Identity and Historical Question of Food

Cookery is one of the rare arts or sciences that has no need for confirmation of its purpose. Unlike painting, theater, or philosophy, cookery does not suffer from a lack of apparent utility, yet at the same time, it goes beyond its central, momentary, and self-evident purpose to encapsulate a concurrent status as an image, a notion, and an idea. By serving as a toy and indicator of accurate memory, both individual and collective, food appears within the class of origin myths (Gray, 2011). Old cookbooks offer mythological material, with instructive correlations of (omni) knowledge about being alive; although they preserve ancient lessons and traditions, such readings do not belong to the domain of traditional wisdom. Whether written down or shared through vocal transmissions, the art and being of nutrition are phenomena capable of unconscious, transgenerational transmissions, and they determine both who we are and what we are like, revealing perhaps more than we want them to and more than we realize. As Tony Judt (2010) realized, “We Are What We Eat” (p. 31), a slogan known in antiquity and Hindu teachings as a literal caution; today, the phrase is a subject of a wider interest and argumentation, encompassing the impact of consumer habits on building identities (see also Foulston, 2006; McGee, 2004). It acknowledges that food is a story of a life and a rare truth that cannot be forged. By moving beyond alimentary biographies, bibliographies, or edible memories, nutrition indicates identity and becomes a true reflection of people’s being, views, and experience. The resulting perception or story does not require interpretation, because it cannot deceive or lie but is self-evident and self-sufficient.

Furthermore, it offers an inexhaustible source of research. Food has been the subject of biology, chemistry, and anthropology studies that seek the most accurate representation of humanity (Judt, 2010). In historical terms, food is a key term, because it represents the foundation not only of civilizations but also of their boundaries, such that it has prompted most of the changes in a society, provided measures of economic growth, and indicated social fragmentation (Holtzman, 2006). In this sense, the history of food is actually the history of the world, in that we can regard *magistra vitae* from the perspective of food development and its impact on the appearance of the *magistra* (Standage, 2010). In addition to being a driving, cohesive force, the key function of food in the history of humankind has been largely performative. Much like Adam Smith’s (1723-1790) assumption of “an invisible hand of the market,” Standage (2010) speaks about food through a metaphor of “invisible fork” that changes the fate of humankind, which is unaware of the main cause of that change (pp. 14-15). In inducing divisions and struggles...
for power throughout all historical periods, food continually represents a backdrop for all other contests and struggles. The history of the world, as we know it, thus is inextricable from the history of food. More than any other fear, fears about a lack of food are easy to manipulate and effective routes to conquest. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (2002) provided remarkably early insights into the importance of nutrition, claiming that the destiny of a nation depends on a type of food it has chosen. Despite offering an effective platform for the physiology of taste, his early 19th-century work remained on the margins of learning until recently. Yet Brillat-Savarin essentially established the scholarly discipline, unrecognized in his time, of transcendental gastronomy. Soon thereafter, Nietzsche (1888) conditioned the salvation of humankind on its nutrition, suggesting that the slavery of ideology that confined people could best be measured by their inability to conceive of alternatives, such as in their food selections.

As an insatiable desire and driving force, food also constitutes a passion, reflecting instinct. In recent years, it has come to represent either salvation or catastrophe, such as when it is proposed as a cure or the cause of virtually any disease. Any manipulation of food, whether collection, cultivation, preparation, or consumption, represents a cultural act (Montanari, 2006)—more than merely knowledge or merely discourse or merely culture or merely need, though it also is all of those things simultaneously. Traditional approaches forget, or ignore, that food entails both primary enjoyments and elementary values, such as emotional and energy values. However, by vulgarizing food perceptions, the cliché view of needs has greatly and negatively affected human self-perceptions.

