

2014-04-26

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Recommended Citation

Mac Con Iomaire, M. (2014). 'Identified by Taste: The Chef as Artist?' in TEXT (Special Issue Website Series No. 26) April 2014, DOI: 10.21427/d7b760

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Identified by taste: the chef as artist?

Abstract:

This article discusses the role of taste among the senses using fictional depictions of taste, including Proust's madeleine episode; Suskind's *Perfume: the story of a murderer*; Esquivel's *Como aqua para chocolate*; Harris's *Chocolate* and Blixen's *Babette's feast*. The discussion also provides three historical case studies which highlight how an individual chef was identified against the odds by the individualistic taste of his or her cooking.

Biographical note:

Dr. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire is a lecturer in culinary arts in the Dublin Institute of Technology. He was the first Irish chef to be awarded a PhD, for his research on the Influence of French haute cuisine on the emergence and development of Dublin restaurants, using oral history. He is a regular attendee and contributor at the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery. He is also keen contributor to the media and has hosted two series of cookery programmes for Irish television. He is the founding chair of the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium and co-editor of *'Tickling the palate': gastronomy in Irish literature and culture* published by Peter Lang (2014).

Keywords:

Creative writing – Taste – Food writing – Fiction – Chefs

The American sociologist Gary Alan Fine has studied professional kitchens and described the work of chefs as ranging from that of artist to that of manual labourer. Other descriptions he used include professional, business man, a craftsperson, a scientist, a humanist and a philosopher (1996). Naturally, not all chefs can be considered artists, but it has been argued that to describe Ferran Adria, Heston Blumenthal, Pierre Gagniere or Alain Ducasse as mere cooks would be akin to describing Dali as just a painter or Mozart as a pianist (Mac Con Iomaire 2005). In 2007, Adria was invited to exhibit at *Documenta 12* but instead of traveling to Kassel, Germany, for the 100 day art fair, he provided a table for two at his Costa Brava restaurant El Bulli each day for randomly chosen *Documenta 12* guests, who were given air fare for the 1,000 mile journey. This became known as the ‘G’ pavilion. Adria noted that ‘Cooking cannot be “musefied” – it is an artistic discipline that needs its own scene’ (qtd. in Artforum 2007). Indeed, the philosopher Terry Eagleton has noted that: ‘Genuine eating combines pleasure, utility, and sociality, and so differs from a take-away in much the same way that Proust differs from a bus ticket’ (1997: 25). The below will discuss the concept of the chef as artist, the signature of the individual chef on actual dishes, and the representation of the moment of tasting, emblematised by Proust’s madeleine moment. Taking examples from literature, film and real life, I will argue that a discerning diner can identify the work of a master-practitioner in the culinary arts using his or her taste, much as a wine connoisseur can identify a particular wine and vintage; or that a student of art history can identify the work of Degas, Renoir, Dali or Pollock.

For centuries, there has been a strong connection between food and visual art. One only has to think of the still lives from the Dutch golden age by the likes of Rembrandt and de Heem; the work of Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo whose imaginative heads were made of fruit, vegetables and fish; Van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters*; Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans; and the work of more recent contemporary artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija who has served soup at the Grand Palais in Paris and Thai curry in New York’s Museum of Modern Art. English artist and Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller operated a free café serving tea in room four of the British Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale (Tipton 2014). A number of Irish artists such as Abigail O’Brien, Mary Kelly, Katharina Stover, Barbara Wolf and Fiona Hallinan have also incorporated food into their work, with one artist, Mick O’Kelly, installing a food wagon for the homeless in Dublin’s Temple Bar Gallery in 2005 with his *Artwork for an Imperfect World*. This created a stir with critics asking was it exploitative? Or, was it even Art? (Tipton 2014)

What is taste? Is it flavour plus aroma? Simon Schama, in a keynote address to the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2009, suggested that food and cooking was a performance art and questioned whether we can actually adequately write about food, likening it to both music and sex, both of which have an extensive literature. Do we have sufficient language to fully describe either, since exact repetition seldom happens in food, music or sex. Food scientist Len Fisher, quoting the philosopher Thomas Nagel’s notion that subjective experiences are unique to each of us, points out that this is not just a matter of philosophy, since scientifically each individual actually tastes the same shared meal differently. In particular, humans have different

detection thresholds for the vast array of food aromas that contribute so much to our enjoyment. Selective anosmia, the inability to detect a particular odour, according to Fisher is a real issue. Some 30 per cent of humans cannot smell androstenone, which is the odour component in truffles. Thirty-six percent of the population is anosmic for isobutyraldehyde, found in white bread, beer and chocolate, and 7 per cent are virtually anosmic to trimethylamine, a compound whose presence is one of the first indicators that a fish is not totally fresh (Mac Con Iomaire 2009b).

