Wittgenstein's kitchen: Sharing meaning in restaurant work

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Talk is poetry: sociological poetry – rhythmic webs of connotative meaning bound together within a social structural matrix. Meaning depends upon a community of shared understanding in which strings of lexical items are interpreted. When we talk about *things* we do not directly refer to the whole of our thought – our language is necessarily imprecise and capable of variable interpretations. Garfinkel's recognition of the presence of the "etc. rule" underlines that much of what we know we must leave unstated – full explication is a never-ending process.[1]

In practice, however, speakers hope to draw from each other similar evocations. In Isenberg's terms we strive "to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content."[2] When this shared understanding occurs, it is because we have had similar experiences and have been taught to understand them in similar ways. Symbols are but marginally precise. This circumstance was nicely captured by George Herbert Mead in *Mind, Self and Society:*

> It is the task not only of the actor but of the artist as well to find the sort of expression that will arouse in others what is going on in himself. The lyric poet has an experience of beauty with an emotional thrill to it, and as an artist using words he is seeking for those words which will answer to his emotional attitude, and which will call out in others the attitude he himself has.[3]

Mead makes the point that this type of speech (or writing) is especially applicable to those forms of talk (or writing) that have an aesthetic reference: that is, that attempt to present an argument of sensory appreciation about an experienced object or event. When speakers wish to explain to others the sensory (hence, the aesthetic) characteristics of an object or event they rely upon skills of role-taking.

Theory and Society **24**: 245–269, 1995.
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Yet, this does not imply that the speech acts themselves will be flowery or "aesthetic," even within art worlds. While replete with metaphor (the claim that A has a resemblance to B, and this relationship is a meaningful one), the language can be mundane, routine, quotidian. Indeed, much technical communication relies on the fact that speakers use abbreviated or profane images, assuming collective understanding. Talkers in such circumstances are rarely self-reflective about their talk. This is particularly true in communities in which extensive cultural capital is not a requirement for entry. Communities of talk need not be limited to elite culture producers, although surely these producers are most self-conscious about what they do. The creation of meaning is found in communities of all kinds, and is incorporated and expressed within the activities found in those communities.[4]

In this analysis, I attempt to understand "aesthetic" talk.[5] My goal is not to present a philosophy of language (*langue*), but to reveal a pragmatics of language (*parole*): talk as used by workers involved in the everyday creation of aesthetic objects. How is language used for purposes of creating community standards – here, aesthetic standards? Sociologists have traditionally been hesitant about analyzing aesthetic judgments. Perhaps we have agreed with the philosophical position, from Kant, that aesthetic judgment is a function of the "aesthetic attitude,"[6] grounded in individual distance, disinterest, or perspective. When classified in this reductionist, psychologistic way, aesthetic judgment may seem outside the realm of sociological analysis: these philosophers ignore the social component of these choices. Sociologists, such as Gans[7] or Bourdieu,[8] who have examined "taste" see cultural choices as mediated through such classical social variables as class position or educational attainment, but have ignored or downplayed the interactional context in which evaluations are learned and expressed.

I argue that sensory judgments are grounded in social relationships, face-to-face negotiations, social structures, and organizations,[9] and are found throughout the society. These judgments, while they purport to present empirical statements for belief, present "feelings." By feelings I refer to the cross-pollination of bodily feedback and emotion talk. The grounding of this talk can be analyzed within the sociology of the body and the sociology of emotions: how what one senses (felt bodily reactions) is transformed into self-reflective cognitions about these sensory states.

Yet, a personal response is insufficient for building a "universe of discourse." These expressions are meaningful because speaker and audience are embedded in the same "moral community." The acceptance of talk strengthens the recognition of communal properties among the speakers. One of the key markers of community is the existence of shared constraints of language.[10] Constraints are ultimately grounded in social organization and socialization, and depend on the existence of common knowledge of linguistic rules and patternings.[11] To talk "sense," conversants must have an adequate notion of what each may and can be talking about before the conversation begins.

The general category of speech events that captures the discussion of the sensory experience is what Michael Polanyi describes as "tacit knowledge." Polanyi[12] notes:

> [T]he aim of a skillful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them.

