

## **Suppressing Desire as Culinary Discipline: Can Culinary Education Be Hedonistic? Should It Be?**

Jonathan Deutsch, Ph.D., Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA

### **Abstract**

Paul Rozin says that food is fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching. While academia loves to bemoan, prevent, dissect, and discuss, it struggles to enjoy; fun gets short shrift. Much of the early history of food studies has been occupied with establishing its seriousness and legitimacy, despite—or at the expense of—pleasure (Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts*). Lab coats, hair nets, micronutrients, and portion scales take the sensuality from cooking—and from a food safety perspective, rightly so! Professional culinary education in particular has been a discipline (and there it is again) committed to suppressing and controlling desires—desires among working class commis to become white collar (literally) chefs; desires to cook with passion as one does at home, tasting with one’s finger or licking the cake beaters; and desires to storm the dining room to tell a dissatisfied guest where to shove his opinion of the cuisine, to name a few. Culinary education has its roots in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century hotel training. Even the standard curriculum—knife skills, stocks, soups, sauces in that order—has its roots in Escoffier’s *Le Guide Culinaire*. By the end of the course, desire—to cook, to eat, to savor—evaporates in the process of reducing until sec as a necessary cornerstone of the professionalizing process. Colleagues at Drexel University have developed an alternative model to culinary education that teaches methodological understanding over recipe and culinary improvisation—cooking when things go wrong, as they often do—over following a recipe. The approach is agnostic with regard to cuisine. What tastes good—what one desires—should be in the repertoire, with a clear acknowledgment that a culinary student of today is much more likely to find herself rolling sushi for a cocktail party than preparing a tableside sole bonne femme. At the core of such pedagogy is desire: professional, gastronomic, and intensely personal. This paper describes this approach and reviews some preliminary data on its effectiveness with an eye for soliciting feedback and building interest in an international faculty learning community

of like-minded gastronomes and culinary educators looking to train young cooks to say not only, “Oui, chef!,” but “Why, chef?”

## **Introduction**

Like great academics, I begin with caveats and limitations. This story is intensely personal as I’ve been intimately involved with culinary education, first as a student, then as an instructor and now as an administrator. Some of these thoughts have been published in the textbook, *Culinary Improvisation: Skill Building Exercises Beyond the Mystery Basket* (Pearson, 2010), but more from a didactic standpoint than a philosophical one. Data that inform this paper come from three main sources:

1. A series of focus groups of employers of culinary school graduates in New York and Philadelphia used in designing curriculum.
2. An audit of over 400 professional culinary programs’ curricula in the US and Canada for the purposes of curriculum review and alignment.
3. Anonymous end-of-term evaluations completed by culinary students piloting new curriculum.

An astute reader will gather that these data sources were gathered for other means—namely curriculum development—but a retrospective study of those data can inform our conversation. This is a US-based project—one of the benefits of presenting these ideas internationally is the hope of soliciting feedback and perspectives from other education systems.

## **Desire**

The theme of this symposium is desire. As a culinary educator at a university, I spend this time of year dodging bullets of desire from all angles: desire of graduating seniors (next week!) to simply finish the onerous requirements in the worst case or in the best case to surpass their classmates, internship preceptors and the faculty on the road to celebrity chefdom; desire of incoming Freshmen to become independent adults and create a new identity as a university student with new friends and new roommates; desire for working-class students to become business leaders and middle-class through the food

business; desire for aspiring culinarians to taste everything they can get in their mouths—wine, food and of course one another; and desire among us stale old farts to be one of them again, an open career path with mistakes yet to be made and obstacles and obligations invisible.

It is a thrilling environment, to be sure, but also a messy one, figuratively and literally. And it is resonant in every culinary education setting with only slight variations on the theme.

The challenge, of course, for educators, is to harness this desire to a professional drive so that we provide our industry with the next generation of talented, passionate and committed professionals. This paper considers how that is traditionally done, how feedback from employers shaped how we do it, and where we hope to go with these ideas, probably and properly yielding more questions than answers.

