In the late summer of 1986, blessed by a favourable exchange rate, I dined at the Michelin three-starred L’Espérance, just outside of the Burgundian town of Vézelay. The dining room was elegant and formal, appointed with weighty silver, gossamer crystal, thick linens, and all the cosseting luxuries of haute cuisine. Although much of the meal is now a blur, undoubtedly owing to the heady burgundy and a mild case of crise de foie the following day, I have vivid memories of one of the earliest courses, cromesquis de foie gras, tiny cube-shaped croquettes of foie gras, minced truffle, cream, and port wine that were lightly breaded and deep-fried. Five to a serving, they were arrayed on a heavy white napkin like the dots on a die. Before I could pick up one of the silver utensils lying at my place, a red-and-black liveried waiter announced, in a mixture of French and sign language, that I was to pick up each cromesquis with my fingers, pop it in my mouth, close my lips, and then press it with my tongue. The foie liquid oozed like a spent volcano. It was ecstasy.

The cromesquis stood out, not only for the lusciously decadent ingredients, but for the pleasure of eating with my fingers: it was surprising, playful, and slightly transgressive in the setting. Chef Marc Meneau, a practitioner of nouvelle cuisine, had deliberately injected casual, picnic etiquette. He inverted my expectations of dining at the highest echelons of French cuisine, expectations made possible because I came to the table with the cultural capital of a twentieth-century bourgeois upbringing. A well-thumbed book by Emily Post, America’s twentieth century doyenne of etiquette, lurked on my parents’ bookshelf. A nearly-flat sauce spoon, such as the one already set and used in a later course, could have neatly transported the hot cromesquis to my mouth, and, but for the waiter’s timely intercession, I would have intentionally selected that implement to demonstrate my supposed savoir-faire. I had internalized the meme that, at a fine restaurant, fingers were messy or even worse, uncivilized. Although I was fluent in table manners for a fine restaurant, fingers were messy or even worse, uncivilized. Although I was fluent in table manners for a fine restaurant, fingers were messy or even worse, uncivilized. Although I was fluent in table manners for a fine restaurant, fingers were messy or even worse, uncivilized.

What were these norms of Western dining etiquette that threatened to mislead me at L’Espérance? Post pithily distilled them in the 1920s:

Table Manners resolve themselves into a few important don’ts: Don’t chew with your mouth open, or talk with your mouth full. Don’t do anything that is offensively smearable or messy. Don’t attract attention by unpleasantness of either sight or sound. These are the requirements of decency…. Rules of least account concern the implements you choose, since it is taken for granted that you are not going to select a meat fork for oysters, nor a teaspoon for soup (in a soup plate) … or commit other barbarities. (Post 1929, 21).

Pause to consider Post’s assumptions: diners are presumed to (1) understand what is ‘offensively messy’, and (2) be thoroughly grounded in the ebb and flow of a multi-course meal, correlating utensils with successive courses. Post’s humorous labelling as ‘barbarities’ the misuse of a meat fork tacitly reinforced the significant cultural capital needed at such meals.

What happens when people who have embodied these norms are confronted with dining experiences that invite them to eat in ways that neither Post nor the most well-schooled diners could ever have imagined? I refer to the challenges presented by modernist cuisine. In other words, how are diners to know how behave should they snag a coveted reservation at a temple of avant-garde gastronomy?

**Data Points and Thesis**

Using online videos of meals at Alinea and Noma, videos and popular writings designed to teach table manners, and canonical writings about modernist cuisine, this paper explores how one eats at some of the world’s most cutting edge restaurants. I focus on how knowledgeable diners behave when confronted by the changing culinary styles and presentations, and what these experiences say about the relationships among chefs, waitstaff, and patrons. I argue that, by shifting the table manners necessitated by these innovative dishes, modernist cuisine inverts the relative cultural capital, and thus power, among these players.

The evolution in table manners signals, among other things, an increasing control of natural urges in order to avoid disgust and discomfort at the table (Elias 1939). Furthermore, dining behaviours are a performance through which we demonstrate discernment and our cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). The cultural omnivore, one who is open to a wider range of experiences without snobbish judgment, expands on the Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital to recognize that culinary capital can take many forms and can deviate from the criteria of haute cuisine and formalistic dining. (Peterson 1996, Naccarato 2012).

The modernist chef has created a revolution in behaviours in the dining room by creating different etiquettes of consumption. The most practiced diner
cannot rely on past experience to know how to eat the sometimes perplexing dishes that form part of a modernist meal. Rather than merely delivering the dishes, waitstaff now play the role of expert guide to navigate diners through these uncharted waters.

