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Discussion paper

Gastronomy: a phenomenon of cultural expressionism and an aesthetic for living

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Abstract

The culture of a society is manifest in a variety of ways, in its art, language and literature, music, and in all forms of religious and secular ritual. Cultural expression, however, whilst being a powerful factor in the definition and development of the human species, is not always vital in the utilitarian sense. Rather, it can be regarded as a group of activities usually referred to as “art for living”, which provides substance, meaning, continuity and value to living in a particular social grouping. This paper argues that gastronomy, the selection, preparation, presentation and participation with culinary and gastronomic aspects of food, falls squarely into this category of ‘fine art activity’ since most societies seek to differentiate their food preparation into either the purely utilitarian or the highly developed and stylised methods of presentation and participation which, in many instances, are not designed for consumption merely, but also for status, ritualistic and aesthetic purposes. © 2001 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

Keywords: Gastronomy; Cultural expressionism; Aesthetic purposes

1. Introduction

To say that the food supply was the most important factor in the evolution of man is to state the obvious, but occasionally we fail to realise that eating is more than just vital for human survival it is an activity by which culture can be distinguished (Chang, 1977). The importance of food in understanding the cultural phenomenon however, lies in its infinite variability — variability that is not essential for species survival. Philosophers have held that man is distinguishable from animals in a variety of strictly human characteristics

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such as language and the capacity to think. If there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner, at least some of its food (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 937). Responding to basic biological drives animals feed, that is, they just eat food, and food is anything which their instincts place in the category “edible”. In contrast, humans beings, whilst primarily procuring their preservation by means of the best possible nourishment and communication, also prepare and consume food in a most sophisticated manner. It is therefore, suggested, that the preparation and consumption of food, is one of the major traits which characterise them as humans. Indeed, Levi-Strauss (1978) contends that the manner in which people prepare and cook food can be considered as proof of civilization.

“Obviously mankind must eat to survive. We have this in common with all living things ... [However] we grow up eating what our parents and friends eat. We eat what is available” (Lovatt 1989, p. 2). Moreover, there is a distinct difference in the manner in which different societies prepare similar foodstuffs. In primitive cultures, for example, people who produce grains or collect seeds pulverise them with a mortar and pestle or grind them between stones which provides flour which can subsequently be made into gruel, cakes or incorporated into an edible formulation. Similarly meat and fish are commonly cut into small strips or chunks and dried by air, in the sun, or over a fire. Cooking is often limited to a basic level which can be achieved with or without vessels. Some Indonesians, for example, cook their food in bamboo tubes, whilst a number of primitive societies steam or bake food in pit ovens. In addition, people without pottery may boil food in wooden, hide or basket containers by placing red hot stones in the water which surrounds them. It is also possible to grill meat or other food by placing the piece on a stick or otherwise arranging it over or near a fire. Some items are baked in hot, ashes, heated sand or hay-boxes.

Essentially, human-kind does not have to cook food: they do so for symbolic reasons which serve to demonstrate that they are humans, not beasts. In essence, for survival needs, all men everywhere could eat the same food which can be measured in purely nutritional terms of fats, carbohydrates, proteins and vitamins (Bode, 1994; Pyke, 1970). For this reason Levi-Strauss (1978) proposes that fire and cooking are basic symbols by which culture is distinguished from nature. He also asserts, in his classic work *The Origin of Table Manners* (1978), that culture can be distinguished on the basis of the receptacles which are used in the cooking process. An example of cultural behaviour associated with the symbolic nature of food is provided by Visser (1991) who states that

because we are human, because as we shall see, “cultural” behaviour appears in us to be a “biological” necessity, bread became in addition, and has remained, a deeply significant symbol, a substance honoured and sacred. We still remember that breaking bread and sharing it with friends “means” friendship itself and also trust, pleasure and gratitude in sharing. Bread as a particular symbol, and food in general becomes, in its sharing, the actual bond which unites us ... (p. 3).

Strengthening this argument, there are observable cultural differences in the basic ingredients from which food is prepared; the ways in which it is preserved, prepared and cooked; the amount and variety available at each meal; the tastes that are liked and disliked; the customs and traditions of serving food; the implements and utensils which are used; and inherent beliefs about the properties of particular foods. Many of these cultural differences are apparent even in the least developed societies and can be observed in the rituals which are practised by such societies. Visser (1991) explains the evolution of ritualistic behaviour in the following terms:

The repetition [of ritual actions] soothes us, apparently, in and by itself-inducing what James Joyce called “those here we are again gaieties”. Rituals survive because people want them to do so; they “work”. Culture, [therefore] not instinct, determines a good deal of what we do” (p. 20).