### **Traditional Culinary Education**

Paul Rozin (1999) says that food is fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching. While academia loves to bemoan, prevent, dissect, and discuss, it struggles to enjoy; fun gets short shrift. Much of the early history of food studies has been occupied with establishing its seriousness and legitimacy, despite—or at the expense of—pleasure (Belasco, 2008). Lab coats, hairnets, micronutrients, and portion scales take the sensuality from cooking—and from a food safety perspective, rightly so! Professional culinary education in particular has been a discipline (and there it is again) committed to suppressing and controlling desires—desires among working class commies to become white collar (literally) chefs; desires to cook with passion as one does at home, tasting with one’s finger or licking the cake beaters; desires to have bad boys (and increasingly girls) behave and take their training seriously; and desires to storm the dining room to tell a dissatisfied guest where to shove his opinion of the cuisine, to name a few.

Culinary education has its roots in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century hotel training. Even the standard curriculum—knife skills, stocks, soups, sauces in that order—has its roots in Escoffier’s *Le Guide Culinaire* (2011/1903) the seminal hotel cuisine training guide based largely from his time as chef at the Savoy hotel in London. As an aside, Escoffier

himself would have been mortified that a century-old book, even his century-old book, would have the longevity to form the cannon of professional cooking. He begins (with thanks to Dr. Joseph Hegarty for reminding me to include this quote), “If the art of cookery in all its branches we are not undergoing a process of evolution, and if its canons could be once and forever fixed, as are those of certain scientific operations and mathematical procedures, the present work would have no *raison d’être*.”

Hotel training differed somewhat from the apprenticeship model used for cooks and other tradespeople throughout France and much of Europe in that the numbers gave it a quasi-academy, quasi-military style atmosphere. Where the trainee of one of Escoffier’s contemporaries might be one of a couple apprentices at an independent restaurant, learning at the side of the master, large hotels of the Gilded Age had hundreds of cooks and tens of trainees, a group not unlike what we would call a “class,” though the most noticeable difference is that it would have been all male (Trubek, 2000). Good sources for descriptions of hotel training programs during and after this era can be found most entertainingly in George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* (2012/1933) and in a more scholarly format in Amy Trubek’s (2000) *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession*. “The culinary system Escoffier outlined in the cookbook, which eventually became a manual of proper practice for professionals throughout the twentieth century, was inspired by the elite patrons who frequented his restaurants” (Trubek, 2000, p. 49).

In 1946, two do-gooding women, Katherine Angell and Frances Roth, invoked Escoffier’s *Guide* as the foundational curriculum when they formed The New Haven Restaurant Institute to take advantage of GI Bill funds and help returning World War II veterans start a career. Their school later became the Restaurant Institute of Connecticut and, in 1951, the Culinary Institute of America (CIA). Presumably, following that trajectory, the Culinary Institute of the World is next. As the first professional culinary school in the US—professional reads: male, partly in distinction from the many cooking schools for women that sprung from the home economics movement in the late-nineteenth and earlier in the twentieth century—CIA was a trend-setter and influencer of the 400-plus professional culinary education and training programs that followed in the US (US Department of Education, 2014).

Most of these programs, consistent with Escoffier's outline—stocks, sauces, soups, moist heat cooking, dry heat cooking, combination techniques, followed by *garde manger*, baking, pastry and beverages—would be familiar to any student of any Western professional culinary program. The pedagogy would also be familiar. First, consistent with Escoffier's *brigade de cuisine* and Angell and Roth's military student body, there is a strong emphasis on discipline and order. First, of course, there is education about the uniform, its history and the need to keep it pristine. Students are taught the ultimate authority of the chef and apart from important safety commands like, "Chaud" or "Hot behind," learn "Oui, chef!" or "Yes, chef!" as the response that a command has been heard. Consistent with the authority of the chef, teaching is done primarily by replication. I demonstrate a hollandaise. You repeat. If yours looks and tastes like mine, good! If not, keep trying. Even advanced culinary courses are taught in this vein: I show you how to make an elegant salad topped with a seared scallop and a cardamom cracker. You repeat. A final exam may be to show that you can cook without the demonstration: make a proper sole *meuniere* and *pommes rissole* from memory. To be sure, there is value in learning through replication. I have a good means of cutting an onion that I learned from a mentor. It's the best way I know. I should share it with my students rather than giving them a knife and an onion and saying, "Learn through project-based inquiry." As a counter argument, however, consider a fine arts or even craft program based solely in replication. Copying the masters is important, but the expectation is that there will always be studio space for creativity and innovation—so it should be in culinary arts. For a good example along these lines, consider Harold McGee's foolproof recipe for *sauce hollandaise*, where cold butter, egg yolks and lemon juice are simply and slowly whisked together directly on a flame as compared to the classic but cumbersome double boiler method as practiced by Escoffier, learned by thousands of culinary students each year. Fittingly, Escoffier (1969/1903) himself writes, in his recipe for hollandaise, "Experience alone—the fruit of long practice—can teach the various devices which enable the skilled chef to obtain different results from the same kind and quality of material" (p. 23).