Nathan Myrhvold summarizes a key turning point in the evolution of the new culinary style, brought about by Ferran Adrià at the now-legendary elBulli:

Adrià developed perhaps his most important piece of culinary philosophy: the idea that dining is a dialogue between the chef and the diner. In haute cuisine up to that point, the vocabulary of that dialogue was constrained by tradition and convention. Diners come to a meal with a tacit understanding of what is possible and familiar, based on their previous dining experiences. The chef, at least in traditional cuisine, comes prepared to cater to diners' preconceptions. Adrià broke those constraints by creating novel foods that could not help but provoke a reaction, forcing diners to reassess their assumptions. (Myrhvold 2011, 37).

I push this discourse one step further to argue that, rather than creating a dialogue, which requires an exchange of ideas, modernist cuisine creates a one-directional flow of information. With its strict tasting menus that offer little or no choice and the need to educate the diner as to how to eat the meal, modernist cuisine is a narrative in which only the chef and waitstaff have the script. Through unfamiliar presentations, unexpected tastes, and the importance of tactility, chefs and waitstaff force the diner, sometimes uncomfortably, to break the standard rules of etiquette that have formed part of elite meals for the past one hundred years. It is the chef and waitstaff who possess the superior cultural capital in this setting.

Traditional Table Manners as Performative Baseline

"The crisis of the dinner table is the point at which the treacheries of money, class, and the social and cultural assets associated with them become visible". (O'Farrell 2012, 102). This deliciously biting assessment, although directed to the eighteenth-century world of Jane Austen, remains accurate in the twenty-first. Dining creates a stage that allows the actor-participants to observe and to be observed, where we, as diners, 'seek reassurance and a sense of social acceptability, that we belong, that we are in fashion'. (Finkelstein 2014, 44). At conventional elite restaurants, the experienced diner's status and taste are seldom in question, as the diner knows how to behave. The well-trained staff intervenes as minimally and discreetly as possible while still anticipating every need.

Diners, of course, must learn these standard table manners. According to the Emily Post Institute's website, ‘dining etiquette is the single most requested topic’ in its business etiquette seminars. Subtle refreshers appear regularly. A 2015 New York Times Magazine article reminded the bourgeois Times readership of the training it should have received before venturing into a restaurant. Recounting her own childhood tribulations at the table and her secret pleasure in reading etiquette books, Tamar Adler left no doubt that table manners express culinary capital. One particular peril was eating soup with the bristling, vertical posture demanded by her father: the soup sloshed drippily on its long journey to her mouth. The piece ends happily when she discovers, on a dinner date with a fellow she longs to impress, that viscous egg drop soup stays resolutely in her spoon. Her lesson? 'If you can’t change your manners, change the soup'. (Adler 2015, 36). Modernist restaurants change both the soup and the manners.

A sampling of etiquette videos consulted appears separately in the Works Cited listing; in addition to prescriptive works on etiquette (Martin 1997; White 1963), they offer the baseline against which we can measure how far the behaviours encouraged by modernist cuisine seem to deviate from norms. And although works of etiquette have a long pedigree, their numbers exploded in the mid-nineteenth century, when the demand for etiquette guides increased, especially in the United States (Schlesinger 1946). The dramatic increase was required not only by the growing levels of material culture at the dining table, as the varieties of tablewares owned by even the moderately well-to-do increased, but also by the adoption of some version of service à la russe by the fashionable and their emulators. Each course became a new opportunity to demonstrate cultural capital by selecting the proper utensil and using it dexterously. As this history suggests, culinary revolutions require new teachings as to how to eat and rebalance relationships among diners and chefs. (Kaufman 2002).

Haute Cuisine and Modernist Cuisine

Roughly synchronous with the adoption of service à la russe was the codification of French haute cuisine in the works of Antonin Carême, Jules Gouffé, and Auguste Escoffier. Restaurant culture, too, exploded in the nineteenth century. The educated diner became versed in the language of French cuisine, able to distinguish a consommé from a velouté, a sauce Espagnole from a Bordelaise or Bourguignonne, a tart aux pommes from a purée de pommes de terre. An outing to a classic haute restaurant was an opportunity to demonstrate cultural capital by understanding the dishes on the menu and how to eat them confidently. But starting in the 1970s, France’s nouvelle cuisine began to loosen classic cuisine’s corseted dictates: béarnaise sauce might be infused with ginger and cilantro instead of tarragon. Restaurant menus and waitstaff began disclosing more information about dishes to an audience who could not rely upon past dining experiences to predict the present menu variations.

