

## THE PITCHMAN

*Ron Popeil and the conquest of the American kitchen.*

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

The extraordinary story of the Ronco Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ begins with Nathan Morris, the son of the shoemaker and cantor Kidders Morris, who came over from the Old Country in the eighteen-eighties, and settled in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Nathan Morris was a pitchman. He worked the boardwalk and the five-and-dimes and county fairs up and down the Atlantic coast, selling kitchen gadgets made by Acme Metal, out of Newark. In the early forties, Nathan set up N.K. Morris Manufacturing—turning out the KwiKi-Pi and the Morris Metric Slicer—and perhaps because it was the Depression and job prospects were dim, or perhaps because Nathan Morris made such a compelling case for his new profession, one by one the members of his family followed him into the business. His sons Lester Morris and Arnold (the Knife) Morris became his pitchmen. He set up his brother-in-law Irving Rosenbloom, who was to make a fortune on Long Island in plastic goods, including a hand grater of such excellence that Nathan paid homage to it with his own Dutch Kitchen Shredder Grater. He partnered with his brother Al, whose own sons worked the boardwalk, alongside a gangly Irishman by the name of Ed McMahon. Then, one summer just before the war, Nathan took on as an apprentice his nephew Samuel Jacob Popeil. S.J., as he was known, was so inspired by his uncle Nathan that he went on to found Popeil Brothers, based in Chicago, and brought the world the Dial-O-Matic, the Chop-O-Matic, and the Veg-O-Matic. S. J. Popeil had two sons. The elder was Jerry, who died young. The younger is familiar to anyone who has ever watched an infomercial on late-night television. His name is Ron Popeil.

In the postwar years, many people made the kitchen their life's work.

There were the Klinghoffers of New York, one of whom, Leon, died tragically in 1985, during the Achille Lauro incident, when he was pushed overboard in his wheelchair by Palestinian terrorists). They made the Roto-Broil 400, back in the fifties, an early rotisserie for the home, which was pitched by Lester Morris. There was Lewis Salton, who escaped the Nazis with an English stamp from his father's collection and parlayed it into an appliance factory in the Bronx. He brought the world the Salton Hotray—a sort of precursor to the microwave—and today Salton, Inc., sells the George Foreman Grill.

But no rival quite matched the Morris-Popeil clan. They were the first family of the American kitchen. They married beautiful women and made fortunes and stole ideas from one another and lay awake at night thinking of a way to chop an onion so that the only tears you shed were tears of joy. They believed that it was a mistake to separate product development from marketing, as most of their contemporaries did, because to them the two were indistinguishable: the object that sold best was the one that sold itself. They were spirited, brilliant men. And Ron Popeil was the most brilliant and spirited of them all. He was the family's Joseph, exiled to the wilderness by his father only to come back and make more money than the rest of the family combined. He was a pioneer in taking the secrets of the boardwalk pitchmen to the television screen. And, of all the kitchen gadgets in the Morris-Popeil pantheon, nothing has ever been quite so ingenious in its design, or so broad in its appeal, or so perfectly representative of the Morris-Popeil belief in the interrelation of the pitch and the object being pitched, as the Ronco Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ, the countertop oven that can be bought for four

payments of \$39.95 and may be, dollar for dollar, the finest kitchen appliance ever made.

## A ROTISSERIE IS BORN

Ron Popeil is a handsome man, thick through the chest and shoulders, with a leonine head and striking, over-size features. He is in his mid-sixties, and lives in Beverly Hills, halfway up Coldwater Canyon, in a sprawling bungalow with a stand of avocado trees and a vegetable garden out back. In his habits he is, by Beverly Hills standards, old school. He carries his own bags. He has been known to eat at Denny's. He wears T-shirts and sweatpants. As often as twice a day, he can be found buying poultry or fish or meat at one of the local grocery stores—in particular, Costco, which he favors because the chickens there are ninety-nine cents a pound, as opposed to a dollar forty-nine at standard supermarkets. Whatever he buys, he brings back to his kitchen, a vast room overlooking the canyon, with an array of industrial appliances, a collection of fifteen hundred bottles of olive oil, and, in the corner, an oil painting of him, his fourth wife, Robin (a former Frederick's of Hollywood model), and their baby daughter, Contessa. On paper, Popeil owns a company called Ronco Inventions, which has two hundred employees and a couple of warehouses in Chatsworth, California, but the heart of Ronco is really Ron working out of his house, and many of the key players are really just friends of Ron's who work out of their houses, too, and who gather in Ron's kitchen when, every now and again, Ron cooks a soup and wants to talk things over.

In the last thirty years, Ron has invented a succession of kitchen gadgets, among them the Ronco Electric Food Dehydrator and the Popeil Automatic Pasta and Sausage Maker, which fea-