Do some people have a higher propensity to identify taste? Why do we develop an acquired taste or a refined taste? Bourdieu suggest that an appreciation of art, music, theatre, fine food and wines give us ‘cultural capital’ (1984). We know that smell and taste work closely together. Wine connoisseurs and tea tasters have developed a heightened sense of smell and taste. Many of us have built up a preference for the food of our childhood and dislike the taste of other foods. In his paper on the lives of Dublin’s tenement mothers, Tony Kiely notes that stews, for example, were ‘your mother’s stew’ and, being gleaned from family tradition, ‘never changed’, often causing familial problems after marriage. One Dublin woman commented that her husband ‘spent the whole of his life longing for his mother’s stew’ (Kiely 2014). These childhood food memories can be highly emotional, most famously captured in Marcel Proust’s ‘episode of the madeleine’ in his *À la recherche de temps perdu*.

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. ... Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? ... And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it. And all from my cup of tea.

Stephen Mennell cites Hayward (1852) and Norbert Elias in comparing chefs to writers and musicians who moved from dependence on a rich patron in the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, when they depended ‘almost exclusively on the public for patronage, to the manifest advantages of all parties’ (1996: 22). François Pierre La Varenne (1618–1678) and Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) belong to the former while Marie-Antoine Carême (1784–1833) and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) belong to the latter. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) had the misfortune to be a transitional figure, ‘a *bourgeois* artist in a court society’ (Institute of Cultural Economy and Cultural Research 1998). The crucial thing for the culinary profession following the French Revolution was that it now had its own public (Mennell 1996: 142). When it comes to food, however, can the taste of the work of a chef be identified in the same way as in painting or music? This paper will discuss a number of issues that make this a bit more difficult and, along with fictional examples, gives

three historical case studies which highlight how individuals were identified against the odds by the individualistic taste of their cooking.

The artistic practices of painting, drawing, sculpture, singing or writing can be principally solitary in nature and reflect a personal talent or trait but there is also a tradition of the *atelier* where a principal master would work with a number of assistants, apprentices and students, together producing pieces that were then released in the master's name. From Medieval times to the nineteenth century, this was common practice for European artists, particularly in the fine and decorative arts. A similar guild system applied to other crafts such as cooking. A strict apprenticeship was followed by a period as a journeyman, prior to becoming a master performer or craftsman. Knowledge was a powerful asset and workshops were normally closed spaces away from prying eyes. Professional cooking is normally carried out by a team of chefs, but the word chef means 'chief' or 'leader', and there can only be one chief in a kitchen. The '*partie* system' developed by Georges Auguste Escoffier (1846–1935) divides the kitchen in various section (vegetables, roast, sauce, fish, pastry and so on) and *commis chefs* or apprentices need to work their way through each section before qualifying as a *chef de partie*. There has long been a debate about the authenticity of eating a Gordon Ramsay or a Joel Robuchon meal in one of their many restaurants when they cannot possibly be cooking in them all. Robuchon may have been influenced by the art world in calling some of his restaurants *l'Atelier de Joel Robuchon*. One interesting aspect of Robuchon's establishments is the open kitchen, where the chefs are in plain sight as they produce the dishes. Alain Ducasse, the first chef to be awarded three Michelin stars in multiple restaurants at the same time, was once asked 'who does the cooking when you are not in the kitchen?' His answer was 'the same person who does it when I am in the kitchen' (Arouh 2006). As in the *atelier*, it can be argued that the artist does not need to be present, for what the diner experiences is a rendition of the artist's work, much as listeners experience a rendition of the work of Mozart or Shakespeare (Mac Con Iomaire 2005). Below, I present first an example from a work of fiction but the other three case studies arose from research concerning the history of French haute cuisine in Dublin Restaurants (Mac Con Iomaire 2009a).

