

DIVORCED EGGS AND THE CULINARY FIELD: BOURDIEU, FIELD THEORY, AND THE CHEF

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Abstract

In this article I seek to utilise Bourdieu's field theory to examine the relation between the artistic and culinary fields. I examine how the field has changed since the mid-twentieth century and how, since the 1960s, the autonomy of the chef drastically changed the culinary field. Focusing upon elite chefs of the twenty-first century, such as Ferran Adrià and Massimo Bottura, I analyse how European haute cuisine has developed and how dialogues between the chef and diner have become a defining feature of contemporary haute cuisine. Overall I examine how this autonomy occurred and what it potentially means for haute cuisine in the future. Throughout, I reference the concepts of Bourdieu's field theory, legitimation, and heteronomy/autonomy to explain how these changes within the culinary field occurred and what it means for the field.

I. Introduction

Divorced Eggs

An Eel Swimming up the Po River

Italian Breasts in the Sunshine

We Are Still Deciding What Fish to Serve

Some of these dishes are by the Futurist artist Filippo Marinetti while others are by Italian chef Massimo Bottura of the three Michelin-starred Osteria Francescana. Some of these dishes are understood as an artistic joke, all of them as a critique of Italian culinary history, yet some have been legitimised as cooking of the highest standards. The fundamental premise of Futurist cookery was to propose a 'complete revolution in the nourishment of our race... to evoke and provoke essential states of mind which cannot otherwise be evoked or provoked' (Marinetti 1932: 136). Bottura on the other hand proposes to view 'Italian culinary traditions seen from ten kilometres away' (Bottura 2014: 10). Marinetti's Futurist manifesto never did evoke and provoke the minds of the Italian population. Yet Bottura's philosophy of viewing Italian cuisine from ten kilometres away remains relevant within the highest

stratum of haute cuisine. Inspired by a story told by art dealer Emilio Mazzoli about how avant garde artist Gino De Dominicco painted the portrait of a prominent art dealer from ten kilometres away by applying a single mark to a canvas; Bottura continues to develop a dialogue between the kitchen and contemporary art. Herein lies a struggle that has continued to resurface within the culinary field since the twentieth century: can cookery ever be art? While it is not the remit of this article to answer such a question, rather, it is concerned with the trajectory of the chef in relation to such debates. The world of the chef treads a fine line between aesthetics and utility, between vicarious pleasure and nourishment, between aesthetic autonomy and craft. In varying degrees, the current field of haute cuisine fulfils all of these. This article intends to examine how and why aesthetics has fundamentally changed the practices of certain haute cuisine chefs. How have the discourses of artistic autonomy in the field of fine art altered the trajectory of the chef and the nature of contemporary haute cuisine?

I will map these ideas onto the main concepts proposed by Bourdieu (1977, 1993) in his sociological frameworks for field theory. While Bourdieu's field theory has not been used to chart the trajectory of the chef or the culinary field; its theories on position-taking, autonomy, and legitimation regarding high cultural production can similarly be applied here. To explore these issues I will examine certain social and cultural changes that occurred within Western Europe in the post Second World War period. The twentieth century saw radical developments in the production and consumption of foods in Europe and, with *nouvelle cuisine*, saw the origins of a recognisable contemporary haute cuisine. By charting this history of changing social and cultural conditions of the culinary field, I intend to reveal how the aesthetic understanding of haute cuisine has developed in the twenty-first century. In turn, this will allow me to interpret what the aesthetic autonomy of certain elite chefs may have on the culinary field.

II. Cultural Production and the Culinary Field

While in some cases chefs have become household names, the profession as a whole has largely emerged from the anonymity of serving a ruling class. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European cuisine was defined by the hegemony of a French court cuisine. Stephen Mennell's *All Manners of Food* (1985) gives a particularly significant examination of the social mechanisms of dining during French and English court society that drove the creation of a distinguishable haute cuisine. Here, chefs were essentially irrelevant in the formation of culinary meaning with the logic of cuisine centred around the social, political, and economic powers of preindustrial elites. These cuisines based

upon spectacle and conspicuous consumption defined the aesthetic conditions of haute cuisine. So for the aesthetic appreciation of contemporary haute cuisine to exist in the manner it does today, we require a fundamental change in the autonomy of chefs. In Elias' (1993) analysis of Mozart's transition from craftsmen's art to artists' art, Elias defines the former to be commissioned by and produced for those socially superior to the artist; whereas with the latter, the artist works autonomously for an anonymous audience. This simple change presents a shift in the power balance of artistic production. With this in mind, we can understand the significance the departure from court society to public audience had in a power shift in favour of chefs. While historically chefs served those socially superior to them, the transition to anonymous audience fostered entirely new ways of thinking about and creating cuisine. As a result, it allowed the meaning of foods to be understood from sources other than the nobility.

