

# Why you can now quit your job to make Snapchat videos

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SANTA MONICA, Calif. — With the solemnity of a priest, Tastemade programming chief Oren Katzeff paces near his TV-grade studio kitchen and assesses his media giant's latest creation: apple-pie latkes, baked on camera for five seconds of Snapchat fame.

In four years, his video network has transformed food porn designed for digital natives into a global juggernaut. But the competition is fierce — and the demands are endless — if he wants Tastemade to stay one of the most-watched media empires on the Web.

“There is something about being maniacal, right?” Katzeff says outside the soundstage during one of the day's half-dozen recipe shoots. “We are so laser-focused on all this stuff. We don't sleep that much.”

Short, viral videos have become more than digital-age curiosities. They are a central economy of the Web and a serious business on which future media fortunes will be gambled, won and lost.

*Autoplay recipe videos on Facebook are inescapable, and they all seem to follow the same basic steps. We break down how one gets made. (Jayne Orenstein, Randolph Smith, Kara Elder/The Washington Post)*

Many leading the charge aren't traditional TV media giants. Instead, they're start-ups such as Tastemade, which since launching as a tiny YouTube food network has exploded to become the fifth-most-watched video publisher on Facebook. In June, Tastemade racked up more than 700 million views — three times the online audience of its rival, the Food Network, according to data from video analytics firm Tubular.

Pumped out cheaply and quickly, most Web and mobile videos make a fraction of the money of a Hollywood film. But they also carry a fraction of the risk: For their makers, a flop doesn't break the bank — and a hit can mean everything.

"In terms of eyeballs and time spent, there's an increasing war for your time and attention," said Rich Greenfield, a media analyst with investment firm BTIG. "Web video, mobile video, is still in its infancy, but I wouldn't mistake being early for being wrong. In 1980, basic cable was really early, too."

### **'Slacker milkshakes'**

Web video's rise has sparked a growing tension for media's most established players, who must retool and compete for a new generation of viewers on an increasingly insatiable Internet. In June, a Facebook vice president called video "the best way to tell stories in this world" and said that the world's biggest social network, with 1.6 billion users, would be "probably all video" within five years.

The players are fighting over billions of screens in people's pockets, where advertisers are moving en masse. Spending on digital ads in the United States is expected to surpass TV ads this year for the first time, research firm eMarketer said. Web-video ad spending grew to \$10 billion this year, having doubled since 2014.

Two years ago, the "Ice Bucket Challenge," which raised money for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis research, proved that simple social video could bloom into a cultural phenomenon. Producers, networks and news organizations have been racing to publish more videos, because advertisers will pay more to sponsor them than digital offerings such as banner ads.

The companies on Web video's front lines do not have the reliable channel placement, traditional audiences or big commercial payouts of TV's goliaths. Many, including Tastemade, are not profitable or keep their revenue under wraps.

Yet their growth has been enough to encourage alliances that a few years ago would have seemed far-fetched. In December, Tastemade secured \$40 million in investments led by Goldman Sachs. Backers included the venture arm of Comcast, the world's biggest cable company, as well as TV giant Scripps Networks, owner of the Food Network.

Tastemade specializes in short, colorful cooking segments of quinoa burgers, Nutella cheesecakes and other millennial-bait cuisine. Unlike traditional food TV, many of its videos are delightfully un-gourmet: Tastemade's most-watched recipe on YouTube involves blending seven ice cream sandwiches into a "[slacker milkshake](#)."

Many of the old hallmarks of television's craft don't apply. Celebrity cameos, high production values and long stories are out, while colorful sets, simple ideas and short, "snackable" moments are in.

[https://youtu.be/\\_99UISrMzHk?list=PLX98sAmndWt0MVogo7yeFfUldLwcrIMJf](https://youtu.be/_99UISrMzHk?list=PLX98sAmndWt0MVogo7yeFfUldLwcrIMJf)

*(Tastemade/YouTube)*

The videos are built to go viral, not to win awards, so volume is paramount, and long-accepted signatures of traditional video are ignored. Many videos are shot not wide-framed but vertically to fit how younger viewers see the world: through cellphone screens. The videos' sound is deemed less important; many viewers watch them muted, anyway.

On Facebook, Tastemade has become an unstoppable force, with more “likes” from loyal subscribers than the New York Times and Washington Post combined. Even so, Tastemade is a traffic underdog to Tasty, BuzzFeed's competing food-video giant.