Guided by the language of needs and necessities, or things we cannot live without, the only acceptable definition states that human survival necessitates food. Such a view has determined the shape of the world, whose history—regardless of perspective—demonstrates the great influences of both hunger and love, as initially established by Freud (1930) and his Viennese colleagues. In studies that focus systematically on the study of instinct and gratification, far more progress has been made in investigating the skills and techniques related to the preparation of food than in parallel research into sexology (Zeldin, 1995). In this narrow assessment, the origin of civilization emerged not just from the conjugal bed but by the emergence of cooking—the mother of humankind, such that one theory holds that primates became human approximately two million years ago, when they prepared the first meal (Wrangham, 2009). Comparable with Darwinian theory in its provocative-ness and comprehensiveness, Wrangham’s theory identifies an initial stage of society as the family, which used the art of living together in organization around a fire and roasting the items that had been hunted and collected. Cooking has made us the people that we are today, claims the author, it steered us toward civilization, initiated the evolutionary leap, and transformed necessity into artistry, a herd into a group that enjoys meals together. How and whether cookery is equivalent to other arts and sciences, and why humankind has taken so long to recognize the activity as such, constitute the central research questions for this article. We adopt a historical perspective, such that the debate appears ingrained with issues of values and our inconsistent relation to those values over time. In this sense, we use Perroux’s (1943) terminology, which defines values as statements or objects that have been assigned importance. Phenomena of value correspond to (comparative) judgments about the importance of goods and are based on individual preference scales. These phenomena of value can be found in any economic system.

The Long Prehistory of the First Revolution

An overemphasis on the corporeal and organic, focused on the nose, mouth, tongue, and digestive system, has degraded the culinary realm for centuries. In contrast, the process of mastering the spirit and knowledge disregarded or conflicted with notions of physiology. In a quest for an absolute, the owners of wisdom and guardians of metaphysical knowledge bypassed trivial, necessary, and commonplace ideas, such that scholarly and aesthetic inquiry ignored instincts and urges. Theories of art and epistemology were associated only with hearing or sight. In the name of progress and civilization, culture built a wall against biology. For centuries, preferences centered on the pleasures of contemplation and continence rather than an immediate, widely available enjoyment. Because no insights into these spheres and their mastery was available, it became impossible for them to attain cultural status.

With its apparent and simple purpose, food became primarily associated with consumption and satiety, similar to how the sexual act came to be understood through orgasm or reproduction, that is, through its function. Indolence and contemptuous attitudes emerged from the social and humanistic schools of thought toward biology and instinctive senses of taste and smell, as indirectly reflected in a vulgar, functionalistic perception of food consumption. For many years, cookery did not have its place in traditionally viewed aesthetics. Furthermore, traditional theorists failed to recognize the evident, fundamental artistic principles culinary acts, which include creation aimed at experience (not just reading, listening, or seeing); unity in action, place, and time; and distinctive performativity principles, in the sense that the culinary act transforms not just states and feelings but the body as well.

Because it is apparent, utilitarian, and broadly understandable, the art of cooking does not generally produce ambiguity; in contrast, classical arts have relied on principles such as an unclear purpose, distinctiveness, flow of time, abstractness, demands, or incomprehensibility except to an exclusive minority.

Closely related to biological needs and temporally coded, the necessary act of cookery had been painfully and slowly becoming a subject of focused analytical or aesthetic research,
perhaps also because it reminded the anthropocentric scholars of the unpleasant human proximity to animals. Finally, the opposition to perceiving the art of cooking emerged from efforts to preserve the prohibitions and cult of culture, which entail dependence on conventional or dominant orders in the organization of knowledge and skills, leading to a lack of ability to realize or recognize alternatives. Bound by self-interest, no existing order can approve of originality, even though seeking alternatives should be the primary foundation for cultural critiques.

To obtain their current prominence, gastronomic knowledge and skill have required both time and true devotees, including artists, eccentrics, provocateurs, and multidisciplinary scholars, as well as some favorable circumstances. For this discussion, we note that the first recorded use of the term gastronomy dates back to 1623, but it entered the common lexicon only after the foundation of corresponding research, including iterative experiments, examinations, classifications, analyses, and obtained facts and conclusions.