This idea can be extended by Bourdieu's (1977, 1993) theories on the cultural field and the various 'positions' and 'position-taking' available to certain agents. By using Bourdieu's field theory we can determine how the relation between the 'habitus' and the culinary field allows certain agents who are high in social, cultural, and economic capital to take greater risks within that field. According to Bourdieu, the space of available positions within any given field determines what is expected and even demanded of agents (1993: 65-67). In short, the culinary field, as a product of history, produces individual and collective practices from which agents may respond to in relation to the possible roles available to them. Pre-twentieth century, these roles were largely limited, even to

the most highly regarded chefs, as culinary power was directed from the court rather than the autonomy of any chef. From the 1960s however, drastic changes occur within and outside the culinary field that provide key formative moments in the legitimisation and autonomy of chefs. Those wide ranging cultural and social changes include major transformative processes such as: the mass migration of populations from rural to urban areas, the industrialisation of food production and transportation, the organisation of work and leisure time, and the proliferation of public restaurants (Trubek 2014: 127-128). Most pertinently, the formation of *nouvelle cuisine* drove a lasting legacy in the positions elite chefs could occupy. In expanding his title from chef de cuisine to chef-proprietor and giving his restaurant the eponymous name Restaurant Paul Bocuse, the French chef took vital steps in reimagining the identity and roles available to elite chefs. Bocuse and the other leading chefs of the time led a revolution not only in the way food was produced, but also in the autonomy of chefs. What I am suggesting here is that the accumulation of social and cultural changes occurring in France at that time fostered entirely new ways for chefs to identify themselves and respond in unforeseen ways. In Bourdieu's idea of the cultural field, these minor changes and revolutions within position taking by certain agents creates a generalised change within the *doxa*, or what is regarded as common sensical for a particular social group (Bourdieu 1977: 167-169).

The Role of Legitimising Institutions

In the case of contemporary art, there is what is referred to as the 'artworld.' A culmination of institutions of art dealers, collectors, gallerists, artists, and critics that define and legitimate the agents

within that field. By comparison, within the culinary field, there is the Michelin Guide. DiMaggio (1987) traces a particularly significant set of legitimating institutions to have formed in Boston in the mid-nineteenth century United States. Several cultural institutions, such as the Museum of Fine Art and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, were formed with the aim to create clear distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art. Organised by a commercial elite and an increasingly affluent merchant class; they sought to protect the cultural practices of Boston from the external threat of the academic populists of Harvard and internally from a rising Irish immigrant population. On the other hand the Michelin Guide, formed as a subsegment of the tyre company to encourage automobile travel and therefore increase tyre sales, stands as the single most influential restaurant guide globally (Surlemont and Johnson 2005). For Bourdieu, these institutions and agents are essential in the formation and understanding of any cultural field. He separates the structure of the field between heteronomy and autonomy. Heteronomy arises from external demand and its value derives from the criteria of those wielding economic and/or political power. Whereas with autonomy cultural products are associated with the independence of the producer who foregoes economic success as a sign of their autonomy. This structure is then mapped onto an axis of consecration which assigns the degree to which products and producers are accepted by either a niche or mass audience (Bourdieu 1993: 40-50).

Through its legitimisation of *nouvelle cuisine*, Michelin set the standard of what was considered good taste and by extension, what creative responses chefs are able to make. As the principles of *nouvelle cuisine*

become legitimised as *the* standards of good taste, more and more chefs work towards these standards, reinforcing a hegemonic French approach to cuisine (Lane 2013). As Bourdieu says, the 'production of discourse about the work of art is one of the conditions of production of the work' (Bourdieu 1993: 35). By this logic, the combination of chefs aiming to achieve Michelin stars and Michelin legitimising certain approaches to cuisine creates and recreates a particular way of thinking about cuisine. In the case of Bocuse, the value of *nouvelle cuisine* is twofold; it benefitted the French agrarian tradition and the regionalism of French cuisine, while simultaneously benefitting Michelin's pursuit of increasing automobile travel through the formation of the 'destination restaurant'. What I am saying here is that the legitimising institutions such as the artworld or Michelin reflects the conscious decisions of invested parties who benefit from consecrating certain standards of taste within the arts.

