

Eating Out as Eating In: The Intimate Call of the Contemporary Restaurant Scene

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Abstract: *Anthropology, sociology, and more recently philosophy have produced a number of accounts of food and eating based on the idea that food is essentially, and fundamentally, a cognitive and experiential activity. Mindful of the body and the mind, while aware of social and economic environments, these accounts range from the emotional experience of food, to the many and multifaceted contrasts intrinsic to the nature of food (life and death, raw and cooked, exotic and familiar), and can also incorporate the social and economic dichotomies associated with the selection and consumption of food. This paper stems from the same analytical tradition, but aims at a target that, at least in the academia, is still not sufficiently explored: the experience of fine dining. Specifically, I am interested in the attention that renowned chefs and exclusive restaurant environments are paying to the cognitive, perceptual, and social features of food and eating that are traditionally associated with more modest, familiar, and affordable eating practices. I begin with an analysis of the practical, but also emotional and experiential differences between “eating in” and “eating out.” I then consider three concepts: Terroir, Home, and Kitchen and how they have been appropriated and shaped by the contemporary restaurant scene. It is largely incorrect, I conclude, to regard fine restaurants and cuisine as exclusive, exceptional, or eccentric experiences. One of the current and leading goals of high scale dining is to recall the intimate and familiar dimensions of food and its consumption. Furthermore, I maintain that in addition to recalling the experience of intimacy and familiarity, fine dining is able to “re-invent” it.*

Keywords: *philosophy of food, Haute cuisine, social aesthetics, terroir, aesthetic experience*

Despite food and eating practices being two central arguments of discussion in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, philosophical studies of food, albeit not sparse, have often been dismissed, or at least looked at with a certain hesitation. With the exception of ethicists, who have long been concerned with questions such as the status of animals and environmental sustainability, almost every philosopher seems to feel the urge to begin a paper on food with some sort of a justification. These justifications tend to involve a brief history of the reasons why food, an essential part of our lives, has not been a central topic of philosophical analysis, and a discussion of why these reasons are either invalid or not valid anymore.

When we narrow the discussion from the philosophy of food to the aesthetics of food, one of the guiding threads of this paper, there are at least three main obstacles to consider. First, the belief that food is an inferior subject because of its relation to the body rather than the mind; second, the predilection for vision and hearing and the dismissal of smell and taste; and, lastly, the “interested” and practical dimension of food which radically separates it from the

imaginative and disinterested activity that, according to Kant and Kantian¹ followers, should characterize aesthetic experience. As a response, philosophers contend that a Kantian notion of aesthetic experience is too limiting and at odds with the aesthetic practices we encounter in everyday life; that, as studies in proprioception and somaesthetics tell us, the mind and the body are not only related, but also inform each other, and that, as Emily Brady, among others, eloquently shows, smell and taste are neither as primitive as philosophers have often thought, nor are they significantly dissimilar from their “nobler” cousins, vision and hearing.²

In joining the ranks of those who believe in the philosophical analysis of food, I am going to bypass most of the aforementioned discussion, and accept its fundamental conclusion. Food is worthy of philosophical study; in fact, with David Kaplan,³ I also believe that food is conquering its own philosophical niche, and that philosophy of food might be on the cusp of becoming a prominent philosophical branch.

In this essay, I will consider a number of issues related to the aesthetics of food and, more broadly, to social aesthetics and environmental aesthetics. Specifically, I am interested in the analysis of haute cuisine and fine dining, and of the experience thereby provided. Contrary to the commonly held beliefs associating fine dining with luxury, elite practices, and with the idea of foreign, unique, or special occasions, I propose an interpretation of fine dining based on intimacy. To explain what I imply by intimacy, I will analyze contemporary culinary movements, restaurants, and renowned chefs under the conceptual triad of “Terroir,” “Home,” and “Kitchen.” Despite not exhausting the many nuances of fine dining, these three terms evoke the sense of familiarity and closeness that characterizes both the duo of home and traditional cuisine and, as I will attempt to demonstrate, haute cuisine. More provocatively, I maintain that haute cuisine has not only adopted these concepts, it has “re-created” and empowered them.