Analysts of modernist cuisine place its roots in this iconoclasm of nouvelle cuisine (Petruzelli 2014, 228). Like
the famous Gault-Millau ‘Ten Commandments of Nouvelle Cuisine’, modernist cuisine is developing its own discourses and manifestos. Adrià has written extensively on the roots of his modernist cooking. He insists that, even with his embrace of gastronomic invention, his dishes and flavours need to be bound to tradition in order to communicate with the diner:

It consists of taking a gastronomic reference that is already known, embodied in a dish, and transforming all or some of its ingredients by modifying its texture, shape, and/or temperature. This deconstructed dish will keep its essence and will still be linked to a culinary tradition, but its appearance will be radically different to the original. For this game to be successful, it is essential that the diner has gastronomic memory... although he may not see that he has been served a familiar dish, he later establishes a direct connection between the flavor of what he is eating and the classic recipe; in other words, he recognizes it. (Quoted in Myhrvold, p.37).

Adrià expects his audience to have culinary capital to intuit his cuisine’s gastronomic parentage. Nonetheless, he defines his culinary philosophy in ‘23 Precepts’ that seek to challenge his patrons by choreographing the presentation and consumption of his dishes in unprecedented ways. Three precepts are especially relevant to my thesis that modernist cuisine inverts the traditional assumptions about table manners, culinary capital, and the relationship between chef, server, and patron:

10. Taste is not the only sense that can be stimulated; touch can also be played with (contrasts of temperature and textures), as well as smell, sight (colours, shapes, visual illusion, etc.) whereby the five sense become one of the main points in the creative cooking process.

15. A novel way of serving food is being promoted. The dishes are finished in the dining room by the waiting staff. In other cases, the diners themselves participate in the process.

21. Decontextualization, irony, spectacle and performance are completely legitimate, as long as they are not superficial but respond to, or are closely bound up with, a process of gastronomic reflection. (Hamilton n.d., p.280-1).

Experiencing Modernist Cuisine (Vicariously)

Chicago’s Alinea is commonly judged the United States’s premier modernist restaurant.2 It ranks consistently high on the San Pellegrino ‘Top 50’ list, has been called the best restaurant in America by critic Ruth Reichl, and has the coveted three-star Michelin rating; its website boasts that it is not a conventional restaurant, but promises a ‘fun, emotional, and provocative experience ... that [pushes] our patrons to rethink what a restaurant can be’. (alinea.com 2016).

Little in a diner’s prior experience can prepare her to eat at Alinea. Waitstaff engage with the diner throughout, narrating the origin and inspiration that led Chef Grant Achatz to create many of the dishes, and, in most cases, directing how to eat the dish. Restaurant reviewer Sophie Gayot distilled her 2012 meal into a fifteen minute video, capturing the tutelage. (Gayot 2012) The initial moments of walking to the dining through the undulating, narrow hallway bathed in an unnatural fuchsia light are disorienting; they may be designed to strip the diner of preconceived notions by removing the familiar ease and spacious welcoming of most high-end restaurants (Gayot 2012, at 0:07-0:14). One does not feel pampered, but unsettled and off-balance, like a circus fun-house. Limitations of space here prevent discussing each course, but three have been selected to illustrate the recalibrations of the relationships among chef, diner, waitstaff, as well as shifting etiquette.

Fidgeting with tablewares is considered ill-mannered by conventional standards, but Achatz asks patrons literally to assemble tablewares in order to eat. VENISON: red cabbage, mustard, paprika has the most elaborate, interactive, and time-consuming prelude to a dish, fulfilling Adrià’s Rule 15 that the diner should participate in the service (Gayot 2012, at 3:43-6:30). A server stands a mysterious metal skewer diagonally on the table, on which he drapes a claret-colored ‘flag’. He disappears, returning with a large, square plate. Calling it a ‘collaboration between food and dish’ and a ‘2D/3D dish’, Sophie must construct an eating platform. She is told to remove a top glass plate on which various condiments are arrayed, exposing a wooden underplate embedded with two removable, curved metal brackets. She struggles, incorrectly inverting the brackets; the waiter corrects the set-up. The ‘flag’, now identified as a cabbage leaf poached in red wine, is unfurled across the bracket. The server scoops braised venison into the leaf and identifies the condiments awaiting on the glass plate. In a meandering explanation delivered in the hushed tones of a co-conspirator, the waiter confides that the plate was designed by Chef’s friend, Mark Kassner, whose family hunted wild game in the fall and winter and that Achatz was inspired by Kassner’s experience to create the dish, including the gelée of pilsner, done in homage to Kassner’s father, who liked to drink beer while preparing goulash. Sophie is instructed to add whichever seasonings appeal, to roll it up like a stuffed cabbage, and to eat it in a few bites, with the reassurance that hot towels will follow ‘for after’.

