts on July 7. Original shows like Tiny House Nation, looking at the extreme downsizing and micro-home trend in real estate, and The Feed, a hybrid road-comedy-food series with Top Chef's Gail Simmons, will lean more toward the Pinterest crowd than their HGTV-loving parents.

FYI has taken many of its program cues directly from the Internet, in fact. It picked up not just the Epic Meal Time squad, who have scored some 600 million video views, but linked with The Knot for a relationship show called Marry Me Today that will have a groom bringing to life his bride-to-be's digital wedding board. There's also a social media hunt for the one that got away, called You're the One, and an in-person meet-up between online restaurant critics and the chefs they trashed in a pilot called Say It to My Face.

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EPIC MEAL EMPIRE

Sauce Boss Harley Morenstein (c.) and crew whip up insane fare, such as whiskey-laced, gut-busting lasagna made from burgers.

The roster of Gen X-targeted cooking, home and styling shows will favor spontaneity over step-by-step directions, with former *Top Chef* hipster contestant Spike Mendelsohn hosting a Chelsea Market-set competition called *Midnight Feast* and urban pioneers revamping fixer-uppers in *Rowhouse Showdown*.

Jana Bennett, FYI's president, explains the goal is to have an ad-hoc, adventurous feel, with less prescriptive, more energetic programming than is typical in the genre—more fun, less dry. “The network is inspired by the way the world has changed over the last decade,” says Bennett, who also oversees LMN. “The younger generation isn't following a rule book—their lives are improvised. They've been using a lot of digital tools, and the existing lifestyle programming on TV isn't reflecting that.”

Bennett already has been seeding FYI in the current Bio slot, re-jiggering its lineup for the past several months to emphasize its existing real estate and how-to shows. FYI plans to premiere with 20 to 25 original nonscripted shows, a number that will ramp up quickly.

The *Feed* is certainly a centerpiece. *Top Chef*'s popular culinary expert Simmons (who still works at *Food & Wine* magazine) will host *The Feed* with superchef and *The Taste* judge Marcus Samuelsson and food blogger and comedian Max Silvestri in a series about food culture and food trends. Simmons says she was looking for a place that wouldn't be afraid to try a fusion show that's attempting to break some boundaries. “This series isn't easily categorized because it's not a food competition, it's not travel, it's not talk—it's a combination of all those things,” Simmons says. “It's like *Top Gear* with food instead of cars.”

Episodes will go in any number of directions. Simmons and her co-stars may cook for each other, visit celebrity chefs and hot restaurants, and interview butchers or other specialty workers. The show looks to speak to an audience that has a fairly deep food vocabulary, having been raised on cooking shows. *The Feed* will take “an adventurous and irrev-

erent” look at the subject, Simmons adds, not shying away from pointing out, for instance, how “twee and handcrafted” the world of artisanal food has become. Silvestri keeps the show grounded while Samuelsson provides behind-the-scenes insight from his restaurant experiences.

Simmons believes the time is right to dig deeper into food trends and declutter the food landscape for informed viewers. “Practically anyone who owns an iPhone and goes to restaurants photographs everything they eat and then shares it on social media,” she notes. “We're at this point in our culture where everybody can join the food conversation.”

THE MARKETPLACE PITCH

The channel defines the “I” in FYI as “inspiration, innovation and imagination” and hopes to steal mostly upscale, city-dwelling 25-to-49-year-old women from other makeover, home-centric and entertaining-based outlets. The space has become jam-packed with popular entries, from Fox's *MasterChef* and Food Network's *Chopped* to HGTV's *House Hunters*, and Bravo's *Million Dollar Listing* and *Flipping Out*. Lifetime, Oxygen, TLC, WE, OWN and others add to the tally, and even nets that weren't traditionally lifestyle programmers, like National Geographic Channel, are staking their claim with hit series like *Building Wild*.

Against this crowded TV landscape, FYI is also competing with E!y, Yummy, YouTube and other digital outlets that have large and loyal followings. But by far the biggest competition is Scripps Networks, the 800-pound gorilla in the home and hearth arena, which divides its wall-to-wall coverage among Food Network, Cooking Channel, Travel Channel, DIY and HGTV. If executives there are concerned about FYI's debut, they're not showing it. “We aren't surprised that others are not- ing our success and want a piece of it,” explains Kathleen Finch, presi-

PHOTOS: COURTESY FYI



BORN TO STYLE

Jonathan Bodrick's (L.) "retail therapy" lends customers counseling on fashion, breakups and personal traumas—without backstabbing.

dent, HGTV and DIY. "It would be hard to miss the consistent performance of HGTV series like Property Brothers, Love It or List It and Rehab Addict. We have the shows and experts that keep the coveted upscale audience coming back to HGTV night after night, so we know what this audience wants, and we will keep giving it to them."