From Food as Art to its Experience: A Few Approaches to the Aesthetics of Food

It is possible to distinguish two branches in the aesthetic analysis of food. On the one hand, we find discussions of whether food can acquire the status of art and be regarded on par, or at least similarly, to higher arts. Elisabeth Telfer,⁴ to mention only one of the authors concerned with this question, analyzes some of the limits hindering the recognition of food as art, and responds that such limits are less motivated than we might think and that food and dishes should be regarded as art. However, her verdict does not truly settle the debate. Despite defending food as art, Telfer regards it as a minor art, and is careful to add a series of cautionary remarks on treating food on par with other arts.

Telfer’s hesitation is neither her fault, nor is it entirely objectionable. Food evades many of the issues we tend to relate to art and art criticism, and adjusting a given definition of artworks as to include food might not be the most pressing issue. In this respect, I agree with Aaron Meskin

1 In Kant, food fails to be an object of aesthetic contemplation in at least three ways. First, our physiological need of food is a mark of interest, and interest in the object of contemplation, rather than a pure contemplation of its presentation, is banned by Kantian aesthetics. Second, food tastes are, according to him, exclusively subjective: food can only be regarded as “agreeable,” and our food preferences, it follows, can never act as an indicator of the beautiful. Lastly, food triggers immediate, hedonic reactions that hinder the reflective contemplation that characterizes the Kantian notion of imaginative experience.

2 Brady, Emily. “Smells, Tastes, and Everyday Aesthetics” in *The Philosophy of Food*, David M. Kaplan (ed.) 2012. Berkeley: University of California Press: 69-86.

3 Kaplan, David M. “The Philosophy of Food” in *The Philosophy of Food*, David M. Kaplan (ed.) 2012. Berkeley: University of California Press: 1-23.

4 Telfer, Elisabeth. “Food as Art” in *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*. 2nd Edition. Alex Neill & Aaron Ridley (eds.) 2002. London : Routledge: 9-27.

who, despite believing in food as art,⁵ invites philosophers, foodies, and the like, to “make the case for the value of food as food and not worry so much about its aesthetic and artistic status.”⁶

On the other hand, as an alternative to the definition, or justification, of food as art, the literature counts several contributions that analyze food in a Deweyan fashion, namely by looking at the experience of food and eating. The main pillar sustaining the edifice of ‘everyday aesthetics,’ Dewey’s thought is central to the understanding of food and eating practices. Framing the analysis of food within the concepts expressed by Dewey, from experience, to emotional significance, to the idea of “transaction” – the latter evoking the exchange, dialogue, and discovery that food implies – is likely to lead to constructive and cognitively interesting results, results that might shed a light on the complexity of the aesthetic (as opposed to the more ambitious “artistic”) experience that food and eating practices afford.

Connotations of food as an aesthetic experience cover a large spectrum of sensorial and cultural stimuli and intuitions, too many and too nuanced in their nature to be listed here. Yet, looking ahead to the direction this essay will take, it won’t be mistaken, I believe, to see food as simultaneously the embodiment and the symbol of something not only capable, but also directly engaged in the shaping of subjectivity. Deborah Lupton,⁷ who abides to this view, points to how the emotions generated by the encounter with food function as an indicator of who we are as persons within culture, while simultaneously putting us in sync with our own body tasting food and reacting to such tastes. It is, she argues, this “embodied” sense of cultural recognition that further leads to the somewhat Proustian transformation of the food-related physical stimuli into memories.