The net effect of this type of traditional culinary education is generally positive: respectful, hard working cooks who channel their desires to learning from chefs in hopes of one day becoming one. So what's the problem? By the end of the course, desire—to

cook, to eat, to savor—evaporates in the process of reducing until sec as a necessary cornerstone of the professionalizing process. We produce good soldiers and even some generals, but no one who can talk her way out of the conflict altogether. We produce skilled technicians who can replicate a menu with efficiency and consistency but who struggle to adapt when the unexpected happens—a missing delivery, many more guests than forecasted, a problem with the gas or electric. And in the foodservice industry, the unexpected always happens.

### **Pleasure and Learning; Pleasure in Learning**

Colleagues at Drexel University have been working on an alternative model to this type of culinary education that teaches methodological understanding over recipe and culinary improvisation—cooking when things go wrong, as they often do—over following a recipe. The approach is agnostic with regard to cuisine. What tastes good—what one desires—should be in the repertoire, with a clear acknowledgment that a culinary student of today is much more likely to find herself rolling sushi for a cocktail party than preparing a tableside sole bonne femme. At the core of such pedagogy is desire: professional, gastronomic, and intensely personal.

Desire should be at the heart of culinary education. Ours is the only subject in the academy that can safely incorporate all five senses as tools for investigation and learning. The fine arts have long-standing traditions of training the primary sense in its academies—musicians take ear training courses and artists art appreciation. None of the four hundred schools examined have explicit coursework in taste or smell, though some mention developing a refined palate as a learning objective of courses in wine tasting or gastronomy—there is a social commentary implicit in that tidbit as well. Moreover there is pleasure in the interdisciplinary nature of culinary studies. A course on bread, for example, necessarily sends us on a romp invoking history, sociology, anthropology, microbiology, religious studies, economics, chemistry, physics, engineering, human kinetics, visual arts, agriculture, and languages in a way that a study of just about anything else (theater history, fashion design, tuba performance) would not. The first part of our solution then, at Drexel, is a course in sensory science from the outset. Without

teaching students how to taste and smell—and it can be taught, just ask a master sommelier—we cannot expect to advance cuisine.

Julia Child famously said, “The only real stumbling block is fear of failure. In cooking you’ve got to have a what-the-hell attitude.” This “what-the-hell attitude” and opportunity to make mistakes is also largely missing from traditional culinary education. Surveyed programs overwhelmingly reply on a recipe-based pedagogy. Students are taught how to do something then follow a recipe to replicate it. Deviations from the expected outcome of the recipes are deemed failures and the recipe is redone. From a chef’s restaurant perspective, this is best practice. Guests expect consistent quality—French onion soup should not be open to interpretation and improvisation among the cooks. This week’s should taste like last week’s. From a learning perspective, this approach is limiting. Imagine if engineering schools, for example, challenged students to exclusively assemble erector sets plans of bridges and buildings rather than devising their own solutions to a set of givens. There is pleasure and learning in the challenge of trying, failing and retrying. In fact, if the reader thinks about her or his own profound learning moments, they likely came from failures rather than didactic instruction or easy success.