‘Sociologists define culture as including all those aspects of human life that are learned and shared by members of a society’ (Riddell, 1989, p. 1). One of the most significant examples of this learning is linked to food. Without learning and the sharing of knowledge, for example, man would continue to experiment with food items which are considered dangerous such as certain species of fungi which are potentially lethal when ingested. As a result, what human-kind considers edible is not a reflection of his inborn nature, but a consequence of his cultural conditioning. For instance, only some foodstuffs may be eaten, without modification, all cultures therefore include customs for modifying foods before eating. Furthermore, some foods are not fit to eat until certain elements have been removed. A number of plants for example, must be scraped, peeled, or cut open before use. (Taylor, 1976). A clear illustration of learning and the subsequent sharing of knowledge in relation to the modification of food, is provided in the following extract from *Larousse Gastronomique*:

Cassava. Manioc. Plant native to the West Indies, Equatorial America, and Florida, U.S.A. The root, which is a fleshy tuber, contains edible starch. The sap, containing hydrocyanic acid, is poisonous. The poison, however, can be eliminated by fermentation and cooking (Montagne 1979, p. 192).

The starch of cassava is treated by heating and drying and agglomerates into small masses known as tapioca, which has become a common food in the Western World and is eaten without fear of toxicity. This is a direct result of the accumulation and sharing of knowledge in relation to the treatment of the cassava root. Techniques of serving and consuming food also vary cross-culturally. In some cultures it is “proper” to eat with ones fingers, whilst convention in others demands the use of implements. Differences are also evident in eating patterns. Many people, for example, have only two meals a day, whilst others have one big meal, snacking at other times. Some like their food hot, others like it cold. Regardless of these

distinctions however, it is suggested that all such cross-cultural differences are learned, for inherent human nature does not dictate precisely what, how or when we eat. Indeed, Visser (1991) asserts that:

The extent to which we demand meals at regular times, mostly giving them specific names each with their own connotations (breakfast, lunch, supper) is as arbitrary as it can be solemnly binding. We even develop physical demands for food when food is “due”; the stomach contractions we experience at midday or in the evening, often quite painful ones, which signal mealtimes and which we call “hunger”, are strictly speaking nothing of the kind. They are the result of habit and bodily rhythms only, and they result from a culturally induced custom of eating regular meals. It is often part of society’s manners code never to eat between meals, so that not only the meals but also the spaces between them are controlled’ (p.22).

Catering for all these variables is part of man’s expressive culture. The manner in which culture is expressed, however, is pervasive embracing an enormous range of activities which includes: Literature written and oral; drama which is allied to literature and can include theatre, cinema, television, painting and sculpture; Music in a variety of forms such as vocal, instrumental, formal and folk; dance in all its forms namely ballet, ballroom, traditional, folk, and disco; building and architecture; furniture making by such masters as Chippendale, Sheraton and Buhl; Clothes by the great designers Dior, Balmain, and Mortell; and finally Gastronomy, which, it is argued, is also fundamental to the cultural development of mankind.

Most people would agree that painting, sculpturing, composing music, singing, dining and dancing are activities that occur in every society. In a modern Euro–American context these are encultured into the notion of art and non-art, or more specifically, the fine arts and the useful arts. While one is prepared to acknowledge that there are activities which do not constitute art, although a definition of art has thus far not been found that would permit general segregation of art from non-art on a world-wide scale. In modern civilisation however, a particular performance is deemed artistic or not by a distinct group of specialists who make or judge art, and by virtue of experience or appreciation control the museums art galleries, conservatories, critical journals and other institutions which are devoted to art, or, in some cases, a particular art.

There is ample evidence to suggest that cultures at a pre-state level of development and organisation lack the sophistication of such an art establishment. However, this does not necessarily mean that there is an absence of artistic standards within these cultures. Indeed, while the food arts may currently lack the sophistication of for example, the fine arts, an absence of standards does not necessarily follow. In rating art-like performance for instance, Harris (1971) asserts that there are three general criteria: (i) technical virtuosity, (ii) fidelity to established tradition, and (iii) creativity.

2. Cultural expression in art, crafts or techniques

Man is a singular creature, he has a set of gifts, which make him unique among the animals; so that unlike them he is not a figure in the landscape, he is the shaper of the landscape, the ubiquitous animal who did not find, but made, his home in every continent (Bronowski 1981, p. 13).

