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A Foodie With a Taste for the Surreal

By DAVE ITZKOFF

As usual, Thu Tran was trying to do two things at once. In the living room of her apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, its floor littered with glittery scraps of paper, she was supervising two friends who were decorating balloons and beach balls to be tossed to the crowd at a D.J. show the following night. Meanwhile in the kitchen she was adding ingredients to the crepes she was cooking for herself and her guests.

Customarily, Ms. Tran said, she calls the dish her “thousand-layer crepe.”

But on this recent Wednesday evening, she said, “I’m going to call it hundred-layer crepe so it’s less of a lie.”

In one room Ms. Tran, 27, an artist dressed in a knit cap, jeans and a white T-shirt drawn on with marker, was task master and visionary; in the other she was hostess and gourmand. And every so often she gets to play all these roles — accompanied by puppets made to look like living cuisine, on sets built from cardboard and reclaimed lumber — on her Internet video series, “Food Party.”

The show, which graduates from the Web to the Independent Film Channel on Tuesday, is a place for Ms. Tran to bring her colorful and bizarre fantasies to life. But mostly, “Food Party” is a place for its star to share her abiding, and at times overwhelming, love of food.

“Some days,” said Ms. Tran, who is barely five feet tall and petite, “I eat a steak and then I eat a baked potato and then I eat shrimp kebabs and then I eat a salad.” She paused, as she added mushrooms to a sizzling frying pan. “Then I eat cereal and then I eat raisins and then I eat some tomato soup. That’s all in one day.”

In her surreal excursions on “Food Party” (whose earliest episodes appear online at foodparty.tv), Ms. Tran can be seen enjoying a romantic dinner with a mustachioed French baguette that smokes cigarettes and wears sunglasses; cooking with kitchenware delivered to her by toy helicopters; and breaking into song as she picks doughnuts from a doughnut tree.

Friends and colleagues call “Food Party” a pure expression of Ms. Tran’s deceptively cheerful aesthetic. “She’s very cute and bubbly, fun to talk to,” said Gregg Gillis, the D.J. and mashup artist known as Girl Talk, who has been Ms. Tran’s friend since college. “But if you want to get dark on the humor level, she’ll go there with you.”

The show “was a perfect fit,” said Jennifer Caserta, IFC’s executive vice president and general manager, who added “Food Party” to the channel’s Automat lineup of movies and short-form programming. (The programming block runs on Tuesday nights from 10 p.m. to midnight Eastern time; “Food Party” will be shown at 11:15 p.m.) .

In its television incarnation “Food Party” episodes run about 10 minutes each and make no pretense about offering any actual cooking advice.

Otherwise, Ms. Caserta said: “We wanted to leave it untouched. To gloss it up would almost ruin it.”

The show, which she began in 2007, is also the result of an organic, almost accidental, evolution and the input of many artists with a shared sensibility.

When she was growing up in Cleveland, Ms. Tran said, her parents, who were Vietnamese immigrants, spoke little English, so she learned to speak the language partly from daytime television: soap operas, cartoons and game shows like “The Price Is Right.”

As an undergraduate at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Ms. Tran majored in glasswork. But she specialized in what she called “weird psychedelic artificial whatever landscape” installations, where hand-blown glass fruits and giant Cheetos grew from the ground, with the scent of car air freshener and the sound of chirping birds wafting throughout.

She also enjoyed making videos of herself as she cooked with her roommate, and eventually realized that she could combine all these passions into a single project.

When she did, she had a team of art school friends ready to assist.

Perhaps most crucially, her fellow Cleveland Institute alumnus Dan Baxter, now a founder of the offbeat plush toy company Kreepy Doll Factory (as well as Ms. Tran’s boyfriend), pitched in to make puppets.

“Even the day of, when we’re filming, someone will have a good idea,” said Mr. Baxter, who has helped construct anthropomorphic ears of corn and ice cream cones, among other things, for “Food Party.” “My famous quote was, ‘Give me five minutes.’ ”

“Sometimes it would turn into a half-hour,” he added.

Later, in 2007, when Ms. Tran moved to Brooklyn (first to Williamsburg, then Bedford-Stuyvesant, finally to Greenpoint), many of her Cleveland friends were already there or prepared to follow for the sake of the show.

“I was willing to quit whatever I was working on,” said Peter Van Hyning, who helps write “Food Party” and plays many of its supporting characters, human and otherwise. “People just dropped what they were doing to do it.”

Following its arrival in New York, “Food Party” garnered endorsements from Web sites like metafilter.com and the Grub Street blog of New York magazine (nymag.com/daily/food), eventually attracting the attention of executives at IFC.

Even with the assistance of a full-fledged production company, the Manhattan-based Greencard Pictures, and an actual studio to make the show, Ms. Tran found it demanding to create six new episodes for the channel.

“All of a sudden, it was like a full-time job for us,” she said. “It was kind of intense to do everything that

we've done in three years in three months.”

Unlike most television creators, Ms. Tran did not seem to be staking her life on the hope that her show will be renewed for additional seasons.

“I'm kind of pumped that it's even gotten this far,” she said. “Lots of art projects I work on, I put it out there, it's done. I move on. This is the most long-term project I've ever worked on.”

But just like food, she said, “I make it, I eat it, I throw it away.”

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