Media buyers love competition because it gives them choices, notes Chris Geraci, OMD's president of national broadcast, who sees unscripted lifestyle programming as "pretty compelling TV that can be absorbed in small doses." There will be ample opportunities for endemic advertisers on the channel, like home improvement and kitchen gadgets, especially those that want deeper connections like brand integration into the content. To Geraci, it's a point of difference, and possibly an advantage, to house all of FYI's lifestyle programming under one roof. "It seems like they're going for a best-of compilation of lots of different subject matter in one place," he says. "And they're aiming younger, so if an advertiser needs a niche of a niche, they may find it there."

Blue-chip advertisers have historically flocked to lifestyle shows, with their positive messages and make-better storylines. Lisa Malen, FYI's svp of ad sales, says insurance companies, automakers and financial institutions have been among the most interested in staking out media buys on the channel. "So many advertisers today are looking at life stages, like when consumers buy their first home, get married, have kids," Malen says. "That's our demo."



Jana Bennett

"The younger generation isn't following a rule book ... They've been using a lot of digital tools, and the existing lifestyle programming on TV isn't reflecting that."

Since many of its series will revolve around cooking, building and remodeling, the channel's ad sales team is discussing brand integrations and other co-marketing and content creation deals with advertisers. They're also touting the net as a cross-platform multimedia property born of the Internet age. "It's not a linear network with other expressions in digital," says Mel Berning, president of A+E Networks' ad sales division. "It's been conceived to live in all platforms simultaneously. That's part of its DNA."

HOMEGROWN TALENT

Platforms aren't the only thing being mixed up at FYI. The Epic gang, famously or infamously, depending on the perspective, uses hard liquor and bacon as go-to ingredients, drives a "hambulance" and swears and burps liberally—behavior that will be only slightly toned down for cable. The show has added a woman to the kitchen—a navigator of sorts for the Canadian quartet's move to Los Angeles for filming—and lifted the veil on the growing Epic business, which now fans out over cookbooks, apps, hats, T-shirts and cookware (sales pitch: Get yours and quit being a dummy).

The three-minute videos on YouTube, which the group has been producing for four years, don't usually stray much from the recipe at hand, which has involved 45 fast-food burgers as the base for whiskey-laced, gut-busting lasagna. The TV show will delve into the personalities of the show's stars. "The videos always had to be very punchy and in your face," Morenstein adds. "The show will have more to it than us getting the food, making the food and eating the food."

The series may even take a frightening peek into Morenstein's cholesterol level if producers decide to include a visit with his doctor that they've already shot. (Pharmaceuticals advertisers, take note!)

Other TV networks have been tugging at Morenstein's greasy sleeve since Epic's early days as a YouTube star, but he held off until he heard FYI's pitch, which he feels is the right fit. "We've been patient and selective and cautious," he says.

Another FYI series, BORN to Style, also features a male-dominated cast but promises to be much more touchy-feely. Jonathan Bodrick, owner of the eclectic Harlem boutique where the show is set, says he and his team give new meaning to the clichéd phrase, "retail therapy."

His shop—the acronym stands for borrowed, old, refurbished, new—styles its customers, reworks their closets and listens to their problems—including bad breakups, self-confidence issues and personal traumas. They often need more than a spiffed-up wardrobe—Bodrick's crew calls it a "fierce" overhaul. "It's not just about the clothes," Bodrick says. "She starts trying on clothes and talking about her life, and then we see what's really going on."

Bodrick has been collecting clothing, handbags, jewelry, accessories and furniture since he was a kid growing up in Brooklyn. He opened the BORN store in a gentrifying Harlem about nine years ago, assembling a disparate group of people that's as much family as staff. And as such, there's plenty of bickering, but none of the backstabbing that's become a hallmark of even workplace-based reality TV, he promises.

Audiences will learn the back stories of the colorful employees in 10 one-hour episodes, along with following the clients and their transformations. "We might find out they just came through a divorce or just had a baby, they're not making time for themselves, they're feeling judged and vulnerable," Bodrick adds. "They've come in here to be their best selves."

FYI executives are optimistic that some of these personalities will develop into stars—but they're also banking on known entities like Simmons, et al. Actress Jennifer Esposito has a pilot in the works at the channel about her gluten-free bakery in New York. She's trying to turn that one shop into "an empire of packaged goods, cookbooks and franchise locations across the country," according to the series description.

"We want to inspire ideas and creativity with our audience," Bennett says. "It's a network for people who are making their own way."—t1stanley8@yahoo.com