SABA



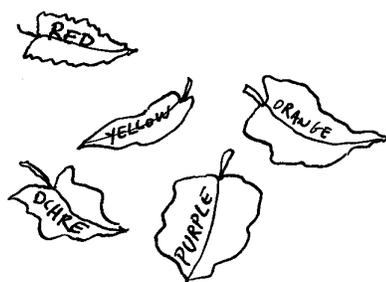
*Popeil, in the kitchen where he developed the Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ. Like his forebears in the gadget trade, he understands that the making and the marketing of his devices are inseparable. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.*

tured a thrust bearing made of the same material used in bulletproof glass. He works steadily, guided by flashes of inspiration. This past August, for instance, he suddenly realized what product should follow the Showtime Rotisserie. He and his right-hand man, Alan Backus, had been working on a bread-and-batter machine, which would take up to ten pounds of chicken wings or scallops or shrimp or fish fillets and do all the work—combining the eggs, the flour, the breadcrumbs—in a few minutes, without dirtying either the cook's hands or the machine. "Alan goes to Korea, where we have some big orders coming through," Ron explained recently over lunch—a hamburger, medium-well, with fries—in the V.I.P. booth by the door in the Polo Lounge, at the Beverly Hills Hotel. "I call Alan on the phone. I wake him up. It was two in the morning there. And these are my exact words: 'Stop. Do not pursue the bread-and-batter machine. I will pick it up later. This other project needs to come first.'" The other project, his inspiration, was a device capable of smoking meats indoors without creating odors that can suffuse the air and permeate furniture. Ron had a version of the indoor smoker on his porch—"a Rube Goldberg kind of thing" that he'd worked on a year earlier—and, on a whim, he cooked a chicken in it. "That chicken was so good that I said to myself"—and with his left hand Ron began to pound on the table—"This is the best chicken sandwich I have ever had in my life." He turned to me: "How many times have you had a smoked-turkey sandwich? Maybe you have a smoked-turkey or a smoked-chicken sandwich once every six months. Once! How many times have you had smoked salmon? Aah. More. I'm going to say you come across smoked salmon as an hors d'oeuvre or an entrée once every three months. Baby-back ribs? Depends on which restaurant you order ribs at. Smoked sausage, same thing. You touch on smoked food"—he leaned in and poked my arm for emphasis—"but I know one thing, Malcolm. *You don't have a smoker.*"

The idea for the Showtime came about in the same way. Ron was at Costco about four years ago when he suddenly realized that there was a long line of customers waiting to buy chick-

ens from the in-store rotisserie ovens. They touched on rotisserie chicken, but Ron knew one thing: they did not have a rotisserie oven. Ron went home and called Backus. Together, they bought a glass aquarium, a motor, a heating element, a spit rod, and a handful of other spare parts, and began tinkering. Ron wanted something big enough for a fifteen-pound turkey but small enough to fit into the space between the base of an average kitchen cupboard and the countertop. He didn't want a thermostat, because thermostats break, and the constant clicking on and off of the heat prevents the even, crispy browning that he felt was essential. And the spit rod had to rotate on the horizontal axis, not the vertical axis, because if you cooked a chicken or a side of beef on the vertical axis the top would dry out and the juices would drain to the bottom. Roderick Dorman, Ron's patent attorney, says that when he went over to Coldwater Canyon he often saw five or six prototypes on the kitchen counter, lined up in a row. Ron would have a chicken in each of them, so that he could compare the consistency of the flesh and the browning of the skin, and wonder if, say, there was a way to rotate a shish kebab as it approached the heating element so that the inner side of the kebab would get as brown as the outer part. By the time Ron finished, the Showtime prompted no fewer than two dozen patent applications. It was equipped with the most powerful motor in its class. It had a drip tray coated with a non-stick ceramic, which was easily cleaned, and the oven would still work even after it had been dropped on a concrete or stone surface ten times in succession, from a distance of three feet. To Ron, there was no question that it made the best chicken he had ever had in his life.

It was then that Ron filmed a television infomercial for the Showtime, twenty-eight minutes and thirty seconds in length. It was shot live before a studio



audience, and aired for the first time on August 8, 1998. It has run ever since, often in the wee hours of the morning, or on obscure cable stations, alongside the get-rich schemes and the "Three's Company" reruns. The response to it has been such that within the next three years total sales of the Showtime should exceed a billion dollars. Ron Popeil didn't use a single focus group. He had no market researchers, R. & D. teams, public-relations advisers, Madison Avenue advertising companies, or business consultants. He did what the Morris and the Popeils had been doing for most of the century, and what all the experts said couldn't be done in the modern economy. He dreamed up something new in his kitchen and went out and pitched it himself.