The power of taste and smell has been represented in a number of novels which have subsequently been made into films (Süskind 1985; Esquivel 1992; Harris 1999). It is a film drama based on a story by Karen Blixen, however, that best expresses the fictional description of a factual phenomenon that concerns this paper – the ability to identify the cook by the taste of the food he or she produces (Blixen 1952). In the 1987 Danish film *Babettes Gaestebud* (*Babette's Feast*) directed by Gabriel Axel, a female refugee arrives in remote nineteenth century Scandinavian town at the home of two puritan elderly unmarried sisters, Martine and Philippa, whose father had founded a strict Christian sect, which had attracted no new followers since his death. Her name is Babette Hersant and is fleeing Paris following the Franco-Prussian war. She arrives with a letter from a Parisian baritone, Achille Papin, once a suitor of Philippa's, recommending her as a housekeeper. Both sisters had been courted by suitors in their youth but the approaches had been rejected by their strict father who derided marriage. The sisters take Babette in as their cook, and she spends fourteen

years gradually easing their lives and the lives of many of the dwindling white-haired believers in that remote village. Babette's only link with Paris is a friend who renews an annual lottery ticket for her. One day she finds out that she has won 10,000 francs in the lottery and decides to use the money to cook a delicious dinner for the sisters and their small congregation on the occasion of the one hundredth birthday of their father, the founding pastor. Babette sends to Paris for a number of specialist ingredients and the whole labour intensive preparation of the meal is an act of self-sacrifice as an outpouring of appreciation for the sisters. No one knows that she is spending the whole of her winnings on this meal and as the exotic ingredients arrive, the sisters fear that this meal will become a sin of sensual luxury. They decide to partake in the meal but to forego speaking of any pleasure in it and to make no mention of the food during the dinner. As it happens, Martine's former suitor, Lorens Löwenhielm, now a general and man of the world who has served as an *Attaché* in Paris, arrives for the meal but is unaware of the pact of silence made concerning the food. He regales the guests with detailed descriptions of the sumptuous meal, its preparation, and the wine pairings, and compares it to an unforgettable meal he had eaten years earlier in the famous '*Café Anglais*' in Paris. The meal transforms the lives of the guests elevating them physically and spiritually. At the end of the meal, it is revealed that Babette had formerly been the head chef of the '*Café Anglais*' and that such a meal for twelve people would have cost 10,000 francs. When the sisters realise that all the winnings were spent on the meal, they are aghast. Martine tearfully says 'now you will be poor for the rest of your life', to which Babette replies 'an artist is never poor' (Axel 1987).

The first and earliest real example I present in this paper shows that diners often do notice when a certain hand is not at the helm in the kitchen. During the nineteenth century, the Viceregal court in Dublin was where fashions and standards in fine dining in Ireland were set and from where they were emulated (Robins 2001). Queen Victoria's visit in April 1900 and her stay with the Cadogans at the Viceregal Lodge was catered for by Michel Jammet, a French chef who would later open what became Ireland's longest running and most successful French restaurant. Jammet left private service in 1900 and opened The Jammet Hotel and Restaurant with his brother François (Mac Con Iomaire 2009c). The Viceregal court's last ceremonial event was held on 16 January 1922 when the lord lieutenant Viscount FitzAlan handed over Dublin Castle and the entire administration of government to Michael Collins.

Lord Cadogan was succeeded as viceroy by the Earl of Dudley in August 1902. In a letter to the editor of *The Irish Times* in 1931, correcting an inaccuracy in Michel Jammet's obituary, George W. Narramore, late Comptroller's Office, Viceregal Lodge, informs that Lord Dudley's chef was Signor Lama, an Italian with French training. Lama subsequently became chef at Claridge's, London. Narramore states that both Jammet and Lama were the equals in their artistry of any of the great 'master chefs' he had met, or heard of, in the previous thirty years. He points out that Lord Cadogan could detect the absence of Jammet's personal touch in some dishes served by temporary chefs employed during the Dublin Castle season. He also recalls that Lord Dudley, whilst dining in Claridge's, not knowing that Lama was in charge of the kitchen, complimented the manager on the excellence of the cuisine, noting

that he had only ever had one of the dishes so delightfully prepared for him by his previous private chef, a Signor Lama. When informed that the chef in charge of the kitchens was indeed Signor Lama, he sent for and personally complimented his ex-chef (Naramore).

The second story comes from separate interviews with two brothers, Phillip Boksberger and Paul Boksberger, and concerns their grandfather. Alfred Boksberger was Swiss and his father was in the Pope's Swiss Guards. He came to Ireland originally around 1900 to work as chef in the Great Southern Hotel, Killarney, and County Kerry. He married Mary Lynch from Killarney, who came from a hotel background. She had two sisters; one married a Swiss photographer Louis Anthony, and the other married Englishman Edwin Bullock and they lived in Flesk View House on the grounds of the Gleneagles in Killarney. Paul knows that his grandfather worked in the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin at some stage because his maternal grandfather Paddy Kelly had worked in the Shelbourne as the head porter. Seemingly Alfred used to send the *commis chefs* away when he was doing something important, because he did not want them to see his technique. He felt that his knowledge gave him power, a practice long associated with artists and master craftsmen.