In turn, such research required significant progress in the skills associated with preparing various dishes; linguistically, it required a practice that was sufficiently recognizable, as occurred in the aftermath of the French Revolution. According to Onfray (1997), “1793 marked the emergence of gastronomy” (p. 146). However, because of the clarity, naturalness, and distinctiveness of the experience of senses of taste and smell, they remained difficult to prove and thus unrecognized or neglected as subjects of study for considerable time. Yet these senses, which are arbiters of what is edible or inedible, tasty or unpalatable, are incomparable in their power and sophistication; few visual or acoustic stimuli prompt such accurate reactions. In literature, the sense of smell is the only one whose vitality and fatality have been characterized by a profound, lucid, existential, literary, and aesthetic reflections (Süskind, 1986). Reactions to smell and taste include altered moods and conditions, which become manifest instantly and in a distinctly individual manner, whether reflexive, mimicking, or onomatopoetic.

These reactions also are difficult to hide and influenced by cultural, collective traditions (e.g., Douglas, 1966; Largey & Watson, 1972; Sokolov, 1991; Synnott, 1991). This influence has decisive importance, because over the time, taste becomes the character of a culture. Unlike Claude Levi-Strauss and structuralists, who prioritize cultural conventions to distinguish edible from inedible, Harris introduces biopsychological, ecological, and political-economic determinants of the consumption and production of food (Harris, 1987). If we overcome disciplinary limitations and preferences, it is difficult to deny the existence of culinary codes in every society that regulate complex geographic, historical, and developmental characteristics, as well as customs, religions, worldviews, and alimentary habits, semiotics, and design. Because this influence is broader than the individual level, these issues belong to the domain of cultural anthropology more than any other field. Nothing is inherently tasty or unsavory, whether dogs, snails, locusts, or pigs; that which is edible or inedible is both an individual choice and a choice made by our cultures (see Korsmeyer, 2002).

More profound and intimate than other stimuli, smells and tastes recount, better than words, what we would not remember otherwise. Like the amalgamated voice of chemical and emotional processes, they are heralds of the unconscious and neglected triggers of forgotten personal experiences. Both smell and taste can revive memories of past events, and from a physiology perspective, oblivion is deceptive, such that we would approach memory and oblivion differently if we studied them through the registers of smell and taste—those sudden stimuli that highlight the permanence experience. Scent reminders reveal that, in an emotional sense, anything that once existed never disappears. It is very much the same with the theoretical-historical treatment of culinary art: Dogged by controversies, these issues had been slowly attracting a focused research or aesthetic attention, first in philosophy and later in other scholarly disciplines.

Without creativity and inspiration, cookery could not progress, yet it generally has been approached as knowledge that gets transformed into a repetitive routine. Of course, it is a routine, just like any other arts based on knowledge and clichés. The procedure is the same; the only thing that differs is the value position taken toward one or the other type of activity or art. If classical aesthetics include “masters and dilettanti, authentic authors and epigoni, creators and followers, ingenious minds and spiritual dwarfs, then the same will hold true for the culinary field” (Onfray, 1997, p. 142).

In short, food is widely understandable and indispensable for everyone, which is both its advantage and its greatest shortcoming with regard to the status of food as art in its preparation. The immediate, direct gratification of instincts deprived cookery of both aesthetic status and attention as an important research subject, though without this instinctive element, it is difficult to imagine the existence of any related art or significant achievement. Instead, the domination of a “rational,” hierarchical system of values and knowledge requires an extraordinary performance: to prove the undeniable, self-evident value of culinary works using weighty approaches from art and science.