## PITCHMEN

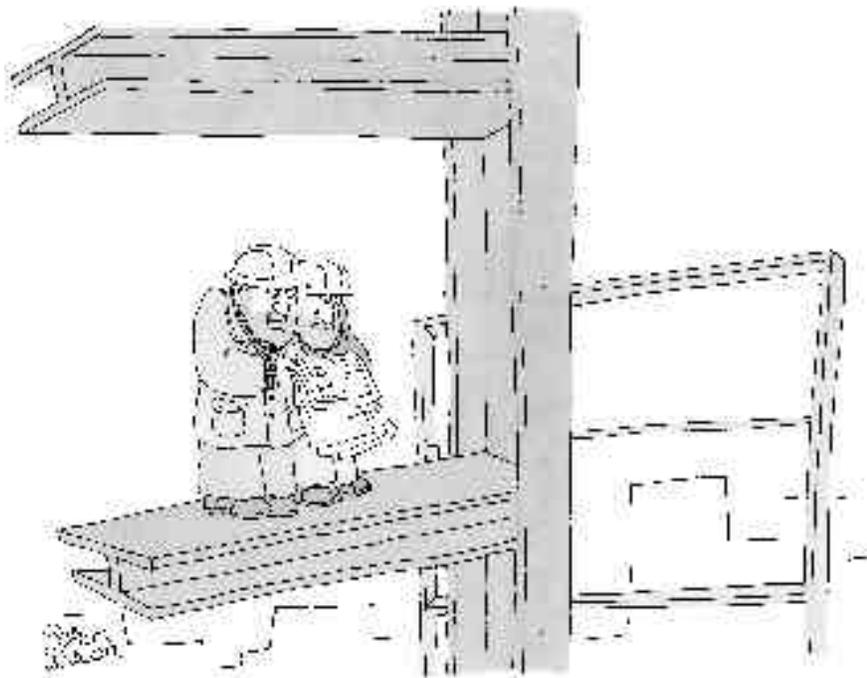
Nathan Morris, Ron Popeil's great-uncle, looked a lot like Cary Grant. He wore a straw boater. He played the ukulele, drove a convertible, and composed melodies for the piano. He ran his business out of a low-slung, white-washed building on Ridge Avenue, near Asbury Park, with a little annex in the back where he did pioneering work with Teflon. He had certain eccentricities, such as a phobia he developed about travelling beyond Asbury Park without the presence of a doctor. He feuded with his brother Al, who subsequently left in a huff for Atlantic City, and then with his nephew S. J. Popeil, whom Nathan considered insufficiently grateful for the start he had given him in the kitchen-gadget business. That second feud led to a climactic legal showdown over S. J. Popeil's Chop-O-Matic, a food preparer with a pleated, W-shaped blade rotated by a special clutch mechanism. The Chop-O-Matic was ideal for making coleslaw and chopped liver, and when Morris introduced a strikingly similar product, called the Roto-Chop, S. J. Popeil sued his uncle for patent infringement. (As it happened, the Chop-O-Matic itself seemed to have been inspired by the Blitzhacker, from Switzerland, and S. J. later lost a patent judgment to the Swiss.)

The two squared off in Trenton, in May of 1958, in a courtroom jammed with Morris and Popeils. When the trial opened, Nathan Morris was on the

stand, being cross-examined by his nephew's attorneys, who were out to show him that he was no more than a huckster and a copycat. At a key point in the questioning, the judge suddenly burst in. "He took the index finger of his right hand and he pointed it at Morris," Jack Dominik, Popeil's longtime patent lawyer, recalls, "and as long as I live I will never forget what he said. 'I know you! You're a pitchman! I've seen you on the boardwalk!' And Morris pointed his index finger back at the judge and shouted, 'No! I'm a manufacturer. I'm a dignified manufacturer, and I work with the most eminent of counsel!'" (Nathan Morris, according to Dominik, was the kind of man who referred to everyone he worked with as eminent.) "At that moment," Dominik goes on, "Uncle Nat's face was getting red and the judge's was getting redder, so a recess was called." What happened later that day is best described in Dominik's unpublished manuscript, "The Inventions of Samuel Joseph Popeil by Jack E. Dominik—His Patent Lawyer." Nathan Morris had a sudden heart attack, and S.J. was guilt-stricken. "Sobbing ensued," Dominik writes. "Remorse set in. The next day, the case was settled. Thereafter, Uncle Nat's recovery from his previous day's heart attack was nothing short of a miracle."

Nathan Morris was a performer, like so many of his relatives, and pitching was, first and foremost, a performance. It's said that Nathan's nephew Archie (the Pitchman's Pitchman) Morris once sold, over a long afternoon, gadget after gadget to a well-dressed man. At the end of the day, Archie watched the man walk away, stop and peer into his bag, and then dump the whole lot into a nearby garbage can. The Morrises were that good. "My cousins could sell you an empty box," Ron says.

The last of the Morrises to be active in the pitching business is Arnold (the Knife) Morris, so named because of his extraordinary skill with the Sharp-cut, the forerunner of the Ginsu. He is in his early seventies, a cheerful, impish man with a round face and a few wisps of white hair, and a trademark move whereby, after cutting a tomato into neat, regular slices, he deftly lines the pieces up in an even row against the flat edge of the blade. Today, he lives in Ocean Township, a few miles from



*"Don't these fools realize they're violating every principle of feng-shui?"*

Asbury Park, with Phyllis, his wife of twenty-nine years, whom he refers to (with the same irresistible conviction that he might use to describe, say, the Feather Touch Knife) as "the prettiest girl in Asbury Park." One morning recently, he sat in his study and launched into a pitch for the Dial-O-Matic, a slicer produced by S. J. Popeil some forty years ago.

"Come on over, folks. I'm going to show you the most amazing slicing machine you have ever seen in your life," he began. Phyllis, sitting nearby, beamed with pride. He picked up a package of barbecue spices, which Ron Popeil sells alongside his Showtime Rotisserie, and used it as a prop. "Take a look at this!" He held it in the air as if he were holding up a Tiffany vase. He talked about the machine's prowess at cutting potatoes, then onions, then tomatoes. His voice, a marvellous instrument inflected with the rhythms of the Jersey Shore, took on a singsong quality: "How many cut tomatoes like this? You stab it. You jab it. The juices run down your elbow. With the Dial-O-Matic, you do it a little differently. You put it in the machine and you wiggle"—he mimed fixing the tomato to the bed of the machine. "The tomato! Lady! The tomato! The more you wiggle, the more you get. The

tomato! Lady! Every slice comes out perfectly, not a seed out of place. But the thing I love my Dial-O-Matic for is coleslaw. My mother-in-law used to take her cabbage and do this." He made a series of wild stabs at an imaginary cabbage. "I thought she was going to commit suicide. Oh, boy, did I pray—that she wouldn't slip! Don't get me wrong. I love my mother-in-law. It's her daughter I can't figure out. You take the cabbage. Cut it in half. Coleslaw, hot slaw. Pot slaw. Liberty slaw. It comes out like shredded wheat . . ."