Memory, the loyal companion of subjectivity, is in turn a leading topic of discussion in the philosophy of food. In “Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home,”⁸ David E. Sutton considers the experience and reactions of Greek students studying at Oxford when they received food from home. The experience is characterized as “returning to the whole,” as a physical and mental restoration of “integrity.” Individual integrity is restored because, Sutton explains: “... the food event evokes a whole world of family, agricultural associations, place names and other ‘local knowledge’” that was, up to the encounter with, in this case, local Greek food, too distant to be fully embraced.

Not necessarily at odds with the kind of food philosophy focusing on subjectivity and memory I briefly hinted at, but nevertheless methodologically, and often conceptually, distinct is the analysis of the dichotomies and contrasts that characterize the experience of food. This approach, to which I subscribe, finds immediate justification in the nature of food and eating practices, a nature that, arguably, has as its essence the art of contrast and combination. Cooking, table arrangements, the order of courses, the presentation of dishes, etc. are guided by the recognition of the complex alchemy underlying the quality and variety of food and possible preparations. Explaining the cognitive effects and unfolding the emotions, but also concepts and ideas that are generated and triggered by such contrasts and combinations is, I believe, one of the most promising ways to approach food from a philosophical standpoint.

Carolyn Korsmeyer immensely acute works in the aesthetics of food is a case in point. In

5 Specifically, Meskin believes in the classification of certain dishes and a certain kinds of cuisine (most prominently Ferrà Adrià’s molecular and deconstructed cuisine) as forms of “hybrid arts.”

6 Meskin, Aaron. “The Art and Aesthetics of Food” in *The Philosopher’s Magazine* Issue 61, 2nd Quarter 2013. Fake Barn Country: Pages 81-86.

7 Lupton, Deborah. “Food and Emotion” in *The Taste Culture Reader. Experiencing Food and Drink*. Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.) 2005. Oxford: Berg: 317-324.

8 Sutton, David E. “Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home” in *The Taste Culture Reader. Experiencing Food and Drink*. Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.) 2005. Oxford: Berg: 304-316.

her essay “Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting,”⁹ and in her book *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*,¹⁰ Korsmeyer analyzes the “compressed symbolic recognition” that is involved in our cognitive responses to food and eating – whether pleasurable or disgusting. The contrast and combination of revolting and delicious is at the core of cuisine, but it is also the “compressed” symbolization of something else. Certain cooking practices and certain foods remind us, she highlights, of the alternation of life and death; they pressure us to reflect on it, and to realize that we belong to the very same cycle.

A further dichotomy often associated with food, and one on which I will, if only tangentially, return is the one between “authentic” and “inauthentic.” Interestingly, as Lisa Heldke¹¹ points out, the question here is whether the contrast exists at all. The authenticity of food, she observes, is a matter of transaction and contamination of traditions. It is also, prominently, a transaction between the dish and the eater. When approaching new cuisines – when we travel, or when we simply have the desire to try a restaurant serving “authentic” food from a region we are not familiar with – we inevitably add our own status of “foreigners” to the dishes we try, an interaction that might be thought to “corrupt” the authenticity of a meal. And yet, no meal would be authentic without the very presence of eaters, local and knowledgeable of the dishes, or foreign, and in search of a new culinary adventure. The concept of authentic food is an evolving concept, a concept in which eaters are to be regarded as active participants.

Lastly, it is impossible not to highlight how contrasts in food and eating practices are often the vehicle for analyses of sociological and economic nature. A prime example here is Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction between “taste of luxury” as representative of the bourgeois freedom, and “taste of necessity” which instead characterizes the working class. Food choices and eating practices embody the separation, social and economic, of classes; they represent a conflict that goes much beyond the savoring of a given food item. In fact, Bourdieu goes as far as claiming that food practices, and especially the “formality” of bourgeois eating, are symbolizations of the “invisible censorship of living,” and “a way of denying the meaning and primary function of consumption, which are essentially common, by making the meal a social ceremony, an affirmation of ethical tone and aesthetic refinement.”¹²

Of all the arguments I listed in this short and, admittedly, very incomplete survey, Bourdieu’s is the one I am least sympathetic to. This is not to say that I deny the relation between classes and food, rather, I disagree with the idea that social practices, whether bourgeois or of other nature, strip food off the “primary function of consumption.” Bourdieu, I believe, is guilty of looking at the consumption of food as a separate biological and physiological act, an act that is being (unfortunately, he implies) adulterated by social practices. Differently put, his mistake resides, I contend, in the framing of food as a “two-steps” process that inevitably separates fulfilling hunger from social aspects of consumption. Such practices can instead be seen relationally, as interwoven experiences contributing together to the hedonic experience of food.