If no other method enables us to make ourselves understood, we note that the wisdom and art of nutrition precede enlightenment in other disciplines. In philosophical anthropology, the importance of food is most easily recognized in the Epicurean tradition, a conceptualization of humans and the world in which pleasure is the highest good, continuing Democritus’s materialistic system of thought. Post antiquity, centuries passed before sensuous experiences were seriously contemplated; as late as the 17th century, owing to John Locke and empiricism, sensuous experience earned legitimacy through the certitude of cognition, that is, Locke’s (1995) well-known assertion that there is nothing in the mind except what was first in the senses. The emergence of empiricism
opened the door to Julien de Offray de La Mettrie’s (1997) ethics of sensual pleasures, in which he argued that “instinct is wiser than intellect” (p. 10).

Because of his claim that psychological occurrences must be related to organic changes in the nervous system, he was severely criticized first by his fellow physicians and later by Enlightenment thinkers (Voltaire, Diderot, and d’Holbach). The attack on La Mettrie came from all sides: He was despised and attacked by everyone, from the French king, senior clerics, Enlightenment thinkers to academic dignitaries. His positions, disputable for the beginning of 18th century, inevitably led to his being driven to Berlin, under the protective patronage of Frederick the Great, where he ended his life (1751), following a sumptuous dinner prepared in his honor. La Mettrie’s death, allegedly caused by an excessive consumption of pheasant pate in truffle cream sauce, or deliberate poisoning—it had never been established—sparked speculations that it was a deserved punishment for his excessively sensual and hedonistic views. In an era ruled by theoretical intellect (i.e., civilized behavior and restraint), it was difficult to write about the finest morality of enjoyment or the life whose purpose was seeking for pleasures.

Unfinished First Revolution

Although Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de La Reynière and Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin did not immediately follow La Mettrie, the founders of the gastronomic alphabet continued his hedonic-sensual thought, specializing in the wisdom and art of good dining. Through practical and theoretical work, they aimed to prove that skillful treatments of food, more than any other skill or art, constitute quests for taste and the sublime. By preferring the invention of a new meal to the discovery of an unknown celestial body, they applied their talents to the only topic that also can be tasted. Grimod de La Reynière was an eccentric theater lover and critic, who created what modern speakers would call an event. This conceptual artist was a member of various societies that gathered on specific days of the week to develop, and enjoy, the procedures of the emerging science of gastronomy. The results of these gatherings were not just new edible inventions but also rules for naming and evaluating meals, as well as improved manners, forms, and orders for serving food. They introduced the idea of a lift between the kitchen and dining room, and they produced the methodological notion of a jury of tasters, which still remains an essential institution for testing new technologies or ingredients in food preparation. Such a jury of tasters is responsible for reflecting on and evaluating morsels to determine the taste of a dish, prior to writing any text or review.

To introduce gastronomy into the fine arts, Grimod de La Reynière (1978) presented his idea as a revolution, designed to overcome the stale order that marked the organization of values and knowledge. The same aim was pursued by Brillat-Savarin (2002), who did not conceal his demand for the highest position for gastronomy. Proceeding from the recognition that nothing can live without food, these provocateurs further asserted that there could be no metaphysics or politics without the reconciliation of humans with their urges, passions, and instincts. Ignoring the ruling order as much as it ignored them (their contemporaries remained mistrusting and scared of their originality), these founders of hedonism evaluated historical epochs only according to their contributions to the alimentary and progress made in the preparation of food, whether practical, technological, aesthetic, or hedonistic. To avoid semantic misconceptions, we also note that the hedonism Grimod de La Reynière practiced had little in common with the contemporary sense of this term; rather, it implied self-control, manners, semi-satiating bites, rituals, forms, order, sensibility, reflection, and intelligent conversations during the course of meals, which represented acts to share pleasures and establish closeness (Onfray, 1997). It was not immoderateness or gluttony but quite the opposite, namely, controlled restraint.