It was a vaudeville monologue, except that Arnold wasn't merely entertaining; he was selling. "You can take a pitchman and make a great actor out of him, but you cannot take an actor and always make a great pitchman out of him," he says. The pitchman must make you applaud *and* take out your money. He must be able to execute what in pitchman's parlance is called "the turn"—the perilous, crucial moment where he goes from entertainer to businessman. If, out of a crowd of fifty, twenty-five people come forward to buy, the true pitchman sells to only twenty of them. To the remaining five, he says, "Wait! There's something else I want to show you!" Then he starts his pitch again, with

slight variations, and the remaining four or five become the inner core of the next crowd, hemmed in by the people around them, and so eager to pay their money and be on their way that they start the selling frenzy all over again. The turn requires the management of expectation. That's why Arnold always kept a pineapple tantalizingly perched on his stand. "For forty years, I've been promising to show people how to cut the pineapple, and I've never cut it once," he says. "It got to the point where a pitchman friend of mine went out and bought himself a plastic pineapple. Why would you cut the pineapple? It cost a couple bucks. And if you cut it they'd leave." Arnold says that he once hired some guys to pitch a vegetable slicer for him at a fair in Danbury, Connecticut, and became so annoyed at their lackadaisical attitude that he took over the demonstration himself. They were, he says, waiting for him to fail: he had never worked that particular slicer before and, sure enough, he was massacring the vegetables. Still, in a single pitch he took in two hundred dollars. "Their eyes popped out of their heads," Arnold recalls. "They said, 'We don't understand it. You don't even know how to work the damn machine.' I said, 'But I know how to do one thing better than you.' They said, 'What's that?' I said, 'I know how to ask for the money.' And that's the secret to the whole damn business."

Ron Popeil started pitching his father's kitchen gadgets at the Maxwell Street flea market in Chicago, in the mid-fifties. He was thirteen. Every morning, he would arrive at the market at five and prepare fifty pounds each of onions, cabbages, and carrots, and a hundred pounds of potatoes. He sold from six in the morning until four in the afternoon, bringing in as much as five hundred dollars a day. In his late teens, he started doing the state- and county-fair circuit, and then he scored a prime spot in the Woolworth's at State and Washington, in the Loop, which at the time was the top-grossing Woolworth's store in the country. He was making more than the manager of the store, selling the Chop-O-Matic and the Dial-O-Matic. He dined at the Pump Room and wore a Rolex and rented hundred-and-fifty-dollar-a-night hotel suites. In

pictures from the period, he is beautiful, with thick dark hair and blue-green eyes and sensuous lips, and, several years later, when he moved his office to 919 Michigan Avenue, he was called the Paul Newman of the Playboy Building. Mel Korey, a friend of Ron's from college and his first business partner, remembers the time he went to see Ron pitch the Chop-O-Matic at the State Street Woolworth's. "He was mesmerizing," Korey says. "There were secretaries who would take their lunch break at Woolworth's to watch him because he was so good-looking. He would go into the turn, and people would just come running." Several years ago, Ron's friend Steve Wynn, the founder of the Mirage resorts, went to visit Michael Milken in prison. They were near a television, and happened to catch one of Ron's infomercials just as he was doing the countdown, a routine taken straight from the boardwalk, where he says, "You're not going to spend two hundred dollars, not a hundred and eighty dollars, not one-seventy, not one-sixty . . ." It's a standard pitchman's gimmick: it sounds dramatic only because the starting price is set way up high. But something about the way Ron did it was irresistible. As he got lower and lower, Wynn and Milken—who probably know as much about profit margins as anyone in America—cried out in unison, "Stop, Ron! Stop!"

Was Ron the best? The only attempt to settle the question definitively was made some forty years ago, when Ron and Arnold were working a knife set at the Eastern States Exposition, in West Springfield, Massachusetts. A third man, Frosty Wishon, who was a legend in his own right, was there, too. "Frosty was a well-dressed, articulate individual and a good salesman," Ron says. "But he thought he was the best. So I said, 'Well, guys, we've got a ten-day show, eleven, maybe twelve hours a day. We'll each do a rotation, and we'll compare how much we sell.' In Morris-Popeil lore, this is known as "the shoot-out," and no one has ever forgotten the outcome. Ron beat Arnold, but only by a whisker—no more than a few hundred dollars. Frosty Wishon, meanwhile, sold only half as much as either of his rivals. "You have no idea the pressure Frosty was under," Ron continues. "He came up to me at the end of the show and said, 'Ron, I will never

work with you again as long as I live.'"

No doubt Frosty Wishon was a charming and persuasive person, but he assumed that this was enough—that the rules of pitching were the same as the rules of celebrity endorsement. When Michael Jordan pitches McDonald's hamburgers, Michael Jordan is the star. But when Ron Popeil or Arnold Morris pitched, say, the Chop-O-Matic, his gift was to make the Chop-O-Matic the star. It was, after all, an innovation. It represented a different way of dicing onions and chopping liver: it required consumers to rethink the way they went about their business in the kitchen. Like most great innovations, it was disruptive. And how do you persuade people to disrupt their lives? Not merely by ingratiation or sincerity, and not by being famous or beautiful. You have to explain the invention to customers—not once or twice but three or four times, with a different twist each time. You have to show them exactly how it works and why it works, and make them follow your hands as you chop liver with it, and then tell them precisely how it fits into their routine, and, finally, sell them on the paradoxical fact that, revolutionary as the gadget is, it's not at all hard to use.