How and with what degree of skill men or women choose to use these gifts can serve to separate the artistic from the non-artistic. Humans engage in multifarious activities, any one of which may be carried out at a routine or utilitarian level, or with a high degree of skill. It is therefore technique and craftsmanship which serves to distinguish the work of art from the non-art or utilitarian performance. The work of art is supremely well done and it is technically *first-rate*. As a result it offers pleasure. It is hedonistic. The concept of food providing pleasure and being recognised as artistically worthy is not new for:

Throughout history, the subject of food occurs again and again as one which gives life pleasure and the joy of sharing, which artists throughout the ages wished to convey and felt worthy of recording. The first illustrations were simple black and white drawings. But as colouring materials were found and their use understood, the paintings incorporated colour, and some representing harvests, food and eating became masterpieces of their time' (Bode 1994, p. 239–240).

In Medieval times the importance of technical ability was recognised, art being defined as the right way of making things and it is no accident that the Greeks had the same word, *techne*, for “art” and “technique”. This suggests a balance between protracted effort and technical mastery of the medium whether in paint, stone, words, or food. In the process, one is well advised to profit from the experience and discoveries of others. As previously noted, human progress is culturally cumulative in that all that is achieved technically in painting, music, mathematics and in *cuisine* is due to the accumulation of individual discoveries made by particular human beings at particular points of time. Where, for example, would modern music be without the innovations in harmony of the last five hundred years? Where would painting be without the early Renaissance experiments in perspective or the insights into colour and light of the expressionists? Similarly, where would gastronomy be without Dubois, Dumas, Careme, Montaigne, Brillat Savarin, Escoffier, and the moderns such as, Bocuse, Ducasse, the Roux brothers and the national culinary teams.

It is therefore suggested that high achievement in any field is dependent upon the achievement of a technique which incorporates the experience of those who have gone before and, indeed, those currently working in the field. Freedom of artistic expression, it would seem, is not without certain boundaries. Levi-Strauss (1970) for example, poses the question:

... would not the abstract painter be justified in appealing to the precedent of music and in claiming the right to organize forms and colors, if not with

absolute freedom, at least in accordance with a code independent of sense experience, as is the case with music with its sounds and rhythms? (p. 19).

Similarly, the trained professional chef creates his or her works while conforming to a code of practice fashioned through learning and experience. This provides justification for the culinary institutes, catering colleges, polytechnics, universities and indeed for *Salon Culinare* occasions such as *Hotelympia*, the Culinary Olympics in Frankfurt and national catering exhibitions, which provide a forum for teaching technical skills and exhibiting the work of culinary artists.

At this stage, it is necessary to make two observations on technique. The first, is the salutary point made by *de Chardin* to the jury of the Salon in 1765; “He who has not felt the difficulties of his art does nothing that counts: he who has felt them too soon does nothing at all”. The second, is that once one has become the master of one’s medium, one can extend the technique or may even ignore, or appear to ignore, the rules altogether. This is evident in the early works of Picasso which conformed to canons of convention, his later works however, were ground-breaking and unique.

3. The fine arts and the useful arts

There exists a traditional distinction of paramount importance to the concept of gastronomy as an art, that is, the distinction between the fine arts and the useful arts. Although all arts involve technique, *The Arts* fall into two broad categories. On the one hand there are arts based on practical activities such as the making of; furniture, clothes, musical instruments and buildings. On the other hand there are the activities of for example, literature, music composition, painting and sculpture. To the latter, during the past three hundred years, it has been customary to give the name *Fine Arts*. They qualify for this title because they are essentially non-practical although not exclusively so. Additionally, they involve the free plan of the human intellect over and above what is required for survival.

A further requirement for the title *Fine Arts*, is that these arts seek to relate, to communicate and commune between people in that, the artist assumes an audience when he/she for example, writes a poem or paints a picture. Furthermore, meaning is conceded to these art forms in a manner which is not associated with utilitarian arts. These two categories of course, are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Since, historically, the fine-arts arose out of the useful arts it is logical to assume that in the evolution of mankind *Homo Faber* carries on his shoulders *Homo Gastronomicus*. In the process, modern Gastronomy has moved from the purely utilitarian to the artistic and can lay claim to fulfilling the various criteria necessary to be considered as essentially a fine-art. These include, in the first instance, its historical base, which is well founded on a worldwide cross cultural basis. Secondly, it is a communion between people, and finally, it involves at its zenith, the free play of the human intellect at a level which is essentially non-practical. It is accepted, that there are many meal occasions which are not gastronomic occasions in that they

never transcend the practical or utilitarian function of providing nutrition. Aside from these purely functional dining occasions, however, dining in a fine dining restaurant would certainly be considered to be a hedonistic or sensually pleasurable experience above and beyond what might be considered routine consumption. Furthermore, a stroll around the *galleries* of a national or international catering exhibition, can leave one awestruck at the magnificence of the works on display, some of which it should be noted, were never produced for consumption.