III. The Difficulty of Discourse

A conservative understanding of food and aesthetics is the suggestion that the sense of taste and smell are 'lower' than vision or hearing. Classical Western philosophers claimed that, as neither taste nor smell involve sufficient amounts of intellect to interpret, they are unable to lay basis for theoretical insight. This Western bias is often attributed to Kant (1798), who admonished taste and smell as 'pleasure' senses that were highly subjective and inherently unworthy of the same esteem as vision. The same is not true everywhere. The Japanese tea ceremony integrates food and art in a way that offers an alternative to the sensorial hierarchies of Western philosophy. The Hindu thought of *rasa* similarly conceptualises taste as the combination of sensory experience

and an aesthetic faculty that evokes emotions that cannot be described (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999: 2). The difficulty of articulating culinary experience has not gone unnoticed. Fine (1996), in his study of restaurant workers, remarked on the difficulty they had describing what they liked about certain foods. In gustatory terms, we acknowledge the basic flavour profiles as sweet, sour, salty, and bitter and can identify foods that fall within these categories. Yet our language goes no further in enabling us to describe how these flavours actually taste. Understood through the ideas of Wittgenstein, Fine argues that gustatory meaning cannot be established linguistically, but only externally through the context of social structures (Fine 1996: 201-206). Unlike the East, Western thought may not have developed any spiritual understanding of sensory experience. Yet with the increasing autonomy of certain chefs and their position-taking focusing upon the aesthetic development of haute cuisine, a new context for understanding food has potentially been developed.

Ferran Adrià, along with Heston Blumenthal and Thomas Keller, are often credited with being the pioneers of 'new cookery' (Adrià *et al.* 2006). Yet Adrià stands as the figure who blurred food and aesthetics in previously unforeseen ways. The comparisons between Picasso and Adrià have been well established; Adrià's deconstructionist approach to cookery is considered equally revolutionary to Picasso's deconstruction of perspective and the conventional planes of the canvas (Åman *et al.* 2015). Whereas Picasso intuitively positioned himself and his art as a drastic departure from the art of his predecessors in the early twentieth century, Adrià similarly positioned his cookery as a reactionary movement

against the established conventions of haute cuisine at El Bulli in the early parts of the twenty-first century. What can be established from this comparison is that the ability for chefs to drastically reinvent the culinary field and cuisine occurred nearly a century after avant garde artists were able to revolutionise the field of art. In the terms of Bourdieu (1993), what this means is that only in the twenty-first century, and only after the developments of *nouvelle cuisine*, were certain chefs able to use their autonomy in taking new positions. In short, Adrià's repositioning, only possible as a legitimised Michelin-star chef, created a general change within the entire culinary field and made possible a new set of potential positions centred around the scientific and aesthetic manipulation of ingredients.

According to Elias (1993), the transition from craftsmen's art to artists' art, and for art to distance itself from utility, necessitates the artist becoming a 'moulder of taste'. As the artist occupies a position of power over their anonymous audience, a dialogue between the two is required so that the artist may direct their audience toward the intended meanings and significance of their art. As with Adrià and similar chefs operating within what is commonly referred to as 'molecular gastronomy,' this dialogue becomes a key feature of their form of haute cuisine. In the technical reimagining of ingredients into gelatinous spheres or foams, Adrià created a dialogue between chef and diner that previously did not exist. As a result, this fundamentally changed the orthodoxy of the culinary field. In classical haute cuisine this dialogue was bound by the traditions of fine dining. Dining, service, and the role of the chef were largely defined by a set of preconceptions of what was to be expected from an haute cuisine restaurant. Adrià's gastronomy broke

these conventions. In forcing diners to reevaluate their approach to dining and structures of ingredients, Adrià opened a direct dialogue between the aesthetic autonomy of the chef and the diner (Myhrvold 2011). Much like how the Futurists believed people 'think, dream, and act according to what they eat and drink' (Marinetti 1932: 33) the proponents of new cookery believed 'cooking can affect people in profound ways... the act of eating engages all of the senses as well as the mind' (Adrià *et al.* 2006). What I am suggesting here is that the difficulty in expressing gustatory experiences has become a major feature of the sort of cuisine being created by leading chefs. Through chef autonomy and the rapid expansion of an aesthetic approach to haute cuisine, certain plates of food have become discursive tools for chefs to engage with their diners. So in Bottura's examination of Italian culinary traditions from ten kilometres away, he is not only reevaluating the foundations of that history, but also attempting to open an emotional narrative that reaches the diner in ways beyond the utility of eating.