Thirty years ago, the videocassette recorder came on the market, and it was a disruptive product, too: it was supposed to make it possible to tape a television show so that no one would ever again be chained to the prime-time schedule. Yet, as ubiquitous as the VCR became, it was seldom put to that purpose. That's because the VCR was never pitched: no one ever explained the gadget to American consumers—not once or twice but three or four times—and no one showed them exactly how it worked or how it would fit into their routine, and no pair of hands guided them through every step of the process. All the VCR-makers did was hand over the box with a smile and a pat on the back, tossing in an instruction manual for good measure. Any pitchman could have told you that wasn't going to do it.

Once, when I was over at Ron's house in Coldwater Canyon, sitting on one of the high stools in his kitchen, he showed me what real pitching is all about. He was talking about how he had just had dinner with the actor Ron Silver, who is playing Ron's friend Robert Shapiro in a



outside, but the pitchman in Ron Popeil wasn't satisfied. I had to feel the back of his head. I did. It felt just like real hair.

## THE TINKERER

Ron Popeil inherited more than the pitching tradition of Nathan Morris. He was very much the son of S. J. Popeil, and that fact, too, goes a long way toward explaining the success of the Showtime Rotisserie. S.J. had a ten-room apartment high in the Drake Towers, near the top of Chicago's Magnificent Mile. He had a chauffeured Cadillac limousine with a car phone, a rarity in those days, which he delighted in showing off (as in "I'm calling you from the car"). He wore three-piece suits and loved to play the piano. He smoked cigars and scowled a lot and made funny little grunting noises as he talked. He kept his money in T-bills. His philosophy was expressed in a series of epigrams: To his attorney, "If they push you far enough, sue"; to his son, "It's not how much you spend, it's how much you make." And, to a designer who expressed doubts about the utility of one of his greatest hits, the Pocket Fisherman, "It's not for using; it's for giving." In 1974, S.J.'s second wife, Eloise, decided to have him killed, so she hired two hit men—one of whom, aptly, went by the name of Mr. Peeler. At the time, she was living at

the Popeil estate in Newport Beach with her two daughters and her boyfriend, a thirty-seven-year-old machinist. When, at Eloise's trial, S.J. was questioned about the machinist, he replied, "I was kind of happy to have him take her off my hands." That was vintage S.J. But eleven months later, after Eloise got out of prison, S.J. married her again. That was vintage S.J., too. As a former colleague of his puts it, "He was a strange bird."

S. J. Popeil was a tinkerer. In the middle of the night, he would wake up and make frantic sketches on a pad he kept on his bedside table. He would disappear into his kitchen for hours and make a huge mess, and come out with a faraway look on his face. He loved standing behind his machinists, peering over their shoulders while they were assembling one of his prototypes. In the late forties and early fifties, he worked almost exclusively in plastic, reinterpreting kitchen basics with a subtle, modernist flair. "Popeil Brothers made these beautiful plastic flour sifters," Tim Samuelson, a curator at the Chicago Historical Society and a leading authority on the Popeil legacy, says. "They would use contrasting colors, or a combination of opaque plastic with a translucent swirl plastic." Samuelson became fascinated with all things Popeil after he acquired an original Popeil Brothers doughnut maker, in red-and-white plastic, which he felt "had beauti-

ful lines"; to this day, in the kitchen of his Hyde Park high-rise, he uses the Chop-O-Matic in the preparation of salad ingredients. "There was always a little twist to what he did," Samuelson goes on. "Take the Popeil automatic egg turner. It looks like a regular spatula, but if you squeeze the handle the blade turns just enough to flip a fried egg."

Walter Herbst, a designer whose firm worked with Popeil Brothers for many years, says that S.J.'s *modus operandi* was to "come up with a holistic theme. He'd arrive in the morning with it. It would be something like"—Herbst assumes S.J.'s gruff voice—" 'We need a better way to shred cabbage.' It was a passion, an absolute goddam passion. One morning, he must have been eating grapefruit, because he comes to work and calls me and says, 'We need a better way to cut grapefruit!'" The idea they came up with was a double-bladed paring knife, with the blades separated by a fraction of an inch so that both sides of the grapefruit membrane could be cut simultaneously. "There was a little grocery store a few blocks away," Herbst says. "So S.J. sends the chauffeur out for grapefruit. How many? Six. Well, over the period of a couple of weeks, six turns to twelve and twelve turns to twenty, until we were cutting thirty to forty grapefruits a day. I don't know if that little grocery store ever knew what happened."