Summarising the link between culture, food and art, It has been proposed that: (i) all works of art involve technique and craftsmanship and (ii) certain arts carry meaning. Now it is suggested that to understand the meaning which is attached to gastronomy as a fine art, it is necessary to come to terms with an adequate theory of knowledge. In other words it is proposed that artistic media speak to us only because the process of artistic creation involves a unique form of human knowledge.

4. A concept of knowledge

The human being is born into this world and its life is a process of grappling with and coping with the world. We come to know the world in various ways, we react to it and in the process we build up a body of knowledge. Traditional accounts of the basic elements of the knowledge process incorporate sense-perception, images and image formation, concepts (the existence of which is the basis of artistic communication), judgements, and logic (Rice, 1979).

Man's process of knowledge has overlaid upon it the rational processes of concept formation, judgment, and logic. These are normal processes for everyone, and are used in everyday life, in buying and selling for example, and in coping with the world. Some people – the statisticians, scientists and economists, for example, develop these processes to a high degree but essentially they are still processes which belong to all of us. Because mankind is defined as a rational animal it is often thought that an account of human knowledge emphasising these rational processes is the whole story. It is suggested, however, that this account must be complemented by an insistence on another definition of human knowledge, if you like, a right-handed knowledge which is common to all of us but which is developed particularly in the “artist” and, in this instance, the “Gourmet”.

5. Special knowledge for cultural expression

As human kind moves through the world it absorbs sense impressions, images and ideas. Over and above this sensory flow however, man perceives an impact that is a feeling of insight or union which can be translated as an empathy with reality. This is essentially an internal feeling of resonance or of being in tune with some aspect of reality which strikes a responsive chord within one's being. As a result, one feels compelled to express the experience in a meaningful way. Anyone who has an interest in food and who has experienced the display of artistry at *Hotelympia*, the

culinary Olympics at Frankfurt or other culinary exhibitions can recognise these feelings.

Such feelings in many cases incorporate tension as if there is a burden that must be set free, and ideally will be set free through an expression of culture. It is therefore unfortunate that one of life's tragedies is that most of us do not have the technical ability to follow through. We try to capture the majesty of the Grand Piece or in the culinary sense, the intricacies of a banquet table and the result is bland and uninteresting. Not so for the genuine gourmet, this artist has the insight. Indeed, it is probable that his/her sensibility is greater than that of the ordinary man or woman, and he/she also has the technical ability to express this insight in a completed work of art. Such a work of art, therefore, involves a combination of intuition or creativity and technique. If either is lacking you do not have a work of art. Insight unsupported by technical ability is an all too familiar experience. It could equally be argued, that however technically competent a work may be, it is not a work of art unless there is a worthwhile insight at the core. This theme is further elaborated upon by Oscar Wilde's character Gilbert, in *The Critic as Artist* as follows:

Shakespeare might have met Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the white streets of London, or seen the serving-men of rival houses bite their thumbs at each other in the open square; but Hamlet came out of his soul, and Romeo out of his passion. They were elements of his nature to which he gave visible form, impulses that stirred so strongly within him that he had, as it were, perforce, to suffer them to realise their energy, not on the lower plane of life where they could be trammelled and constrained and so made imperfect, but on that imaginative plane of art ... (Wilde, 1989, p. 281).

It is therefore suggested that artistic activity is essentially creativity incorporating a feeling of resonance or insight which, with the addition of technique, results in the production of an artistic object. In the gastronomical sense this could be an ice-carving, a carefully balanced meal or some other grand piece. A close analogy with the process of rational knowledge is also evident in this artistic process. The activity of the rational cognitive knowledge for instance, fulfils itself in the production of a concept or a judgment, while the activity of artistic knowing terminates in the production of a work of art, and thus both communicate.