IV. The Discursive Function of Cooking

If opening a dialogue between chef and diner is a defining feature of haute cuisine, then what is the significance of that process? What messages are chefs attempting to convey and how? Carolyn Korsmeyer's (1999) studies into the philosophical aspects of taste are particularly significant in understanding how this process can take place. In Korsmeyer's analysis, she suggests that certain foods are capable of expressing meaning through what they may represent symbolically. The symbolic interpretation of foods allows meaning to be attached to these foodstuffs and, in turn, the subjective pleasure of food can evoke meaning beyond the sense of taste alone.

This form of symbolism can be traced back to the formative years of a French haute cuisine; the spectacle, craft, and disguise of flavours through the use of exotic spices act as a representation of the elites economic and political wealth. Korsmeyer focuses particularly on the work of chef Marie-Antoine Carême (1784-1833), employed by many nobles and royalty during the early nineteenth century. Carême's *pieces montées*, extravagant centrepieces for the display and serving of food, are regarded as the best expressions of the chef's creative output. Formed from a combination of spun sugar, almond paste, purées, and pâtés, they were part architectural showpiece and part edible element of the banquet itself. For Korsmeyer however the importance of these creations lies in how culinary craft is capable of representing the social conditions in which it was created. In this case, representative of the wealth and prestige of Carême's patrons (Korsmeyer 1999: 121-125). Herein lies the discursive function of contemporary haute cuisine: certain chefs today intentionally attempt to offer diners creations that convey meaning or elicit an emotional response. This process of contemporary haute cuisine similarly reflects the social, cultural, and in some cases, political conditions in which they are created.

Five Ages of Parmigiano Reggiano

Massimo Bottura's philosophy of approaching Italian cuisine from ten kilometres away is representative of this discursive role of cooking. Yet to understand how Bottura is capable of developing this within his gastronomy, it is necessary to use the framework proposed by Bourdieu regarding the interaction between habitus and the field. As Bourdieu understands it, habitus is the product of a particular environment of structured structures, which objectively

regulates the practices and strategies of an individual (Bourdieu 1977: 72). Bottura, born in Modena and raised in the culinary traditions of the Emilia Romagna region of Italy, grew up with an understanding of the history and traditions of the rustic, peasant dishes his cuisine critiques and the memory of which he attempts to evoke. His culinary training comes most notably from the tutelage of the three Michelin-starred Alain Ducasse and then Ferran Adrià at El Bulli. From this particular set of environments, Bottura inherited a culinary habitus with a detailed knowledge and understanding of Italian cuisine but also of the culinary field, its histories and traditions, the competing positions and its defining discourses; the French traditions from Ducasse and the experimental aesthetics of Adrià (Bottura 2012). Italian cuisine from ten kilometres away operates at the intersection of his culinary habitus and the historical developments the culinary field had undergone since the development of *nouvelle cuisine* in the 1960s. In short, the culinary field produces a habitus for chefs, which, in turn, produces and potentially changes the field.

The dish *Five Ages of Parmigiano Reggiano* is a clear example of both how it represents Bottura's habitus and position, yet also exhibits the discursive function chefs intend to display. The dish is an examination and deconstruction of the history and production of Parmigiano Reggiano, the cheese most synonymous with Emilia Romagna. Technically, the dish stretches the formal properties of the cheese, transforming it into a demi-soufflé, wafer, sauce, foam, and even as 'air'. Conceptually it examines *stagionatura*, the aging process each wheel of cheese undergoes that subtly changes its flavour. Each technical element utilises a specific age of cheese to present a