People routinely perform acts with considerable competence and with a "sense" of what is right without being able to describe what it is that they do.[13] We know many things that we cannot explain (e.g., the sound of a clarinet[14]). This complicates matters when individuals need to describe their activity to others who are ignorant of the rules – the process of socialization becomes a challenge and a hurdle. Language is a poor indicator of what techniques and sources of evaluation produce aesthetically competent products. Frequently we can neither explain nor define, a point artfully made by that most sociologically astute philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein:

> When we're asked "What do the words 'red', 'blue', 'black', 'white' mean?" we can, of course, immediately point to things which have these colours, – but our ability to explain the meanings of these words goes no further.[15]
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> * * *
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> Imponderable evidence includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone. I may recognize a genuine look, distinguish it from a pretended one. ... But I may be quite incapable of describing the difference.[16]

How, then, can meaning be established? The answer cannot be internal to the linguistic system of which the speakers are party, but must relate to external criteria (the context and structure of the social system).[17] It is the ability to "know in context" and to compare present contexts to past ones that permits aesthetic judgments and the ratification or criticism of judgments by others.[18] This allows us to interact smoothly with-

out recourse to the existence of impossibly precise definitions, in the face of "family resemblances."[19] Even when the objects to be classed together have no one thing in common, they are still categorized together because we perceive a preponderance of similarity.[20]

For an empirical site to demonstrate how everyday aesthetic judgments depend on social organization and interaction, I present material from an ethnographic examination of restaurant cooks. Talk in kitchen environments provides a fortuitous set of data for my argument because professional cooks routinely judge dishes that they produce and serve. While cooking involves the efficient production of foodstuffs for public consumption, these objects must be sensually pleasing, both for cooks and customers.[21] As a result, a concern with flavor[22] is a central part of the doing of professional cooking. As the workers in a restaurant kitchen constitute a closely-knit small group,[23] they rely on colleagues for advice, help, and judgment. Culinary talk is an integral part of cooks' work responsibilities and, in addition, this talk is satisfying to workers in persuading them that they are talented and competent craftsmen, even though most entered the occupation without a self-conscious aesthetic sensibility:[24] they are aesthetically untutored.

In the more prestigious reaches of the occupation the rhetoric of "art" is frequently encountered,[25] yet, cooking is also a relatively low-paid, low-skilled job for many who work at it, and even some elite cooks deny their "artistic" status (e.g., Andre Soltner[26]). Because of the range of images and the structural tensions associated with the occupation of cook, it is a particularly apt occupation in which to examine how aesthetic talk can be created. The aesthetic meaning of any particular food product is not given; there is no widely-accepted "theory" of food.[27] Food talk is not privileged discourse. As a result, culinary meanings must be continually constructed and reconstructed in light of an unknowing or skeptical audience.

All occupations try to some degree to produce objects and services with a measure of "style," however defined. For this reason the process of aesthetic judgment in restaurant kitchens can potentially be generalized to other work worlds.

Research sites

In this research program, I conducted participant observation in four restaurants in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, spending a month observing and taking notes in each kitchen during all periods in which the restaurant was open. I spent on average 50–75 hours in each restaurant, having obtained the approval of the restaurant management and the cooking staff. In each restaurant I interviewed all full-time cooks, a total of thirty interviews. Each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes, with some extending over three hours.

The four restaurants represent a range of professional cooking environments in the Twin Cities. I make no claim that these four restaurants form a representative sample of all eating establishments; clearly they do not. They represent the upper portion of Minnesota restaurants in status; they are not "family," "fast food," or "ethnic" restaurants:

1) La Pomme de Terre is an haute cuisine French restaurant, by all accounts one of the best and most innovative restaurants in the upper Midwest.
2) The Owl's Nest is a continental-style restaurant, best known for the quality of its fresh fish. Its primary clientele is businessmen, and the restaurant is a multi-year Holiday Award winner.
3) Stan's Steakhouse is a family-owned steakhouse. It is particularly well-known in its neighborhood, a middle-class area, not known for the quality of its restaurants. It has received metropolitan awards for the quality of its beef.
4) The Twin Cities Blakemore Hotel is part of a chain of hotels that are not esteemed for the quality of its cuisine. The hotel is modern, catering especially to business travelers. The hotel has a banquet service and operates a coffee shop and dining room.

Although the restaurants vary widely in the number of customers served – from 500 on a busy weekend evening at Stan's to about 75 on the same evening at La Pomme de Terre – each hires from five to ten cooks of whom usually three or four are working in the kitchen simultaneously.