This intricate dance raises several queries about the success of the dish according to the modernist manifestos: is this exercise in assembly a superficial spectacle, deserving of condemnation by Adrià’s Rule 21 or one that encourages gastronomic reflection? The waiter’s belaboured contextualization undercuts the reflective process: the
diner’s appreciation does not come from the glimmer of recognition that Adrià seeks, but is forced through the pedantic lecture. Further, what about etiquette’s role of hospitality that the primary charge of the host is to put his guests at ease and ignore performance errors? Should the waiter have simply packed the cabbage leaf a bit higher, rather than called attention to Sophie’s clumsiness? 

WINTER: in New Hampshire presents peppermint ‘snow’ sprinkled over four river stones that have been super-chilled in liquid nitrogen. Each is topped with a different sweet morsel, but Sophie is warned not to lick the stones, as she would lose skin. A coffee cup holds a clear liquid that the waiter challenges Sophie to identify; he hints that it is something he ‘enjoyed having after coming in from playing in the snow’, chatting as if a friend (Gayot 2012, at 9:12-9:56). Alinea’s co-owner, Nick Kokonas, has slipped into a chair opposite Sophie by the time Achatz’s signature ‘floating food’ is served: green apple-scented helium inflates a knob of green apple taffy to balloon proportions. It is tethered to a metal pin by a strip of green apple leather, and the waiter instructs that ‘the only thing not edible, of course, is the pin’. The waiter prods Sophie to have ‘some fun’ and to say ‘something interesting to Mr. Kokonas’, and, with further coaxing, to ‘hang onto the string, pull it [the balloon] towards you, and give it a bite’. When Sophie suggests puncturing the balloon with the pin, Nick leans in, ‘if you’re not adventurous, you can pop it, but we will know that you will not pop it’. The gauntlet challenging Sophie’s culinary capital has been thrown down, but she needs further instruction to take a small bite, breathe in the scented helium, and then eat the deflated taffy in one mouthful. Nick boasts of the dish’s three-year development process and brags that no other three-star restaurants have as much fun (Gayot 2012, 10:57-11:57).

At Copenhagen’s Noma, another San Pellegrino top restaurant, diners encounter a more casual setting, but need equal guidance to navigate a meal. A non-professional critic, Bernard Leung, posted a video of his 2012 Noma dinner with friends: again, space constraints limit description of the meal, but several courses exemplify the modernist ethos. Directly challenging the diner’s course is a course of live shrimp on ice: presented in a sealed pantry storage jar, the diners are told to pick them up with their fingers, and dip them in butter before eating, with the alert that the shrimp might ‘have a little kick still left in it’. Plaints of ‘Oh, dear’, ‘we’re going to eat them alive’, and apologies to the shrimp and protestations that ‘I can’t eat it’ preface efforts to come to terms with the lively morsels; after one woman musters the mettle to pop it in her mouth and chew, she announces, triumphantly, ‘okay, he’s dead now’ (Leung 2013, 3:23-4:26). Another course enlists the diners in cooking an egg in blazingly hot skillets brought to the table as their ‘kitchen’. It appeals directly to the aspirations of foodies, suggesting a parity between professional chef and patron. Of course, everyone is in on the joke, as they are strictly scripted to crack their eggs into the pans with eyes fixed on the timer that will signal doneness: rather than elevating the patrons’ knowledge, they are de-skilled from judging when the egg is ready (Leung 2013, 11:38-13:40).

Discussion

These snapshots offer glimpses into how modernist restaurants reframe culinary capital in two primary ways. They recalibrate knowledge and power among chefs, servers, and patrons, and they upend traditional dining etiquette. The sophisticated diner knows how to behave at traditional haute restaurants, savvily interpreting menus and needing no guidance in the physical act of consumption; she controls the experience. But at modernist restaurants, dishes and modes of ingestion must be taught onsite, eviscerating the patron’s presumed expertise. Culinary capital is demonstrated by a willingness to dine not knowing how to behave.

Reactions to modernist cuisine have been mixed; many who have never experienced modernist meals dismiss them as pretentious and preposterous (See online comments to Gayot 2012, Pang 2016). Those who have experienced them tend to be more favorable. In 2008, Adrià hosted two ‘round table’ meals for a group of culinary sophisticates who met the next day to dissect the experience (Hamilton n.d., 206-49). One diner saw the meal as ‘a conscious attempt to break up all the conventions that you have assimilated’, essentially throwing cultural capital out the window (Hamilton n.d., 235). Others focused on the changing power dynamics and autonomy:

[Adrià’s] people came and said: ‘You have to eat this in one bite, you have to eat this in two bites! Or don’t chew. Which means a dictatorship, and I’m not using this in a negative way. The fact is that he says: ‘You have to do as I planned! … So he actually broke up the system which was previously determined by the eater (Hamilton, n.d., 222).