temporal and sensual exploration of the cheeses production and elicit within the diner an understanding of the cheeses artisanal production. Another conceptual point that frames the dish derives from the French term *terroir*, a concept and influence born from Bottura's work under Ducasse (Bottura 2014: 32). As a concept, *terroir* describes how the combination of geographic factors with cultural factors create unique flavour profiles. Arising from the twentieth century, the French tastemakers of literary gourmards, critics, and *vignerons* created a language about food and drink that was rooted in the French agrarian tradition, therefore benefiting those who profit from foodstuffs that evoke the past (Trubek 2008: 21-22). This specific plate of food, then, reflects both Bottura's habitus of the Emilia Romagna tradition, and also the heritage of the culinary field and the French agrarian practices embedded within it. Overall, what I am attempting to explain here is that certain plates of food and certain chefs represent the culmination of factors that have occurred within the culinary field since the mid-twentieth century. Autonomy within the field has reached a point where just eating is not the only factor. Narratives, histories, traditions, and emotional experiences are all part of the course of contemporary haute cuisine. This autonomy, emerging only since the 1960s, has resulted in ideas being played out on the plate and for the culinary field to be able to engage with discourses beyond just cooking – something impossible just a few decades ago.

The Ethical Turn

In May 2012, northern Italy was devastated by a series of earthquakes. Part of the destruction resulted in an estimated 400,000 wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano being damaged or outright

destroyed. Risotto 'Cacio e Pepe' is Bottura's response to the disaster and highlights a unique phenomenon: the ethical turn of elite chefs within haute cuisine. What we are witnessing is not only plates of food being used to convey meaning, but that meaning becoming an ethical stance on current social issues. Raviv (2018) notices this in an example of Dan Barber, an American two Michelin-starred chef, at his restaurant Blue Hill at Stone Barns. Diners were momentarily interrupted between courses while a waiter explained the restaurants composting practices and how the restaurant is operates largely self-sufficiently from the produce grown in the farms surrounding the restaurant. In 2015 Barber also initiated the project wastED; bringing together farmers, fishermen, producers, and guest chefs (including illustrious names such as Alain Ducasse and Grant Achatz) to his New York restaurant Blue Hill to create menus from produce that would otherwise be wasted.

Bottura's dish is a derivative of the Roman dish cacio e pepe but replaces pecorino and pasta for Parmigiano Reggiano and rice to create an Emilia Romagna version. The intention for the dish was to utilise as much of the remaining cheese that survived the earthquakes as possible and to encourage others to likewise support the producers. Bottura has described this dish as being 'layered with meanings: people, places and time' (Bottura 2014, p118). Unlike the rest of Bottura's recipes, *Risotto 'Cacio e Pepe'* requires no advanced techniques or special equipment, just vast amounts of cheese to protect the people and traditions of Bottura's Emilia Romagna heritage. What I am suggesting here is that the discursive element of haute cuisine is becoming a way for chefs to ethically engage with issues regarding food production. In broader terms, this

potentially reveals a wider change occurring within the culinary field, resulting from ethical discourses influencing the way chefs think about and create their cuisine. Certain powerful agents, such as Bottura and Barber, drive this change towards an explicit ethical role within haute cuisine. The consequence being that the entire field potentially becomes ethically engaged.

V. Conclusion

In this article I have explored the history and developments of the European culinary field since the mid-twentieth century and its relation to the discourses of contemporary art. Using Bourdieu's field theory I have mapped the social, political, and cultural conditions that have influenced the rapid trajectory of the chef profession since the formation of nouvelle cuisine in the 1960s. Since the profession managed to free itself from the heteronomy of working under the direction of preindustrial elites, both the role and aesthetics of haute cuisine have become increasingly autonomous. Bourdieu's concepts regarding the field, legitimation, position-taking, and heteronomy/autonomy have all been utilised in an attempt to explain how and why chefs have used their autonomy to expand the culinary field. The comparison between the field of contemporary art since the twentieth century and the culinary field has been used to explore how the discourses within contemporary art have influenced practices within the culinary field. Most importantly, this article has examined how that autonomy has resulted in certain elite forms of haute cuisine becoming discursive moments that attempt to reveal the narratives and emotions plates of food are capable of conveying.

Developing from this, I have briefly

detailed the ethical turn within this discursive function. As an examination of how the social and cultural conditions in which haute cuisine operates, this article has also started to engage with new research avenues into how contemporary ethical ideas are influencing haute cuisine. This is the start of a larger research aim of looking into how and why certain elite chefs have started to introduce ethical concerns into their dishes and how haute cuisine, as a whole, is moving in the direction of ethical thinking.

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Biography

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