S. J. Popeil's finest invention was undoubtedly the Veg-O-Matic, which came on the market in 1960 and was essentially a food processor, a Cuisinart without the motor. The heart of the gadget was a series of slender, sharp blades strung like guitar strings across two Teflon-coated metal rings, which were made in Woodstock, Illinois, from 364 Alcoa, a special grade of aluminum. When the rings were aligned on top of each other so that the blades ran parallel, a potato or an onion pushed through would come out in perfect slices. If the top ring was rotated, the blades formed a crosshatch, and a potato or an onion pushed through would come out diced. The rings were housed in a handsome plastic assembly, with a plunger to push the vegetables through the blades. Technically, the Veg-O-Matic was a triumph: the method of creating blades strong enough to withstand the assault of vegetables received a U.S. patent. But from



*"It's the porch plants—can they come in?"*

a marketing perspective it posed a problem. S.J.'s products had hitherto been sold by pitchmen armed with a mound of vegetables meant to carry them through a day's worth of demonstrations. But the Veg-O-Matic was *too* good. In a single minute, according to the calculations of Popeil Brothers, it could produce a hundred and twenty egg wedges, three hundred cucumber slices, eleven hundred and fifty potato shoestrings, or three thousand onion dices. It could go through what used to be a day's worth of vegetables in a matter of minutes. The pitchman could no longer afford to pitch to just a hundred people at a time; he had to pitch to a hundred thousand. The Veg-O-Matic needed to be sold on television, and one of the very first pitchmen to grasp this fact was Ron Popeil.

In the summer of 1964, just after the Veg-O-Matic was introduced, Mel Korey joined forces with Ron Popeil in a company called Ronco. They shot a commercial for the Veg-O-Matic for five hundred dollars, a straightforward pitch shrunk to two minutes, and set out from Chicago for the surrounding towns of the Midwest. They cold-called local department stores and persuaded them to carry the Veg-O-Matic on guaranteed sale, which meant that whatever the stores didn't sell could be returned. Then they visited the local television station and bought a two- or three-week run of the cheapest airtime they could find, praying that it would be enough to drive traffic to the store. "We got Veg-O-Matics wholesale for \$3.42," Korey says. "They retailed for \$9.95, and we sold them to the stores for \$7.46, which meant that we had four dollars to play with. If I spent a hundred dollars on television, I had to sell twenty-five Veg-O-Matics to break even." It was clear, in those days, that you could use television to sell kitchen products if you were Procter & Gamble. It wasn't so clear that this would work if you were Mel Korey and Ron Popeil, two pitchmen barely out of their teens selling a combination slicer-dicer that no one had ever heard of. They were taking a wild gamble, and, to their amazement, it paid off. "They had a store in Butte, Montana—Hennessy's," Korey goes on, thinking back to those first improbable years. "Back then, people there were still wearing peacoats. The city was mostly bars. It had just a few three-story buildings.

There were twenty-seven thousand people, and one TV station. I had the Veg-O-Matic, and I go to the store, and they said, 'We'll take a case. We don't have a lot of traffic here.' I go to the TV station and the place is a dump. The only salesperson was going blind and deaf. So I do a schedule. For five weeks, I spend three hundred and fifty dollars. I figure if I sell a hundred and seventy-four machines—six cases—I'm happy. I go back to Chicago, and I walk into the office one morning and the phone is ringing. They said, 'We sold out. You've got to fly us another six cases of Veg-O-Matics.' The next week, on Monday, the phone rings. It's Butte again: 'We've got a hundred and fifty oversold.' I fly him another six cases. Every few days after that, whenever the phone rang we'd look at each other and say, 'Butte, Montana.' Even today, thirty years later, Korey can scarcely believe it. "How many homes in total in that town? Maybe several thousand? We ended up selling two thousand five hundred Veg-O-Matics in five weeks!"

Why did the Veg-O-Matic sell so well? Doubtless, Americans were eager for a better way of slicing vegetables. But it was more than that: the Veg-O-Matic represented a perfect marriage between the medium (television) and the message (the gadget). The Veg-O-Matic was, in the relevant sense, utterly transparent. You took the potato and you pushed it through the Teflon-coated rings and—voilà!—you had French fries. There were no buttons being pressed, no hidden and intimidating gears: you could show-and-tell the Veg-O-Matic in a two-minute spot and allay everyone's fears about a daunting new technology. More specifically, you could train the camera on the machine and compel viewers to pay total attention to the product you were selling. TV allowed you to do even more effectively what the best pitchmen strove to do in live demonstrations—make the product the star.

This was a lesson Ron Popeil never forgot. In his infomercial for the Showtime Rotisserie, he opens not with himself but with a series of shots of meat and poultry, glistening almost obscenely as they rotate in the Showtime. A voice-over describes each shot: a "delicious six-pound chicken," a "succulent whole duckling," a "mouthwatering pork-loin

roast . . ." Only then do we meet Ron, in a sports coat and jeans. He explains the problems of conventional barbecues, how messy and unpleasant they are. He bangs a hammer against the door of the Showtime, to demonstrate its strength. He deftly trusses a chicken, impales it on the patented two-pronged Showtime spit rod, and puts it into the oven. Then he repeats the process with a pair of chickens, salmon steaks garnished with lemon and dill, and a rib roast. All the time, the camera is on his hands, which are in constant motion, manipulating the Showtime apparatus gracefully, with his calming voice leading viewers through every step: "All I'm going to do here is slide it through like this. It goes in very easily. I'll match it up over here. What I'd like to do is take some herbs and spices here. All I'll do is slide it back. Raise up my glass door here. I'll turn it to a little over an hour. . . . Just set it and forget it."