While real differences distinguish these restaurants in the skill and aesthetic orientation of the cooks, my goal in this article is to focus on the similarities among them – those commonalities that might be gen-

eralized to the occupation as a whole. I downplay the elements that divide them for purposes of this article, preferring to generalize from four cases than to use each individual restaurant with its manifest idiosyncracies as a representative of its culinary class. Cooks at La Pomme de Terre certainly had a more profound aesthetic orientation than those at Stan's, but what impressed me was how cooks at each establishment attempted to make aesthetic sense of the food that they produced, and for this reason I feel justified in combining discourse from each kitchen in a single argument.

I recognize that examining cooks in a second-tier, "provincial" metropolitan area provides a different kind of sample than one based upon elite chefs in a primary cultural center (e.g., New York, San Francisco, New Orleans), where a more self-conscious aesthetic dynamic occurs. It is precisely that these cooks are not elite artists that make them sociologically interesting. Trained in trade school, where cooking was likened to other industrial work, and not other arts, leads them within their habitus to be inarticulate about taste and to produce imprecise classifications of culinary productions.[28] The fact that, even so, they talk about the aesthetics of food preparation suggests the extent to which aesthetic discourse affects the doing of work.

Talking about food

English, in common with other Indo-European languages, does not have an adequate vocabulary for expressing and describing sensory experiences. Yet, the five senses are, in practice, described with varying amounts of specificity and clarity. The visual aspects of our world, perhaps because the visual is often temporally stable and capable of being pointed to, has the largest and most denotatively descriptive vocabulary. We all can see simultaneously what we are describing. In our culture when we wish to describe something as empirically certain we speak of it in visual terms – exclaiming "seeing is believing."[29] Vision is culturally privileged. Tactile and auditory sensations have a somewhat intermediate position – being measurable and easily shared by a community of spectators.

Taste and smell are more difficult for audiences to reach a shared understanding. For this reason, cooks and those interested in food find that they have difficulty talking about things edible. If many foods are "good to think,"[30] these thoughts are not always easy to express.[31]

Scientists have not developed standardized measuring scales by which taste can be judged and discussed – taste has no widely shared equivalent of volume and amplitude. Further, an object to be tasted must be consumed, must be incorporated within the body.

Smell has some of the components of taste – there are no adequate measuring devices for smells, although there have been numerous attempts at developing them;[32] often we are at the mercy of "experts,"[33] who create dimensions on which smells can be classed – yet, these classifications rarely transcend the laboratory. Because smell and taste are socially undifferentiated senses, they provide a critical case for the development of a sociology of aesthetics. Despite the difficulty of developing such a language, perfumers and gourmets do understand their colleagues. How? How can individuals, in the absence of a well-developed linguistic code that specifically denotes sensual (in this case olfactory and gustatory) experiences, come to believe that they share a common set of meanings? In the case of professional cooks, how do they become sufficiently confident of the ability to share meaning about foodstuffs that they can, as a practical accomplishment, use this knowledge as an instrumental tool in their occupational world?

The "problem" of flavor

Whatever the reasons for the lack of differentiation of smell and taste, Western culture does not socialize people to these senses: there are no culinary appreciation courses in American schools,[34] going to a restaurant is not the same kind of event as going to a museum. Smell and taste are defined as secondary senses. They get no respect. Some suggest that the senses of taste and smell are not merely secondary, but are "lower" senses than the visual or auditory senses, an argument made by notable philosophers such as Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel. Taste and smell, they claim, do not involve sufficient portions of the intellect to involve contemplation. They don't go beyond themselves; they do not lead to theoretical insights. Colvin[35] suggests:

> Sight and hearing are intellectual and therefore higher senses, that through them we have our avenues to all knowledge and all ideas of things outside us; while taste and smell are unintellectual and therefore lower senses, through which few such impressions find their way to us as help to build up our knowledge and our ideas.