My hesitance in accepting Bourdieu’s argument, together with the objection mentioned above, can also be seen as the standpoint from which to develop an analysis of haute cuisine and fine dining. As some of the authors listed in this section, I am also interested in the contrasts,

9 Korsmeyer, Carolyn. “Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 60 No. 3 (Summer, 2002): 217-225.

10 Korsmeyer, Carolyn. (2011). *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

11 Heldke, Lisa. “But is it Authentic? Culinary Travel and the Search for the ‘Genuine Article’” in *The Taste Culture Reader. Experiencing Food and Drink*. Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.) 2005. Oxford: Berg: 385-394.

12 Bourdieu, Pierre. “Taste of Luxury, Taste of Necessity” in *The Taste Culture Reader. Experiencing Food and Drink*. Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.) 2005. Oxford: Berg: 77.

dichotomies, and combinations that belong to food and eating. Specifically, the conflict I aim to consider is the one between “eating in” and “eating out.” These two terms, which taken by themselves are rather vague and hard to define, encompass a set of associated concepts that I will divide into the three aforementioned headings of “Terroir,” “Home,” and “Kitchen.” What I find interesting about these terms is that they are often associated with eating experiences that are radically different from the highly sophisticated and glamorous descriptions characterizing haute cuisine. And yet, I hope to show, the sense of familiarity, intimacy, and comfort evoked by these terms might be precisely what is at stake in contemporary haute cuisine.

Terroir

Terroir is a complex term; a term one might want to dedicate to more than a short section in an article. Yet, for my purposes, the concept of *terroir* is probably the easiest to analyze. Traditionally associated with the French culinary tradition, *terroir*'s meaning is related to both a specific geographical location and to how such a location is felt, recognized, and remembered by the people inhabiting it. The relationship between the land and the local population is, in this sense, the starting point for the creation of the sensual and practical connotations characterizing the products of *terroir*.

In her analysis of *terroir*, Amy Trubek traces the origin of the “*goût du terroir*,” the specific combination of taste and tradition (or of tasting the tradition) described above, to two sources. On the one hand, *terroir* is directly and somewhat literally linked to the roots of someone's history and to the very soil of a region. In this sense, the *goût* is interpreted as the taste that the soil can give to a product. On the other hand, the concept of *terroir* and the idea of a *goût du terroir* are instead seen as largely cultural, if not economic, constructions. As Trubek writes:

...beginning in the early 1900s, a group of *people* began to organize around this naturalized connection of taste and place, for they say the potential benefits of a foodview celebrating the agrarian and rural way of life. French *taste-makers* – journalists, cookbook writers, chefs – and *taste producers* –cheese-makers, wine-makers, bakers, cooks – have long been allied in an effort to shape taste perceptions. Taste producers and taste makers intervened in an everyday occurrence, eating and drinking, and these advocates guided the French toward a certain relationship between the soil and taste, *le goût du terroir*.¹³ [emphasis in the text]

These two sides, one linked to nature, location, and a sense of origin, the other to the inventiveness of culture and following enterprises (commercial and not) seamlessly cooperate, in the best of cases, in channeling the attention to the protection and preservation of the lands, techniques, and traditions that risk to be forgotten or wiped out by the mass and low quality production that often impinges upon the food industry.