When the chef as artist completes a work, something new — the work of art — has been brought into existence. What exactly is this new thing? This work of art? This creation? Is it not as important to discover a new dish, as it is a new star? We can accept that it is something personal since it has been shaped by a particular human being and since it is conceived of an urge to share, it ought to be acknowledged that it has a role to play in communication. But why should it assume its particular shape or form? To answer this question we need to consider the tension in the artist, which demands expression. As previously stated, in his/her encounter with the world sense impressions, images and ideas form within the artist. As a result, from time to time he/she experiences this resonance or mysterious empathy between his/her own

subjectivity and some aspect of the real world. The artist subsequently feels that he/she has an insight and understanding of some facet of reality and it is this intuition which he/she feels compelled to express and share with other humans. In attempting to give expression to this intuition, the creator finds that concepts and the logical order of the genre used by scientists, economists and mathematicians are not enough. Their laws, it is argued, will not span the totality of human morality and as a result, concepts and logic will not span the delicacy and profundity of what he/she has experienced. The artist therefore, feels compelled to create another thing in order to communicate which results in the artistic object. In this act of creativity the chef as an artist, uses raw materials in a special way so that the meaning of the meal as a whole, that is the integral meaning, is greater than the sum of the experiential meanings.

Finally, the insight itself may be clarified for the artist only as the work progresses. Until then the original resonance which demands expression may be obscure and general. For frequently it is only as the work proceeds that the artist comes to know the details of the communication, as within his or her consciousness, reality and the artist's own subjectivity merge together from his/her inner self. The work of art subsequently reveals the heart of the artist as illustrated in the following quote:

An act of thought which by its very essence is creative, which shapes something into existence, instead of being shaped by things, what does such an act express and manifest when it produces the work if not the very being and substance of the one who creates? But, the heart of man is obscure to himself; it is only by receiving and suffering things, by awakening to the world, that our substance wakes to itself. The poet can express his own substance in a work only if things resound in him, and if, at the same awakening they and he emerge from sleep. All that he discerns and divines in things is thus inseparable from himself and his emotions, and it is actually as part of himself that he discerns and divines it and in order to grasp obscurely his own being through a knowledge the end of which is to create. His intuition, the creative intuition or emotion, is an obscure grasping of himself and things together in a knowledge by union or cognitively, which only take shape, bears fruit and finds expression in the work' (Maritain, 1975).

What, one might be inclined to ask, do we the consumer in turn receive by encountering the artistic/gastronomic object. It is proposed that, if the preceding analysis is correct and if we are open to the effect of the gastronomic work, we obtain a double knowledge which is quite unique. That is, the work of art expresses simultaneously an insight into some aspect of reality and an aspect of the intimate subject of a living human being. As a consequence, we obtain an insight into reality, together with an understanding of the heart of the artist themselves which might not have been possible by other means. Consequently the cognitive content in the work of art, that unique knowledge which the work of art conveys, provides ample argument for the presence of the arts in life and in education.

6. Gastronomic art and beauty

There has long been a connection between art and beauty. A work of art is expected to be beautiful and it is expected to conform to certain canons of regularity. For gastronomy, this translates into menu balance and harmony in such areas as colour, temperature, taste and texture which in some cases can be dictated by the aesthetic demands of the raw materials which are used to create a gastronomic work. The ultimate answer to the relationship between art and beauty is likely therefore, to lie in the relationship between being and beauty. In this regard, there is an old scholastic insight which states that being, that is existence, is beautiful. This seems to be one of the laws of the universe. The sky is beautiful. A river is beautiful. A race horse is beautiful. Consider the beauty of a human face or of a human body. It is acknowledged that there is ugliness and evil in the world, but ugliness and evil seem to be a wound, a defect in being, while being itself seems to be beautiful. Joyce's character Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, however, states that three criteria have to be present in order to establish beauty, namely 'wholeness, harmony and radiance' (Joyce 1934, p. 241). Although it is often said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, *Stephen* probes this theory asserting that:

This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty the clear radiance of esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart (Joyce, 1934, p. 242–243).

7. Conclusion

An interpretation of gastronomy as an art form has been sought. It began by pointing to the pervasiveness of art and by pointing out that any human activity, provided it is carried out with sufficient skill can be the subject of an art.

Further, it was posited that in all art technique is essential and, it was argued that there may be technique without art but there is no art without technique. With regard to the distinction between the fine arts and the useful arts, and their association with the concept of meaning, it was suggested that the meaning that attaches to works of art does so only by reference to a theory of knowledge. In the process of artistic creativity in many fields it was proposed that a resonance between some aspect of reality and some aspect of the artists subjectivity occurs. The work of art subsequently crystallises and expresses this resonance so that by encountering it the consumer obtains a double insight; (i) into some aspect of reality and (ii) into the intimate subjectivity of the human being who has created it.

Finally, with regard to the relationship between art and beauty, it is concluded that it is a law of nature that being tends towards the beautiful. In the work of art a man or woman brings a new being into existence and consequently it is asserted that all art, including that which has food as its base, must engender beauty.

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