The 1911 census listed Alfred Boseberger (aged 30) from Switzerland as the chef in the Dolphin Hotel (Mac Con Iomaire 2008). The Dolphin was renowned for good wholesome food – particularly its steaks – and was frequented by legal professionals from the nearby Four Courts and the racing fraternity, and was a meeting place before, and after, sporting events. Alfred was clearly a talented individualistic chef as we shall see. When Alfred married Mary, the couple opened a hotel / townhouse in Leeson Street, Dublin, where he did the cooking and she looked after the front of house. Tragically, Phillip tells how his grandmother took ill and died young, when his father was only fourteen years old, leaving Alfred alone with a young family. It seems that this proved a little much for him and he abandoned the children to his wife's sisters and disappeared. The children were raised by their aunt in Killarney. A few months later, one of his late wife's sisters was dining in a hotel in Virginia, County Cavan. She recognised one of his signature dishes on the menu and buttonholed him in the kitchen about betraying his family. He is reputed to have been a charming man but tough with a fierce temper. Alfred died in Killarney in 1951. Paul recalls driving to see him with his father before he died.

For two decades (1970–1990) County Cork was the centre of fine-dining in Ireland. This reputation centred on three restaurants: Ballylickey House Hotel, near Bantry; Ballymaloe House in Shanagarry; and Arbutus Lodge, in Cork city (Mac Con Iomaire forthcoming). Arbutus Lodge's reputation was built by two brothers, chefs Declan Ryan and Michael Ryan who had identified the leading culinary artists of the day and had gone to work for them. They did *stages* in Dublin's The Russell Hotel under Pierre Rolland, in Lyon with Paul Bocuse and in Roanne in Jean and Pierre Troisgros. The Troisgros restaurant in Roanne was awarded three Michelin stars in 1968 and voted 'best restaurant in the world' by *Gault Millau* in 1972. Pierre Troisgros's son Claude was a talented sauce chef and he came to Ireland to work in Arbutus Lodge for a year to learn English. Declan Ryan suggests that in France Claude worked hard, but in Ireland he also played hard which meant that he found it difficult to settle back

into the work routine of his father's restaurant. He eventually moved to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil where he opened a chain of successful restaurants including *l'Olympe*, 66Bistro, CT Boucherie and CT Brasserie. A number of years after Claude's departure from Arbutus Lodge, one of the regular customers, a doctor's wife, travelled to Brazil with her husband to attend a medical conference. During this time, they happened to dine in *l'Olympe* and this connoisseur recognised that she had tasted the chef's cooking before. She asked the manager if they had a French chef in the kitchen, to which she was told 'of course'. But, she then asked if this French chef had ever worked in Cork? Following this question, Claude Troisgros emerged from the kitchen and they spent some time discussing their shared past and memories of Arbutus Lodge.

These three case studies show that truth is often stranger than fiction. Indeed, my ex-head of school, Joe Hegarty informed me recently that he was dining in an Irish hotel during the 1980s and recognised a spinach dish as the signature of one of his chef / instructors (clearly doing a 'nixer' – a job outside your normal work – during the summer holidays). He asked the waitress who the chef was. She went into the kitchen and returned saying he was a Mr. Murphy. He told the waitress to go back in and tell the chef that his food was unmistakably good and that he knew exactly who it was.

We remember the extraordinary, be it visual, aural, nasal, tactile or gustatory. Throughout our lives we use all our senses daily but how focussed are we in this? We clearly do not remember everything we have seen, heard, smelled, touched or tasted because quite often they are unremarkable and we are not focusing or using our senses as acutely as possible. When our senses are heightened by remarkable sights, sounds, smells, touch or taste (be they good or bad), however, they remain with us for a longer time. One only has to think of Marcel Proust and the effect the 'madeleine' had on him to understand the power of taste. In many cases it is what Bourdieu calls the 'cultural capital' (1984) that is associated with fine food, fine wine, knowledge of literature, film, music or the visual arts that cause us to take note. In life, we train ourselves to appreciate tastes that we find unpleasant on first encountering. Should the creators of fine food and wine be equally considered artists as the musicians, painters and sculptors who equally provide 'cultural capital' to their consumers? This question has been debated inconclusively for well over a century (Anon 1986) and in recent times (Lehmann 1999; Revel 2000; Arouh 2006), but within the limited scope of this article, it is hoped that these case studies give some food for thought on the subject of taste and stimulates further memories and discussion.

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