Another multitalented gastronomist and a contemporary of the originators of the gastronomic scene—as well as true devotee to the beautiful and tasty—Antonin Carême sought to achieve through cookery (pastry making in particular) what he could not do through architecture. Faced with rejections of his projects, he shifted his talent to culinary writings and discussions of the art of French cuisine, along with drawings, copper plate engravings, and “deteriorative,” edible works modeled after architectural designs. With his knowledge of architectural styles, which he applied to food preparation, Carême became the originator of bourgeois cuisine, defined as follows:

The bourgeois cuisine attempts to bound the internal by the external, to negate the spiritual refinement of a dish by an alluring appearance. That is the reason for such popularity of flambé dish preparation, over-pouring and permeation, soaking and benumbing the taste by alcohol; saucing, covering by cream, butter, and béchamel sauce spread. Then, glaze icing, which hardens the dish and fixes it by a layer of jelly; poaching and frying in bread crumbs, which disguise the true appearance of eggs and chicken; filling, by means of which volume is artificially increased, and a false appearance is created (Onfray, 1997). This step forward in culinary form, texture, content, and poetic naming is largely manifested in the altered approach to the contemporary culinary order, which relied solely on taste and smell. By subordinating his approach to the sense of sight, he shifted the art of well-prepared dishes from a focus on smelling to visual sensations, while also directing attention to stylistic harmony and visual effects.

Although hungry for recognition, Carême had to content himself during his lifetime with the title pastry chef-architect, or the Palladio of French cuisine. The new world emerging after the French Revolution needed precisely this type of talent, because it celebrated (including through food) the power of money as a new master, as possessed by merchants,
entrepreneurs, and members of the bourgeoisie. Although opposed to the ruling system, Carême served the emerging order—as, for that matter, did Brillat-Savarin and Grimod de La Reynière—because “by abolishing one system of privileges based on blood, the French revolution created prerequisites for establishment of a brilliant, brand-new system, this time based on money” (Onfray, 1997, p. 152).

In the years that followed the political revolution, the culinary revolution remained incomplete, important only to itself and a narrow circle of people who could benefit from it. The main ideas of its authors were left unrealized, and the extant value and knowledge order stayed intact. Chefs remained chefs, the bourgeoisie enjoyed ever-tastier dishes, and artists and metaphysicians continued to guard their artistic “temple.” Good dishes were necessary but not sufficient to invoke a fundamental change of the value system, which instead required outside influence, aided by the receptiveness, and the weaknesses, of the culture itself, as it started to consume itself. Ultimately though, the culinary specialties of true revolutionaries Brillat-Savarin, Grimod, and Carême would be enjoyed by their gastronomic progeny in France and worldwide through different types of cheese, cakes, and various other dishes—all savoried in a French manner of dining. By eating their dishes, the disciples extended the life of their creators, who will, after an uninterrupted continuity of practicing, experience the triumph of deserved world fame and the victory in the present day theory and aesthetics—their culinary ideas and inventions will be replicated by the artists who wished to be recognized as such.

In the 19th century, these culinary provocateurs (i.e., Brillat-Savarin, Grimod, and Carême) could have found perhaps their greatest ally in Friedrich Nietzsche, a self-proclaimed disciple of Dionysus. Whether he knew of their endeavors, Nietzsche’s (1888) poetics of life spoke in their disembodied voices, in his attempt to reassess all values, including his claims that human salvation depends on the form of nutrition. He gave priority to issues of food, climate, and residence over to all other questions, despite his traditional German education, “which from the beginning teaches losing sight of realities, in order to run after entirely problematic, so called ‘ideal’ objectives” (p. 41). Indulging his instinct to overthrow idols and idealistic or rationalistic hoaxers throughout history, this self-confident sage claimed that what and how we think is directly determined by what we eat.

Following this proclamation of the poetics of life in the late 19th century, many authors remained indebted to Nietzsche, whether they recognized it or not (mostly not). The question of how we become what we are, as posed in the subtitle of Ecce Homo, appears in Wrangham’s (2009) theory of cooking as the mother of mankind. However, even today, it is difficult to regard Nietzsche as being one of the founders of the ideas on wisdom and art of food consumption, as his work has been rarely interpreted in this key.