In August, Tastemade was added to Snapchat's top media-company lineup, Discover, putting it a swipe and a tap away from every user on one of the fastest-growing social apps on the planet. Coca-Cola was one of the firm's first sponsors.

## **7 billion views and counting**

Founders Steven Kydd, Joe Perez and Larry Fitzgibbon launched the network in 2012 after meeting at Demand Media, a Web “content farm” whose business depends on getting clicks from Google searches. But within three years, Tastemade had become one of the rare additions to Snapchat's heavy-hitters list that was not a household name. Its neighbors include CNN, ESPN and People magazine.

The pressure was on: A month earlier, Tastemade's more-established peers, including Warner Music Group and Yahoo, had been booted from Snapchat's invite-only Discover rankings on the thought that they had not been pulling their viral weight.

But the company has become a veritable video factory: 7.1 billion views of 3,739 videos and counting, with no signs of slowing down. In December, Tastemade pledged to publish three original videos a day, every day. This spring, the company aimed even higher, saying it would produce more than 100 cooking shows, recipe guides and travelogues every month exclusively for Facebook's live-video streaming service.

Key to Tastemade's success are its “tastemakers,” the 1,000 or so global freelancers who contribute recorded shorts or recipes. None are traditional celebrities, although their followings can be robust, and Tastemade invests heavily in winning their allegiance.

One of Tastemade's three dozen online job openings [seeks](#) an “unflappable” Influencer Acquisition Representative — known internally as a “treasure hunter” — working to recruit from within YouTube's amateur army of popular chefs and quasi-stars.

Julie Nolke, a 25-year-old “tastemaker” in Toronto, started making movie-inspired food videos

for YouTube while working a desk job at an investors' association. With her short red hair, easy laugh and oddball acting, she became like a Lucille Ball of the food-video Web, and she signed on with a Tastemade "partner manager" to get help optimizing and sharing her videos while splitting ad revenue.

<https://youtu.be/cu0deZ1KVjQ?list=PLX98sAmndWt0fJdZvXB2WJJIOHbmW49jk>

*(Julie Nolke/YouTube)*

A year ago, after Tastemade's demands heated up, the firm signed her and other top tastemakers up directly. She and her boyfriend quit their jobs to make videos full time: They shoot and edit three videos a week, produce show ideas and work on "branded content," including a series sponsored by Starbucks.

Tastemade pays the couple \$1,000 a video — good money, she says, considering that they earned far less relying solely on ad revenue. But "everything we were doing before has entirely revved up," she said: Every short video — from grocery shopping to food prep to video editing — takes about 14 hours to make. The couple work from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., seven days a week.

Fans ask Nolke for pictures on the street — an odd feeling for an acting-school graduate who struggled during auditions to land traditional roles. But now, she finds herself dealing with a new kind of stardom.

"I literally make videos in my house. I don't know if I talked to anyone else today but you," Nolke said. "This is not what the celebrity life looks like. This is a whole other brand of thing. But it's really, really cool."

Web video has not supplanted the titans of TV and film, but its early successes have shown what kinds of content best resonate on an always-on platform free from traditional length, style and cost constraints.

"TV has all the money, and the TV ecosystem has an older consumer," said Laura Martin, a senior analyst at Needham & Co. "But the data you can get online — on younger audiences, short-form programming — is really important, too. [They can show] how certain verticals are making it work."

To cash in, Web-video giants still rely on TV's classic moneymakers, including riffs on product placement and regularly scheduled commercial breaks.

Tastemade's revenue has come from "brand integrations" with corporate sponsors, including Google, Grey Goose and REI, some of whose executives said they have paid "seven figures plus" to insert their products onscreen. Hyundai sponsored a pork-and-pigskin feature, "The Grill Iron," that programming chief Katzeff defined as "auto meets college football meets tailgating, but not in a 'bro' sort of way."

The executives acknowledge the natural tension between a hip, Web-friendly food network seeking to expand into a corporate trough. But they say they offer advertisers an irresistible deal: Young viewers bored by or disinterested in the behemoth of prime-time TV.

“The audience that’s not watching TV, the audience that’s not watching commercials,” Katzeff said, “is the audience that’s looking at Tastemade content every day.”

*The Internet is going crazy for super satisfying videos, or videos that feature objects being crushed, destroyed, put together or taken apart. (Daron Taylor/The Washington Post)*

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