The awareness of these two concepts—culinary education’s reluctance or inability to explicitly teach taste and the rare opportunity to learn from one’s mistakes prompted a reimagining of culinary curriculum at Drexel. The process began with a qualitative focus group of employers asked a simple question: “When you hire our graduates, what skills, knowledge and attitudes are you looking for?” I expected an indictment of our students’ technical proficiencies—more time with butchery and charcuterie, for example; or better, faster, knife skills. The answers were surprisingly mostly non-cooking skills:

- Spanish or at least a willingness to try to speak Spanish.<sup>1</sup>
- Knowing how to fix and maintain equipment.
- A good palate, especially when it comes to salt levels.
- Works clean with a sense of urgency.
- Comes to work on time with good energy.
- Communicates problems.

---

<sup>1</sup> Due to immigration, Spanish is the primary or secondary language of many kitchens in the US.

- Can solve problems and display initiative.

The cooking, employers say, can be taught and developed over time. Responsibility, humility and willingness to learn, they say, cannot be. Some of my colleagues reacted to this as expected—there simply is not sufficient room in the curriculum to cover some of these things and others cannot be taught. Pardon my academic language but, “Bullshit.” We are currently immersed in a project to do just that, finding, unsurprisingly, that curriculum that aligns with employer demands, is both more desirable and more pleasurable for the students. Some changes are easy, obvious and immediate—a course in cooking of the Spanish-speaking world taught in immersive Spanish and paired with an introductory Spanish class; a tweak to our existing equipment design and layout course to include maintenance. Others are more challenging—how does one teach the skills vaguely called “professionalism”—being on time, energetic, enthusiastic, and moving with a sense of urgency—at most culinary schools. And is it teachable?

Our approach to these remaining skills—palate development, teamwork, communication and problem solving is to develop an experimental (special topics) course of fun, improvisational culinary exercises based on the concept of theater games used by actors to hone their craft in a low-stakes environment, essentially creating a guided studio course for the culinary arts. Students are placed in situations necessitating they apply culinary, interpersonal, problem solving and critical thinking skills. Students, rather than replicating recipes, develop their culinary skills while simultaneously building broader understanding and satisfying their desire to create, synthesize and share, teaching study of food in a hands-on setting (Deutsch and Miller, 2012). For example, the game “Bain Marie Time Machine” has students mining food history to make a dish with present-day appeal. The game “Mood Food,” uses Annie Hauck-Lawson’s (1991) concept of the food voice, that what one eats or eschews can make powerful statements about identity, often in ways more powerful than words can, to challenge students to convey a particular story through menu semiotics. “Not Too Corny” introduces food politics and GMO labeling by challenging students to construct a menu with no corn, corn products or corn derivatives. Concepts like the Columbian exchange, migration and colonization can be taught with a game like “Same Recipe, Different Style,” where students employ Elizabeth Rozin’s (1983) concept of flavor principles to make variations on a theme (with an obvious



analogy to music). “Technique Trio” invokes chemistry to have students cook from a mystery basket not of foods but of techniques, some from the modernist’s toolkit.

Student feedback from this approach is overwhelmingly positive. Qualitatively, when asked the best aspects of the class, various students responded, “The events that we were able to take part in, recipe development and opportunities for publication...opened so many doors of opportunity to learn and develop our potential in this great Hospitality Industry.” “Easily the games. The games were a lot of fun and pushed my culinary knowledge and tested a lot of my skills.” “The creativity and the opportunities we were given.” “Unique studio styling of course.” “The opportunities to work outside of Drexel.” When asked for their recommended changes to the course: “More guest speakers, chefs from the various facets of the industry that aren't at the forefront like food science, food writing, food photography, gastronomy/ molecular gastronomy.” “Make the course its own legitimate course, and not just a special topic. Making it longer I think will improve the course. Maybe make recipe development and recipe writing more major of an aspect.” “More industry type events for students to participate in” And of course every positive change has its detractors: “I honestly didn't learn that much at all. Maybe a more structured organized plan like this is what we are doing today instead of lets see what happens.” As for additional comments: “This class is great and I see it getting even greater as time goes on. This class provides a clear look at the every day scenarios of the every day chef. THIS CLASS SHOULD BE A MANDATORY COURSE” (emphasis in original). “Great, new course offering with the dept. A lot of fun overall. Unique new twist on classic teachings. Tremendous learning opportunity if you truly put forth the effort individually.” “I enjoyed this class.”