Furthermore, and most importantly for our purposes, *terroir* has been able to connect the respect for a specific environment and its products to a sense of identity. The products of *terroir* are not only local, they are also “authentic” in their ability to signal and enforce identity. The *goût du terroir* is thus better understood as the synesthetic feeling that connects a product to the cultural and social history surrounding it. While defining a culinary tradition, *terroir* becomes a way of characterizing the identity of the people inhabiting a specific place.

It is precisely this latter, more complex feeling combining taste, identity, and authenticity

¹³ Trubek, Amy. “Place Matters” in *The Taste Culture Reader. Experiencing Food and Drink*. Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.) 2005. Oxford: Berg: 263.

that has been embraced by haute cuisine. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the concept of *terroir* is one of the easiest to observe within fine dining. *Terroir* relies on localism, on simple, authentic flavors, and on the sense of being familiar with a region or land, tied to it, belonging to it. These concepts are essential to the contemporary food scene. An obvious example is the restaurant *Noma* in Copenhagen. René Redzepi, chef and owner, engineers his nine course menu around ingredients from the immediate surroundings of the restaurant. Redzepi's creative power is borne out of the recognition of the potential of *terroir*, and it is propelled by the difficulty of limiting the menu to what is locally available. Since 2010, *Noma* has been voted three times number one in the *World's 50 Best Restaurants List*; it is featured in a number of cooking show (including David Chang's *The Mind of a Chef*), and, after being at the center of several documentaries, is now the main topic of *Noma, The Perfect Storm*, which recently premiered at Berlin Film Festival.

Less grandiose, but nonetheless significant, is the number of chefs leaving buzzing urban centers and food capitals such as New York to open "farm to table" restaurants in rural towns. In "An Upriver Current"¹⁴ published in the *New York Times* in the summer of 2013, Julia Moskin chronicles the journey of renowned city chefs to the Hudson Valley, which is, one may say, becoming to New Yorkers what Napa and Sonoma are to San Franciscans. New Yorkers are, in other words, starting to enjoy and to identify themselves with products of New York, from the immense success of Brooklyn-Made products and markets like Smorgasburg,¹⁵ to the farms of the Hudson Valley.

These and other forms of localism, whether in the form of markets, restaurants, or through the initiative of both communities and farmers are, because of their connection to notion such as *terroir*, creating a new sense of intimacy, identity, and familiarity. Historically, New Yorkers have long emphasized and preserved their respective "terroirs;" a city composed largely of immigrants, New York is a mecca of local, authentic products, and it comes to no surprise that "Eataly," the enormously successful store selling fine Italian food, has opened its American branch here, a block from the Flatiron Building. Yet, with the exception of the products immigrants have historically brought with them and added to the culinary landscape of the city, New York relies on a much less sophisticated list of local foods: hot dogs, New York pizza, and bagels. This is, I believe, changing. The haute cuisine of New York is creating new gustatory experiences by combining the local reality of present New York with neighborhood traditions. New American restaurants such as Cesar Ramirez's *Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare* (on which I will soon return), have inaugurated a new phase that, while superb in its attention to technique, quality, and presentation, is largely focused on the recreation of a sense of intimacy and familiarity with food and its "terroir." The grocery store located above the restaurant claims:

Our goal is to be a centerpiece of the Brooklyn community and your 21st Century Neighborhood Grocer. A place you and your family will come back to again and again for gourmet groceries, delicious prepared meals and more. A place where you'll find the prices and processes of a modern day supermarket, with the perks and service of an old-school neighborhood grocer.¹⁶

As a term, *terroir* has been associated with a specific past and its related traditions. Haute cuisine, as in Ramirez and Redzepi's case, has proven how the idea of *terroir* can be introduced through

14 Moskin, Julia. "An Upriver Current" *New York Times*, accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/14/dining/city-chefs-head-to-the-hudson-valley-lured-by-fresh-ingredients.html?pagewanted=all>

15 <http://www.smorgasburg.com/> accessed January 27, 2015

16 <http://www.brooklynfare.com/pages/about> accessed January 27, 2015

the discovery of “potential terroirs” such as Copenhagen or Brooklyn. *Noma* and *Chef’s Table at Brooklyn Fare* are incredible restaurants because they have re-interpreted the concept of *terroir* and brought it to different centers and locations. They have donated an intimate gustatory past to the people of Copenhagen and Brooklyn.

