
Vanina LESCHZINER, *At the Chef's Table. Culinary Creativity in Elite Restaurants* (Stanford, Stanford University Press 2015)

This engaging book offers much more than an evaluation of elite chefs and the food they serve in the US cities of New York and San Francisco (and the San Francisco Bay area). It brings a theoretical sophistication and depth to an area of research that is not always known for its theoretical rigour and creativity. In addition to expanding and refining Bourdieu's concept of a cultural field, Leschziner also excels at the elucidation of "categorization and classification in cuisine," "cognitive patterns and work processes in cooking," "culinary styles" and, with some reservations, of "culinary creativity and innovation." While many of the observations about chefs and the culinary field have been made in other analyses of the topic, Leschziner's analytical approach to these features is often innovative. She even adds to an understanding of the "field" when she points out that characteristics of the area of activity wherein fields are embedded shape the mode of cultural production, as well as field dynamics.

In terms of methodology, the qualitative interview- and observation-based method yields good insights and immediacy and shows rigour in its gathering and analysis of data. It is, however, regrettable that the data, collected in 2005 in a fast-moving field, are a little old and therefore valid mainly for and coloured by a particular context of US towns before elite restaurants became partly defined by the Michelin rating system and its requirements of consistent quality plus originality. Her study also antecedes global developments in cuisine that elevated innovation as a more important marker of status in the field—one of Leschziner's central categories—than her work is able to allow for. Moreover, with the introduction of the Michelin rating system, status became measured in international, rather than just local or, at most, national comparisons. Additionally, "star tourists," who consider themselves experts in haute cuisine and judge chefs in their culinary blogs, have become more prominent than Leschziner allows for.

The book is written in a very accessible style. I particularly like the way in which the introduction of a new theoretical concept is often

preceded by an empirical example that illustrates the issue under discussion. References are provided in the form of end notes so as not to break up the text. However, the relegation of all methodological questions to an Appendix made it difficult at first to grasp how categories of chefs had been devised and how individual chefs were allocated to them.

The overarching question Leschziner seeks to answer is “how and why chefs make choices about the dishes they put on their menus.” After an introduction of elite restaurants and their chefs in the two cities, she explores the mode of cultural production and what is specific to haute cuisine as a form of cultural production, namely the fusion of artistic quest and the striving for commercial success. This leads to the introduction of the notion of cultural field. For the author, cultural fields were still geographically bound in the early 2000s and face-to-face interaction was common. The navigation by chefs around the field and their constant endeavour to establish and maintain a position within it involves them in creating dishes and establishing a culinary style—between the two poles of originality and tradition—consonant with their position in the field. Orientation to others in the field is constantly in the background of the actions and career moves of the chefs, resulting in self-concepts that guide them “in making choices between competing incentives and constraints” [9]. Such self-concepts are dynamically adjusted to the changing field.

The status of chefs ranges from high, via upper middle to middle, and is determined by Leschziner in reference to the stars awarded by the locally predominant press, as well as by restaurant prices. While the first is a common criterion for assigning status, the second is more ambiguous and a less reliable criterion for categorization. Restaurant prices are determined by more than the quality of their food. Hotel restaurants in particular, with a more luxurious décor and furnishings and a more professionalised service than owner-managed ones, usually charge higher prices, even though their cuisine may be no better than that of the latter. A more explicit discussion of the perceived rating principles of the two main local newspapers would have been welcome given that rating bodies—both guides and newspapers—are important actors and shapers of the culinary field.

Leschziner’s description and conceptualization of chefs’ culinary careers well captures their specificity, namely the constant moving around to construct a career that may eventually lead to becoming a chef-de-cuisine or even restaurant owner. Leschziner well depicts the strong social networks and bonds that are inherent to the culinary

field and explains why chefs become deeply embedded in this social world, making movement to another occupation very unlikely.

Comparing the careers of these American chefs to those of the German elite chefs I studied [Lane 2014],¹ I am struck by the degree to which the American context has shaped them. Whereas the former may have lowly origins in low-quality Italian or pizza joints and build their career mainly on the basis of astute moves between restaurants, German elite chefs rely more strongly on their vocational training and would rarely start their careers in such undemanding culinary environments. Leschziner is aware of this contrast but attributes it to the whole of Europe [17]. In contrast, the US shares this pattern with the United Kingdom, another country where vocational training is invested with relatively low value and where labour markets are organised in a comparable manner. In both the American and the UK contexts, association with a particular restaurant becomes a proxy for skill, whereas in Germany it primarily adds prestige.