Employer feedback is harder to gauge. While employers exposed to this course, including some in the initial focus group, were overwhelmingly positive about the idea and the work they observed in the classes, only time will tell whether it has a meaningful impact on the quality of our graduates. And even then we invite the classic educational quasi-experimental research design problem of being unable to separate improvements attributable to this class from those attributable to other coursework or work experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Students' desires—to taste, explore, create, sensate, challenge, and share need not be mutually exclusive with effective culinary education. Traditional models of education that devalue individuality, creativity, and questioning authority in favor of uniformity, conformity and channeling of desires is not necessarily optimally effective and seems to have shortcomings in terms of best preparing students for industry. This paper describes an approach to reforming culinary education and introduces some very preliminary data on its effectiveness with an eye for soliciting feedback and building interest in an international faculty learning community of like-minded gastronomes and culinary educators looking to train young cooks to say not only, “Oui, chef!,” but “Why, chef?” While proving such an approach to be more effective will be complicated (but possible) from an evidence-based research perspective, we are already seeing the value of designing and piloting such an intervention for consideration.

So what? At its core, the culinary industry is manufacturing—adding value to transform raw product into something useful and desirable to the consumer. Like other sectors of manufacturing, we will increasingly be challenged by changing technologies. The repetitive nature of manufacturing work further alienates workers—those who are smart do not last long on the line. And it is a fiercely competitive field. Skills and knowledge along with culinary creativity become tools to differentiate, stay current and capture the market.

### **Acknowledgments**

Thanks to Drexel University Department of Culinary Arts and Food Science, Center for Hospitality and Sport Management colleagues James Feustel, Rosemary Trout, Michael Traud, Paul O'Neill, Edward Bottone, and Erica Friedman for their ideas and collaboration on this project.

### **References**

Belasco, W. (2008). *Food: The key concepts*. Oxford: Berg.

Deutsch, J. (2010) *Culinary improvisation: Skill building beyond the mystery basket*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pearson.

Deutsch, J. and Miller, J. (2012) “Teaching with Food,” in Pilcher, J. *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Escoffier, G.A. (2011/1903). *Le Guide Culinaire*. New York: John Wiley and Sons

Escoffier, G.A. (1969/1903) *The Escoffier Cookbook*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Lawson, A.H. (1991) *Foodways of three Polish-American families in New York*. Ph.D. Dissertation. New York University.

Orwell, G. (2012/1933) *Down and out in Paris and London*. New York: Harper Collins.

Rozin, E. (1983) *Ethnic Cuisine: The Flavor-Principle Cookbook*. Brattleboro, VT: S Greene Press.

Rozin, P. (1999). *Food is fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching*. *Social Research*, 66, 9-30.

Trubek, A. (2000). *Haute Cuisine: How the French invented the culinary profession*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

US Department of Education (last accessed May 15, 2014). Ed.gov

## **Bio**

Jonathan Deutsch, Ph.D., is Professor of Culinary Arts and Food Science and Director of Drexel University’s Center for Hospitality and Sport Management , a new freestanding academic unit reporting to the provost. Before moving to Drexel, Deutsch built the culinary arts program at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York (CUNY) and the Ph.D. concentration in food studies at the CUNY Graduate Center.

He is the author or editor of six books including *Barbecue: A Global History* (with Megan Elias), *Culinary Improvisation*, and *Gastropolis: Food and Culture in New York City* (with Annie Hauck-Lawson) and numerous articles in journals of food studies, public health and hospitality education. He earned his Ph.D. in Food Studies and Food Management from New York University (2004) and his culinary degree from the Culinary Institute of America (AOS, Culinary Arts, 1997), and is a proud alumnus of Drexel University (BS, Hospitality Management, 1999). A classically trained chef, Deutsch worked in a variety of settings including product development, small luxury inns and restaurants. When not in the kitchen or in meetings he can be found behind his tuba.