The (R)evolution That Guardians of the Cult of Culture Cannot Digest

The complex question of the internal collapse of the cult of culture, and its co-relation with an event, historical circumstances, or cumulative discontent, necessarily surpasses the available framework of any one discipline, as well as our knowledge and ambitions. However, in a context that pertains, directly or indirectly, to the change in the status of the art of cooking, we find a decisive role of Marcel Duchamp—cooking, a decisive role was performed by Marcel Duchamp with his Chocolate Grinder (1913)—at the end of an epoch or at the dawn of a short 20th century (Hobsbawm, 1994). Yet it is hard to define whether Duchamp’s subversive acts were directed at visual arts, to overcome the gap between art itself and the living world, or aimed to signify the erosion of the previous order of things in the value system and organization of knowledge, in terms of perceptions of sublime versus low. Beyond objects and images, in the verbal realms of social and humanistic studies, indicators of change and discontent with the ruling value order doubtlessly were expressed before and after Duchamp, such as in Physiology of Taste by Brillat-Savarin; in Nietzsche’s writings; in psychoanalysis, when Freud declared that something is wrong with our standards and that “It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement . . . They disparage, however, the true living values” (Freud, 1930); later in the works by Theodore Adorno, Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. For example, Barthes (1972) helped encourage the shift from linguistic semiology to a cultural version, summarized as poststructuralist critique. Through his analyses of advertisements for pannari spaghetti and similar works, Barthes also revealed an interest in studies of food (see Barthes, 1983).

Some versions of this cultural end cite the decline of visual arts and art critiques in the 1970s, whereas others note the trend of identifying marketing with culture (Seabrook, 2000), through the dominance of representation, such that the positions of the symbol and the symbolized switch. Still others focus on the so-called death of the author. Yet they all agree that symbolic value of the cultural or artistic, in the old sense, became devalued long ago. The value of the related theory is its ability to register these processes and attempt to find their causes, though the most convincing anticipation of the profound changes actually emerged much earlier, in a literary rather than theoretical domain. That is, Robert Musil (1965) predicted quick shifts in the evaluation of scientific knowledge, claiming

Our teaching is so strong that it will transform the cesspool of your sins into clear, sparkling mountain streams. But in science it happens every few years that something till then held to be in error suddenly revolutionizes the field, or that some dim and disdained idea becomes the ruler of a new realm of thought. Such events are not merely upheavals, but lead us upward like a Jacob’s ladder. (p. 43)
He also foreshadowed the marginalization of humanistic values that had been typical of the period before 1914. Cultural theorists, in their irrepressible drive to break from obsolete terms and previously imposed metaphysical objectives, slowly released the ballast of the past, to always find something new and interesting. Finally, by the end of the century, humanists had unburdened themselves of everything from the “dark past” and thus irreversibly marginalized themselves as well.

Regardless of the perspective taken, the collapse of the cult of culture took place during the “short twentieth century” (Caryl, 2013; Hobsbawm, 1994), whether we locate its symbolic end in 1979 or 1989. For those who live of and for culture, nothing would be the same after that end, as perhaps best revealed in the context of fine arts—the first space to open to culinary arts and ultimately its subordinate in the promotion of aesthetic, hedonistic, and consumer aspects. The release from the visual provided a beneficial, important strategy for survival in the new understanding of the cultural sphere. Saboteurs in their own fields licensed their professional non-involvement strategy first as a provocation, then as a fashion or practices; as a result, few modern artists actually paint. This virus of obstruction and destruction of traditional disciplinary conventions spread to other fields, and literary and humanistic critique in general. Camille Paglia (1998), as early as the late 1970s, lucidly identified the lack of negative critique in the United States and the prevailing standard of cautious, indulgent reviews. From her perspective, when academic whistles and bells quiet down, an atmosphere of general uniformity and simulation prevails; in frustrated response, Paglia sharply criticized the inertial academic world, including the gap between it and commercial mass media; the means by which humanistic science, in the service of politics, had become cheap propaganda; and voyeurism as a dominant cultural cliché.