The chapter on Categories and Classifications in Cuisine has a particularly strong theoretical underpinning. Her focus on chefs' awareness of the consequences of their classification for status in the field and how they seek to influence and control their classification through carefully constructed narratives is particularly instructive, as is her exploration of the lasting influence of French techniques on the so-called Modern American style. The chefs' resistance to external classification of their style, Leschziner suggests persuasively, is partly motivated by their feeling that classification makes their style more generic to the category and less of their own. The fact that flavour rates very highly in both chefs' self understanding of status and in external categorization is not surprising. However, the very low weight that chefs place on innovation—which for most of them has a negative loading—must surely be a feature of that particular time when Michelin's demand for originality had not yet been internalised. In contrast, of the 40 British and German chefs I interviewed in 2010–2012, 30 considered themselves as innovative [Lane 2014: 138–139]. This rejection of innovation by American chefs seems particularly odd when they are portrayed as constantly concerned with distinctiveness, new ideas and creativity. Creativity, it is held in the literature on innovation, is the first stage in the innovation process, which requires the implementation of creative ideas and their recognition as such by significant stakeholders, including experienced diners.

¹ Christel Lane, 2014, *The Cultivation of Taste. Chefs and the Organization of Fine Dining*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

The issue of knowledge and knowledge exchange is also deftly handled. It pinpoints the lack of protection of knowledge and the moral restrictions around borrowing new ideas from other chefs. Borrowing from chefs outside the area is readily acknowledged but taking ideas from chefs in the field is morally sanctioned. Hence chefs, particularly in New York, are prone to obscure the conduits of influence during interviews. There is a fine balance, Leschziner suggests, between borrowing ideas and developing one's own distinctiveness that requires careful monitoring both of one's own style and that of others in the field.

Chapter 5 on Cognitive Patterns and Work Processes in Cooking highlights the severe tensions entailed by being an elite chef, particularly between the stressful work process and the necessity of remaining inspired and distinctive or, as one chef puts it, between being artistic and being robotic [100]. Here Leschziner develops a useful distinction between chefs engaged in creating new dishes, namely a conceptual and a practical approach to cuisine which shapes culinary style. Whereas the former is associated with more deliberative steps towards creativity, the latter may develop creativity through adapting to contingencies in a more habitual manner and being more prone to a "trial and error" mode of achieving new dishes. However, the chefs' processes of cognition, Leschziner cautions, should not be viewed in neatly dualistic terms, divided between only conceptual and practical, cerebral and intuitive. She reminds the reader that chefs develop their style in relation to their position in the field. Recently appointed chefs are more likely to attempt innovation. I am less convinced, from my own field work, that chefs with high status in the field, because they feel secure, are more likely to be innovative.

In Chapter 6, the author explains how chefs use culinary style to position themselves vis-à-vis others in the field and struggle to gain recognition and legitimacy. Although culinary capital already possessed plays a role in the adoption of style, the latter is cultivated very strategically. Adoption of styles entails an association with an established style and the prestige of that style and of the chef practising it. Likewise, chefs refrain from identification with a given style—even if their cooking is close to it—if that style is not invested with cultural value. "Chefs and dishes influence one another's standing in a field".

Regarding the principle of culinary innovation, Leschziner suggests that chefs reject any attribution of creativity or innovation because they see the latter as incompatible with achieving good flavour—the master concept in the culinary fields of these two American cities. It is,

however, not clear why the two principles of cuisine cannot be combined as they are not inherently antithetical. It may be that the term “innovation” at this particular point in time had become negatively loaded through its association with molecular cuisine whose originator, Ferran Adria, would occasionally prioritise innovation at the expense of flavour. European chefs, by the mid-2010s, had overcome this interpretation and realised that selective use of molecular techniques could even enhance flavour although they still avoided the tag “molecular” in their self-descriptions.

In the final chapter Leschziner maps out creative patterns in a systematic diagrammatical form. To facilitate the mapping she adopts four principles of culinary creation that chefs have deemed important in portraying their culinary style. The poles of innovation and tradition are paired with those of purity and impurity. This dualistic categorization, however, is slightly problematic. First, even innovative chefs emphasise the importance of tradition as a principle against which they define themselves. Second, defining impurity by prioritising visual appearance and particularly texture, instead of flavour does not make sense. Texture and flavour are closely associated, and chefs often choose a certain texture to enhance flavour.

A section on “adversarial cooperation” among chefs in a given local field makes the astute observation that competition is muted because elite restaurants rarely have exclusive customers, i.e. diners who patronise only one restaurant. Such adversarial cooperation reinforces the homogeneity of values in a field and strengthens the collective. For me, this well explains the term of “the brotherhood of chefs.” Leschziner acknowledges that culinary fields differ in many ways from other fields studied but the similarities make for instructive comparisons.

Concluding and summarising sections on “theorizing action in the field,” chefs self-concepts and on “creativity within constraints” complete a theoretically stimulating and empirically rich book that manages to encompass chefs as both individual actors and as members of a social field.