Home

The second concept we find associated with the notion of food and eating as familiar and intimate practices is what I simply summarized with the term “Home.” By “Home” I mean, of course, the dinner table, but also the idea of entering a specific environment, a home, as either its owner or guest.

Home dinners, and the food served at such dinners, have been *topoi* of the literary tradition since Antiquity. Take, for instance, Petronius’ *Satyricon*. Petronius’ Book XV, “Dinner at Trimalchio,” is a satirical, immensely character oriented, rendition of a fabulous feast held by the vulgar and boisterous Trimalchio at his home. Petronius alternates three descriptions: the house, the dinner, and a portrait of Trimalchio; the descriptions overlap, they complete each other, and they highlight how a home and a dinner can be indicators of the person who is hosting it. Trimalchio’s home *is* Trimalchio, as his dinner is a manifestation of his personality: both aspects that, needless to say, advance the readings and interpretations offered by the *Satyricon*.

Dinners set at home are also widely present in film. *La Grande Bouffe* (Ferreri, 1973) features a group of friends, and foodies, who retire in a villa with the goal of indulging in a vast array of sexual and culinary pleasures (of hardly hidden morbid nature) until their eventual death. Sardonic and grotesque, the film is a stellar example of the relation (some may say conflict) between transgression and desire in the consumption of food “at home.” The highly elaborate dinners cooked, and the “excess of delicacies” are a reflection of the persons they are, or have become: persons whose narrative arc, in its peculiar aesthetic and moral qualities, can only unfold in a confined environment where excesses, but also weaknesses and wickedness can fully develop.

At the opposite end of the moral spectrum we find films such as *Eat, Drink, Man and Woman* (Ang Lee, 1994), a touching portrait of the life of an aging chef and his three daughters. The four of them sit together around the table where, while eating the father’s dinners (a famous chef), they bring up novelties and secrets in their lives. The dinner table is here the channel through which all what happens in the house is revealed. In *Eat, Drink, Man and Woman*, food is seen in its most delicate and suiting light, as a vehicle for family conversations and as the means through which families express a feeling of intimacy and community. Dining at home is in this sense related to the disclosure of who we are as persons, of our secrets, habits, and character features, together with the presentation of the conflicts and difficulties that surround us.

Lastly, when focusing on the symbolic value of dining at home, it is impossible not to mention the function of home dinners as one of the leading aspects of hospitality. Being invited to dinner is very different from eating out. To start with, an invitation implies some kind of acquaintance with the host; acquaintance might in turn be related to close friendship or, as it often happens at dinner parties, to a certain curiosity – the desire, to put it simply, to know someone. Home dinners can be formal, a display of fine china, crystal glasses, and polished silver cutlery, but they also allow for the exact opposite. After all, guests are typically asked to “make themselves at home,” to relax, and to close an eye on a service that, like any service in any family, is unlikely to be perfect. Finally, home dinners rarely have a menu and they rely instead on what the cook (and frequently also the host) decides to make.

This series of combinations and the intertwined dynamics of families, persons, and the codes – formal and not – of hospitality are also, to a large extent, at the core of Craig Thornton’s work.

Thornton is a young, successful chef working in Los Angeles. In the past years he has become famous for an underground event, *Wolvesmouth*, held at *Wolvesden* – his loft in downtown Los Angeles. Dining at *Wolvesden* is not easy; you are asked to sign up to a list and “when it happens” you might be contacted via email and invited to one of the dinners. A dinner at *Wolvesmouth* puts together sixteen strangers – picked (sometimes) according to their affinities and (sometimes) according to their diversity. A menu features nine to twelve elaborate courses, courses that are *forever* experimental – Thornton never adopts the same recipe twice, and he hardly tastes his creations.