Why does this work so well? Because the Showtime—like the Veg-O-Matic before it—was designed to be the star. From the very beginning, Ron insisted that the entire door be a clear pane of glass, and that it slant back to let in the maximum amount of light, so that the chicken or the turkey or the baby-back ribs turning inside would be visible at all times. Alan Backus says that after the first version of the Showtime came out Ron began obsessing over the quality and evenness of the browning and became convinced that the rotation speed of the spit wasn't quite right. The original machine moved at four revolutions per minute. Ron set up a comparison test in his kitchen, cooking chicken after chicken at varying speeds until he determined that the optimal speed of rotation was actually six r.p.m. One can imagine a bright-eyed M.B.A. clutching a sheaf of focus-group reports and arguing that Ronco was really selling convenience and healthful living, and that it was foolish to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars retooling production in search of a more even golden brown. But Ron understood that the perfect brown is important for the same reason that the slanted glass door is important: because in every respect the design of the product must support the transparency and effectiveness of its performance during a demonstration—the better it looks onstage, the easier it is for the pitchman to

go into the turn and ask for the money.

If Ron had been the one to introduce the VCR, in other words, he would not simply have sold it in an infomercial. He would also have changed the VCR itself, so that it made sense in an infomercial. The clock, for example, wouldn't be digital. (The haplessly blinking unset clock has, of course, become a symbol of frustration.) The tape wouldn't be inserted behind a hidden door—it would be out in plain view, just like the chicken in the rotisserie, so that if it was recording you could see the spools turn. The controls wouldn't be discreet buttons; they would be large, and they would make a reassuring click as they were pushed up and down, and each step of the taping process would be identified with a big, obvious numeral so that you could set it and forget it. And would it be a slender black, low-profile box? Of course not. Ours is a culture in which the term “black box” is synonymous with incomprehensibility. Ron's VCR would be in red-and-white plastic, both opaque and translucent swirl, or maybe 364 Alcoa aluminum, painted in some bold primary color, and it would sit on top of the television, not below it, so that when your neighbor or your friend came over he would spot it immediately and say, “Wow, you have one of those Ronco Tape-O-Matics!”

## AREAL PIECE OF WORK

Ron Popeil did not have a happy childhood. “I remember baking a potato. It must have been when I was four or five years old,” he told me. We were in his kitchen, and had just sampled some baby-back ribs from the Showtime. It had taken some time to draw the memories out of him, because he is not one to dwell on the past. “I couldn't get that baked potato into my stomach fast enough, because I was so hungry.” Ron is normally in constant motion, moving his hands, chopping food, bustling back and forth. But now he was still. His parents split up when he was very young. S.J. went off to Chicago. His mother disappeared. He and his older brother, Jerry, were shipped off to a boarding school in upstate New York. “I remember seeing my mother on one occasion. I don't remember seeing my father, ever, until I moved to Chicago, at thirteen. When I was in the boarding school,

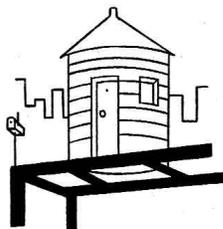
the thing I remember was a Sunday when the parents visited the children, and my parents never came. Even knowing that they weren't going to show up, I walked out to the perimeter and looked out over the farmland, and there was this road.” He made an undulating motion with his hand to suggest a road stretching off into the distance. “I remember standing on the road crying, looking for the movement of a car miles away, hoping that it was my mother and father. And they never came. That's all I remember about boarding school.” Ron remained perfectly still. “I don't remember ever having a birthday party in my life. I remember that my grandparents took us out and we moved to Florida. My grandfather used to tie me down in bed—my hands, my wrists, and my feet. Why? Because I had a habit of turning over on my stomach and bumping my head either up and down or side to side. Why? How? I don't know the answers. But I was spread-eagle, on my back, and if I was able to twist over and do it my grandfather would wake up at night and come in and beat the hell out of me.” Ron stopped, and then added, “I never liked him. I never knew my mother or her parents or any of that family. That's it. Not an awful lot to remember. Obviously, other things took place. But they have been erased.”

When Ron came to Chicago, at thirteen, with his grandparents, he was put to work in the Popeil Brothers factory—but only on the weekends, when his father wasn't there. “Canned salmon and white bread for lunch, that was the diet,” he recalls. “Did I live with my father? Never. I lived with my grandparents.” When he became a pitchman, his father gave him just one advantage: he extended his son credit. Mel Korey says that he once drove Ron home from college and dropped him off at his father's apartment. “He had a key to the apartment, and when he walked in his dad was in bed already. His dad said, ‘Is that you, Ron?’ And Ron said, ‘Yeah.’ And his dad never came out. And by the next morn-

ing Ron still hadn't seen him.” Later, when Ron went into business for himself, he was persona non grata around Popeil Brothers. “Ronnie was never allowed in the place after that,” one of S.J.'s former associates recalls. “He was never let in the front door. He was never allowed to be part of anything.” My father, Ron says simply, “was all business. I didn't know him personally.”

Here is a man who constructed his life in the image of his father—who went into the same business, who applied the same relentless attention to the workings of the kitchen, who got his start by selling his father's own products—and where was his father? “You know, they could have done wonders together,” Korey says, shaking his head. “I remember one time we talked with K-tel about joining forces, and they said that we would be a *war machine*—that was their word. Well, Ron and his dad, they could have been a war machine.” For all that, it is hard to find in Ron even a trace of bitterness. Once, I asked him, “Who are your inspirations?” The first name came easily: his good friend Steve Wynn. He was silent for a moment, and then he added, “My father.” Despite everything, Ron clearly found in his father's example a tradition of irresistible value. And what did Ron do with that tradition? He transcended it. He created the Showtime, which is indisputably a better gadget, dollar for dollar, than the Morris Metric Slicer, the Dutch Kitchen Shredder Grater, the Chop-O-Matic, and the Veg-O-Matic combined.