In the late short 20th century culture, with the decisive aid of several actors such as Daniel Spoerri and Peter Kubelka, autonomy in the conventional sense of the word was lost. Even if not dead, culture in the 21st century changed, compared with the previous century’s perception. Cookery benefited from this death though, as a marginal, unexpected beneficiary of complex processes, as well as directed action. In the early 1960s, Daniel Spoerri attached notes reading, “attention, work of art” to delicatessen products; in the 1970s, as the eat-art movement was established in Milan, he was appointed a lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts of the Academy in Cologne (Onfray, 1997, p. 217). Reacting to decadence in art, this author concluded that nothing remained but “the sublime art of cookery” for acquiring the knowledge about oneself. In 1978, the film director and musician Peter Kubelka became a cookery lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Frankfurt, in which role he taught that more could be achieved by raising awareness of and education about the senses than through intellect. Yet these examples remained exceptions at the time, whereas in the present time, they would represent regular practice. Cookery clearly has gained legitimacy as an academic subject, as exemplified by the introduction of relevant theory and practice in schools. French elementary school pupils already participate in systematic training in the study and formation of taste. This formation of personal identity through taste can hardly be separated from a general relation to the world or one’s body. In addition, the curriculum includes experimenting with known and unknown dishes and encouraging openness to the sensations, smells, and tastes of different cultures (Zeldin, 1995).

The dynamic relationship between cookery and art is experiencing a sharp shift today. The traditionally subordinated position of cookery to art finally has been altered, largely through the intervention of Marina Abramović. Cookery will no longer use the back door to access aesthetics and knowledge, but instead, the symbolic capital of art must appeal to cookery. In her performance Let Them Eat Volcano Flambé! staged in the New York restaurant Park Avenue Winter, Abramović effectively demonstrated the equivalence of the value of cookery and art, by equalizing the price of a museum ticket and the price of cake: US$20 was the price of entrance to the New York Museum of Modern Art and for the consumption of a dessert that featured her signature. With her flambé cake sprinkled by golden leaves, the performance artist went even further, to achieve more than a mere equivalence, through a direct quotation of Antonin Carême, the founder of bourgeois cuisine. Using flambé and glazed icing procedures to subordinate, in value terms, the internal content to external manifestations, Abramović confirmed the paradigm through a combative binary structure, making her the Carême of American art. If cookery, in the altered value order, gains the status of a superior, prestigious form of art, then this new value hierarchy also must be reflected in our language, so the formulation, Carême of American art, must be understood affirmatively, rather than ironically or disparagingly. When Carême claimed himself a Palladio of French cuisine, his pride reflected the current hierarchy at the time. Calling her the Carême of American art is a compliment to Abramović, within a value system in which the art of food preparation dominates. Accordingly, even as she maintains essentialist frameworks of internal and external, spiritual and material, Abramović demonstrates the shift of the traditional relations of these values in the cultural hierarchy and affirms material, hedonist, and luxury values on formal level, marked by golden leaves and flambé. Although this shift can be interpreted in at least two ways, the performance clearly transforms an old value order and symbolically verifies the change, a long-term process achieved by various means. The initiation of cookery into the art world through performance is not unusual, because this art form is the closest to the single-time, unrepeatable quality of a culinary act. The question that remains is whether the symbolic capital of the artistic performance of Let Them Eat Volcano Flambé! serves more than the purpose of the value inversion of a long-lasting dichotomy, built through various means, or contributes to its overthrow.
One way or another though, “a tortilla has been tossed,” as a colloquial Spanish saying goes. Things were in their proper order; the art of preparing and consuming food acquired the status it has deserved from the beginning. Yet it would be bitterly noticed by guardians of the metaphysical temple, in a vain attempt to understand the historical movements. Ironically, the art of cookery came to triumph in a period that, through “progress” and the serial production of food, downgraded our consumption to a prehistoric status: similar to their distant ancestors, modern consumers have meals in places imposed by need, such as fast food stands and petrol stations. Because the expansion of cookery coincided with the fall of “true culture,” comparisons are inevitable—though the global fame and influence of Jamie Oliver are hardly comparable with the fame and influence of any painter, playwright, or philosopher. Initiated during the Enlightenment but neglected for two centuries, gastronomy is teaching us a modern lesson, as the manifestation of civilized behavior, described in studies that have acquired the dignity of representing a prestigious scholarly discipline. Ever increasing investments in the study of food, frequently by faculties in the social sciences, design, and art, testify that cookery is no longer a distant relative or exotic, unnecessary spice. On the contrary, it has become an experimentally established, verifiable expression of mutual conditioning: Through gastronomy, and its molecular form in particular, a powerful alliance has been established between the rational and emotional attainment of an objective (This, 2009).