Thornton’s dishes, presented quite crudely through a list of their ingredients, follow a specific aesthetic. Meat is hand-torn and sauces and reductions in bright colors cut through the dishes unevenly. There is something savage about them, but also the impression of a newfound balance. Differently from the harmonious compositions of formal dining, his dishes come alive on the plate, they invite reflection, if not the very need of reconstruction. Diners are able to trace back the origin of a dish to its ingredients, and to gaze at Thornton’s intervention. A skinny young cook with a cascade of long hair tucked up in a makeshift chignon, Thornton chooses his home to let the food disclose his personality.

Dining at *Wolvesden* is an experiment in aesthetics and ethics. The hypersensitive quality of his food and of the apartment in which the courses are served suggest a new dimension of dining and of what it means to dine at home. In a world that constantly dines out, *Wolvesmouth* is an intrusion. You go out to walk back in and, by doing it, you become conscious of the implications of having to share food with other persons and personalities, a food that, in its unique quality and presentation, is meant to interrogate all the diners. They will talk about it as a group, or, perhaps, as a new family.

Kitchen

The last component of our triad, Kitchen, brings our reflection to an end, or closure, by narrowing the focus to what can be metaphorically understood as an intimacy of food itself: the moment and stage in which food, before becoming a meal, “gets dressed.”

Kitchens are deeply experiential and highly synesthetic environments. The smell, look, and sound of a kitchen are often tied to vivid memories belonging to intimate and familiar aspects of our daily life. Before kitchen islands took over, most of us ate in the kitchen, right next to boiling pots, knives, and to the uncooked food that was to become our meal. We cleared the table and remained there, using the kitchen as a little, cozier living room reserved for family members and close friends: imperfection and comfort underlining the familiar aspects of kitchens while highlighting their uniqueness.

Cooks, professionals and not, recognize the importance of kitchens in their culinary education. Yotam Ottolenghi, who is largely responsible, with his column in the *Guardian*, for changing the way English people think of food and approach food at home,¹⁷ fondly remembers the small kitchen in Amsterdam where, as a young student of philosophy, he cooked for a steady group of friends.¹⁸ Massimo Bottura, the chef and creator of the Three Stars Michelin Restaurant *Osteria Francescana*, which revolutionized the culinary tradition of Emilia Romagna and most

¹⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/profile/yotamottolenghi> accessed January 22, 2015

¹⁸ Kramer, Jane. “The Philosopher Chef” in *The New Yorker*, December 3, 2012.

of Italy's Northern regions, spent his childhood under the kitchen table.¹⁹ The seeds of Bottura's culinary sophistication, and of dishes that are capable of flirting with eccentric flavors as well as avant garde art – as the dishes offered in his menu “Sensations” – were planted in a kitchen that loved traditional ingredients, laborious, but simple preparations, and the occasional 3 a.m. pasta “*aglio, olio e peperoncino*.”

In the case of Ottolenghi and Bottura, kitchens have become fragments of memory; they embody a sense of origin and intimacy, an origin that symbolizes their initiation, more or less conscious, to the world of fine cuisine. But kitchens are not just the training camp of master chefs. We are today beginning to observe a reconfiguration of the dynamics related to kitchens and to a re-conceptualization of the role of kitchens in the overall process of a meal.

Restaurants such as the aforementioned *Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare*, or *Blanca*, opened in 2012 by chef Carlo Mirarchi in Brooklyn's last rediscovered neighborhood, Bushwick, are aesthetically, as well as practically, functioning kitchens. A stainless steel counter is, it seems, good enough to be a table, and no guest is truly supposed to be bothered by the presence of a severed pig's head – as long as it is part of the menu. The vicinity to ingredients, stoves, and plates “in composition” provides the guests with a more complete dining experience. Diners at *Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare* sit close together, they share their opinions on food; they actively participate in each step of the preparation. This is, fundamentally, a twofold activity. On the one hand, they are learning to see food for what it is, and they are, with the chef, allowing for its transformation. On the other hand, they become conscious of a process, eating, that involves, as active performers, chefs and eaters alike.