When I was in Ocean Township, visiting Arnold Morris, he took me to the local Jewish cemetery, Chesed Shel Ames, on a small hilltop just outside town. We drove slowly through the town's poorer sections in Arnold's white Mercedes. It was a rainy day. At the cemetery, a man stood out front in an undershirt, drinking a beer. We entered through a little rusty gate. “This is where it all starts,” Arnold said, by which he meant that everyone—the whole spirited, squabbling clan—was buried here. We walked up and down the rows until we found, off in a corner, the Morris headstones. There was Nathan Morris, of the straw boater and the opportune heart attack, and next to him his wife, Betty. A few rows over was the family patriarch, Kidders Morris, and his wife,



and a few rows from there Irving Rosenbloom, who made a fortune in plastic goods out on Long Island. Then all the Popeils, in tidy rows: Ron's grandfather Isadore, who was as mean as a snake, and his wife, Mary; S.J., who turned a cold shoulder to his own son; Ron's brother, Jerry, who died young. Ron was from them, but he was not of them. Arnold walked slowly among the tombstones, the rain dancing off his baseball cap, and then he said something that seemed perfectly right. "You know, I'll bet you you'll never find Ronnie here."



*"Not voting this year?"*

## ON THE AIR

One Saturday night a few weeks ago, Ron Popeil arrived at the headquarters of the television shopping network QVC, a vast gleaming complex nestled in the woods of suburban Philadelphia. Ron is a regular on QVC. He supplements his infomercials with occasional appearances on the network, and, for twenty-four hours beginning that midnight, QVC had granted him eight live slots, starting with a special "Ronco" hour between midnight and 1 A.M. Ron was travelling with his daughter Shannon, who had got her start in the business selling the Ronco Electric Food Dehydrator on the fair circuit, and the plan was that the two of them would alternate throughout the day. They were pitching a Digital Jog Dial version of the Showtime, in black, available for one day only, at a "special value" of \$129.72.

In the studio, Ron had set up eighteen Digital Jog Dial Showtimes on five wood-paneled gurneys. From Los Angeles, he had sent, via Federal Express, dozens of Styrofoam containers with enough meat for each of the day's airings: eight fifteen-pound turkeys, seventy-two hamburgers, eight legs of lamb, eight ducks, thirty-odd chickens, two dozen or so Rock Cornish game hens, and on and on, supplementing them with garnishes, trout, and some sausage bought that morning at three Philadelphia-area supermarkets. QVC's target was thirty-seven thousand machines, meaning that it hoped to gross about \$4.5 million during the twenty-four hours—a huge day, even by the network's standards. Ron seemed tense. He barked at the team of QVC producers and cameramen bustling around the

room. He fussed over the hero plates—the ready-made dinners that he would use to showcase meat taken straight from the oven. "Guys, this is impossible," he said, peering at a tray of mashed potatoes and gravy. "The level of gravy must be higher." He was limping a little. "You know, there's a lot of pressure on you," he said wearily. "How did Ron do? Is he still the best?"

With just a few minutes to go, Ron ducked into the greenroom next to the studio to put GLH in his hair: a few aerosol bursts, followed by vigorous brushing. "Where is God right now?" his co-host, Rick Domeier, yelled out, looking around theatrically for his guest star. "Is God backstage?" Ron then appeared, resplendent in a chef's coat, and the cameras began to roll. He sliced open a leg of lamb. He played with the dial of the new digital Showtime. He admired the crispy, succulent skin of the duck. He discussed the virtues of the new food-warming feature—where the machine would rotate at low heat for up to four hours after the meat was cooked in order to keep the juices moving—and, all the while, bantered so convincingly with viewers calling in on the testimonial line that it was as if he were back mesmerizing the secretaries in the Woolworth's at State and Washington.

In the greenroom, there were two computer monitors. The first displayed a line graph charting the number of calls that came in at any given second. The second was an electronic ledger showing the total sales up to that point. As

Ron took flight, one by one, people left the studio to gather around the computers. Shannon Popeil came first. It was 12:40 A.M. In the studio, Ron was slicing onions with one of his father's Dial-O-Matics. She looked at the second monitor and gave a little gasp. Forty minutes in, and Ron had already passed seven hundred thousand dollars. A QVC manager walked in. It was 12:48 A.M., and Ron was roaring on: \$837,650. "It can't be!" he cried out. "That's unbelievable!" Two QVC producers came over. One of them pointed at the first monitor, which was graphing the call volume. "Jump," he called out. "Jump!" There were only a few minutes left. Ron was extolling the virtues of the oven one final time, and, sure enough, the line began to take a sharp turn upward, as all over America viewers took out their wallets. The numbers on the second screen began to change in a blur of recalculation—rising in increments of \$129.72 plus shipping and taxes. "You know, we're going to hit a million dollars, just on the first hour," one of the QVC guys said, and there was awe in his voice. It was one thing to talk about how Ron was the best there ever was, after all, but quite another to see proof of it, before your very eyes. At that moment, on the other side of the room, the door opened, and a man appeared, stooped and drawn but with a smile on his face. It was Ron Popeil, who invented a better rotisserie in his kitchen and went out and pitched it himself. There was a hush, and then the whole room stood up and cheered. ♦