‘Breaking the system’ brings us to consideration of the cultural omnivore, one who does not define her world by preferring the so-called legitimate or high culture (of traditional haute dining) over all others: she can find merit in certain (but not all) middlebrow and lowbrow experiences (such as eating with one’s fingers in a formal restaurant setting). The omnivore is not indifferent to distinctions, but creates new boundaries, devoid of snobbishness and its rigid rules of exclusion (Peterson 1996, 904). Modernist diners enhance their capital through publicly demonstrated adventurousness and willingness to flaunt convention. As another participant in the elBulli round table noted, ‘there was this wonderful tactility, because we weren’t given any cutlery till about half way through the meal, which actually brought out the inner child in a certain way’ (Hamilton n.d. 230-31). The inner child, of course, is the rambunctious eater that dining etiquette has tried to tame through embodied
table manners and the cultural capital that their mastery traditionally confers.

Etiquette has long been characterized as simply placing one’s companions at ease (White 1963) and doing nothing to elicit feelings of disgust (Elias 1939). This abstraction evaporates at modernist restaurants. Did the woman at Noma, triumphantly announcing that the live shrimp she had just crushed between her molars was dead, behave properly, or did we all recoil, just a bit? Is encouraging diners to ‘make a big mess’ when eating a fish a new form of culinary capital? (Gayot 2012, 1:34-2:58). ‘Good manners’ at a modernist restaurant seems to require the diner to reject, or at least suspend, aspects of one’s embodied capital. Again, culinary capital comes from the confidence to deviate from traditional norms.

Modernist cuisine itself parallels the cultural omnivore’s rejection of traditional values. It claims to be blindly indifferent to the rarity or luxuriousness of ingredients, as ‘all products have the same gastronomic value, regardless of their price’ (Hamilton, n.d. 280). Because rarity is neither good nor bad, new rules of distinction must come through the manner of presentation and ingestion (Warde 1999). Distinctions still take place, but they take the form of Alinea’s icy beet juice encapsulated in a block of ice as clear as Baccarat crystal (Gayot 2012, 1:03-1:33) or Noma’s egg fried at the table, rather than the truffled foie gras now seen on many upscale menus.

Modernist cuisine’s practitioners explicitly seek to transcend gastronomic pleasure and elicit intellectual and emotional reactions to their creations (Myhrvold 2011, Hamilton n.d., Pang 2016, alinea.com). Yet at the end of the day, the meal must be consumed, not simply contemplated or felt. Modernist cuisine’s emphasis on novelty in all aspects of its service and consumption guarantees that patrons cannot develop the culinary capital needed to negotiate a modernist meal. Because the chefs and waiters alone have the script, the ideal of engaging the diner in a meaningful dialogue falls short and the conversation becomes a didactic monologue, with instructions on how many bites to take, the order in which to eat certain elements of a dish and where to put the utensils upon finishing (a palate-cleansing tasting of ginger at Alinea, Gayot, 8:24-9:11). Riffing on Keywords analyses (Williams 2015), the terms ‘waiter’ and ‘server’, which connote one of lower rank, mere deliverers of food, albeit with grace and élan, are no longer apt. To return to my earlier sailing metaphor, the waitstaffs are navigators charting the course set by the chef-captain, while the patrons, lacking a map, compass, or even clear destination, demonstrate their cultural capital by surrendering to the unfamiliar waters.

parallel service instructions: ‘Warn your guests that they need to pick up the whole cromesquis with their fingers, close their mouth and press them against the roof of the mouth with the tongue, and above all, not to bite into them. Disobedient or inattentive guests will, without doubt, soil their ties or blouses. Cromesquis are a pleasure for all the senses: sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste’. (Translation mine).

2 Alinea is closed as at 1 May 2016 for renovations, and Chef Grant Achatz claims that the cuisine will be ‘less shock value’ and more about provoking emotions in the diner. It is currently hosting small, experimental dinners while it completes the renovations: at one dinner, diners were given a card that read, ‘Please, shut up’ and waiters all put a finger to their pursed lips to indicate silence. (Pang 2016).

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Notes

1 A website promoting French gastronomic tourism includes the L’Esperance recipe for the cromesquis, with

Etiquette videos


Restaurant videos