One might have the feeling, while dining at *Chef's Table*, of doing more than eating; and yet, eating is exactly what everyone is doing. What changes is the recognition that eating is never passive and that we are, as diners, working and experiencing a kitchen with the chef – and with all those memories and feelings that kitchens personally inspire in each of us.

Conclusions and Assessment

In this essay, I proposed an interpretation of contemporary haute cuisine based not on its high-end and elite features, but on its ability to evoke, shape, and re-invent the sense of intimacy and familiarity given by traditional or home cuisine. To prove my point, I relied on how a number of chefs and restaurants have embraced the ideas of familiarity and intimacy through the concepts of *Terroir*, Home, and Kitchen.

While showing how wide and nuanced the world of contemporary cuisine is, the examples provided invite us to consider, with constantly renewed attention, the cognitive, experiential, and philosophical questions that fine cuisine is proposing to a growing public. Haute cuisine should not solely be regarded as an aesthetic spectacle for the few, but as a way of changing the very nature of culinary experience. The changes I highlighted in this paper are based on haute cuisine's ability to reinterpret and appropriate concepts that are typically associated with much more traditional eating practices and milieus, concepts that are in turn challenged in such a compelling variety of ways that calls, I believe, for the attention of philosophers.

In the case of *Terroir*, haute cuisine has shown how authenticity can be created anew through the investigation of undiscovered, potential *terroirs* that include urban environments, such as Brooklyn and Copenhagen, as well as new regions, such as the Hudson Valley, that are effectively claiming the status of *terroirs*. Haute cuisine is, in this sense, a first step into the creation of what

¹⁹ Kramer, Jane. “Post-Modena. Italy's food is bound by tradition. Its most famous chef isn't” in *The New Yorker*, Nov. 4, 2013.

are bound to become gustatory traditions.

The notion of “Home” brought us from the creation of traditions to their reinterpretation. A meal at *Wolvesden* is indeed a meal served at home, but it compels its guests with a savage presentation of ingredients, with the encounter of other, non-familiar patrons that are, however, asked to dine together. Craig Thornton plays with the notion of a familiar environment only to carefully dismantle it. As a result, we are left with the task of reconfiguring notions, the notion of home and dining at home, but also the very emotions that we had previously associated with them. The change is sociological and cognitive at once, it acts on a personal and on a collective level; a dinner at *Wolvesden* can alter the security of homes and of the home food we have been trained to rely on.

But dissonance and challenge are not the only ways in which haute cuisine plays with more traditional concepts. Serving a meal where the meal is prepared and allowing the patrons to watch each step of its preparation is likely to empower them. From passive consumers, the guests are given an active role, the one of participants and observers. As in the case of performance art, the audience is engaged to a higher degree, thus becoming more profoundly aware of the experience of food, an experience that goes beyond savoring a dish. A further observation emphasizes the importance of the experience described. “Chef’s Tables” are becoming increasingly popular in urban centers where a large portion of the population ignores, or hardly remembers what it means to eat in the kitchen. They do not know, in other words, what it truly means to “eat in.” In cities where the adopted practice is to *eat out* and *order in*, dining out while dining at a kitchen table is a way of, somewhat oxymoronicly, re-enacting a “forgotten” experience in a contemporary key.

In my introduction, I specified how, rather than making the question of whether food is an art our priority, we should be concerned with its experiential value. I am now willing to admit that, when it comes to the examples provided in this paper, the equation of food with art might not be mistaken. Great art explores and challenges the way we perceive; it allows for the discovery of what perception is capable of while elaborating on ideas and concepts that are crucial for us as human beings. Haute cuisine is, I believe, very close to this goal.

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