Conclusion

The winds of change have started to blow, bringing with them a dynamic era in which, due to progress in communications among other things, culture in the old sense of the word has contributed to its own end. For those lulled by the predictability of the previous linear flow of time, the ruling order, similar to a menu, appeared innovated to the point of inedibility. But menus cannot change without intentions of change; similarly, these extensive changes could not have occurred without some dissatisfaction with the previous state. As a result of our frequently distasteful anthropological theories, the segment of reality that makes our world both tastier and more understandable had been marginalized. In this process, supporters of traditional arts—possibly weary of examining the aesthetic possibilities of known-to-all passions—could have either shrugged their shoulders and joined the trend, or else observed from a distance how the unique experience of creation, including through cookery, became commonplace, usual, and banal. In the language of the dominant culture of market values and numbers, they might have observed how prices dropped rapidly with the emergence of new artists, including culinary ones.

Throughout its history, leading to the status that it enjoys today, cookery has had to traverse long distances, from a routine necessity aimed at fulfilling basic needs to an art performance. It has been an uninterrupted path of testing and perfecting culinary skills, first by sense of smell and taste and later in time engaging all other senses. In that process, food has become much more than a central existential problem; its skilled preparation involves, at the same time, the art of mastering the taste, color, proportions, and, ultimately, the time and the meaning.

Its status development, leading to its transformation into an artistic act, consisted of slow changes in viewers’ perspectives, sometimes painstakingly, in that awareness of the aesthetic and epistemological value of culinary works lagged behind knowledge of food preparation. However, a rigid cultural order can be transformed and democratized through a series of more or less successful revolutions that insist on awareness of the importance of all senses and receptiveness to different viewpoints, as unequivocally demonstrated by the history of cookery. In retrospect, cookery has been invisible as a subject of a serious aesthetic and analytical reflections, treated as an object of refraction for metaphysical and physical contemplations on the sublime or the low, and an independent path with a performative impact. The persistent influence of cookery on the domain of thought also is apparent in the alimentary metaphors used in this text, which facilitate the “digestion” of the complex topics. Yet even though it remains a demanding topic of study—one that puts taste, as a measure, to test—the art of cookery is also a research-friendly topic, which should serve as a constant reminder that we cannot linger too long on its theoretical development. To conclude, Dewey (2005) wrote “by one of the ironic persuasions that often attend the course of affairs, the existence of the works of art upon which formation of an esthetic theory depends, has become an obstruction to theory about them” (p. 3; see also Shusterman, 2010).

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1. For additional systems of olfactory and other sense classification, see Almagor (1990), Beauchamp and Maller (1977), Classen (1990, 1992), and Synnott (1991).

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