This represents a social construction, in that any sense can be a window to the world. I argue that the limits on what one "sees" in taste and smell is culturally determined. Culinary standards are not universal.[36] The Japanese tea ceremony is a potent aesthetic event, as significant for its audience as viewing a painting. Likewise, one can discover in a bowl of bouillabaisse the economic circumstances of the fishermen of Marseilles, the zest of the French for sensual living, or the symbiotic relationship between the sea and the garden. That we typically do not think these thoughts is a cultural choice, not inherent in our sensory apparatus or in the food. Yet, the cultural choice to downplay the gustatory and the olfactory has effects, particularly in the development of language. A serious language of taste and smell would demand dramatic changes in our modes of description of foods. As the nineteenth-century gourmet Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin[37] wrote:

> ... if it is granted that there exists an indefinite number of series of basic savours, all capable of being modified by an infinite number of combinations, it follows that a new language would be needed to express all the resultant effects, mountains of folio volumes to define them, and undreamed-of numerical characters to label them. Now, since no circumstance has so far arisen in which any savour could be appreciated with scientific exactitude, we have been forced to make do with a few general terms, such as *sweet, sugary, acid, bitter,* and so on, which are all contained, in the last analysis, in the two expressions, *agreeable* or *disagreeable* to the taste, and which suffice for all practical purposes to indicate the gustatory properties of whatever sapid body is in question.

A similar perspective is found earlier in the philosophical writings of John Locke[38]:

> The variety of Smells, which are as many almost, if not more than Species of Bodies in the World, do most of them want Names. *Sweet* and *Stinking* commonly serve our turn for these *Ideas,* which in effect, is little more than to call them pleasing or displeasing; though the smell of a Rose, and Violet, both sweet, are certainly very distinct *Ideas.* Nor are the different Tastes that by our Palates we receive *Ideas* of, much better provided with Names. Sweet, Bitter, Sowr, Harsh, and Salt, are almost all the Epithets we have to denominate that numberless variety of Relishes, which are to be found distinct, not only in almost every sort of Creatures, but in the different Parts of the same Plant, Fruit, or Animal.

In the centuries since Brillat-Savarin and Locke wrote little has changed. Talk about food is decidedly constrained by the lack of vocabulary. As Jacobs[39] wrote recently, pungently: "How inadequate the language is in the service of palatal sensation, how hollow with

overuse the few available modifiers!" Yet, this lack does not mean that individuals cannot express opinions and attitudes about food; rather, they must rely upon a set of shared assumptions, which they convey in an indirect and implicit manner.

Much discussion of foods is both general and vague. Consider, for example, one cook's attempt to describe the taste of a Salmon sorbise: "I thought it was excellent. I thought it was one of the better creations. It blends in with the fish flavor excellently. It's just super. It's not tart. Smooth." (Field notes, Owl's Nest.) A person who had never tasted this dish could hardly learn from this description that onions are a central ingredient. Likewise, another cook comments about the soup of the day – lentil soup: "Yucky soup today. ... I hate lentil. ... I don't want to try it. There's probably nothing wrong with it. I just don't like it." (Field notes, Owl's Nest.) When a particular dish is called "nice" or "good" or "wonderful" or "disgusting," it is assumed that others will know *why* that adjective is used and how it related – even when they disagree. There exists a community of meaning. This community of meaning permits cooks to prepare competently those dishes that they find appalling, but to make them so that others find them appealing. Part of this vagueness may be a consequence of the lack of training and cultural capital of these men and women, who are basically working class in origin. Bourdieu[40] emphasizes the role of habitus in providing cultural categories for individuals of different economic and social station to use to make sense of their worlds and express their identities, comparable to Bernstein's[41] class-linked elaborated and restricted codes. Yet, this explanation relying on a model of "culinary literacy" does not explain the whole of the problem in that the challenge of depicting gustatory aesthetics applies throughout the social class hierarchy.

A more direct and personal way of recognizing the difficulty that all people have in discussing their evaluation of food involves a thought experiment. Select your favorite food, and then describe *why* you like it. Often the first answer will be straightforward and tautologous: "because it tastes good." If so, ask again; why does it taste good? How could you describe the taste of the food to someone who has never tasted it? To the extent that one is rigorous in demanding of oneself an answer, one quickly learns that terminology fails – other than the basic terms: sweet, sugary, acid, bitter. Whether such terms have an "essential" meaning – as Wittgenstein doubts – they have a metaphorical meaning *in use*.[42]

Fortunately cooks are not asked to perform this daunting task, except by intrusive sociologists. Consider these two relatively representative inquisitions:

GAF: What is something that you really like?
Doug: Stuffed green peppers are really good.
GAF: Why do you like them?
Doug: The flavor of green peppers.
GAF: How would you describe that? What is it about green peppers that you like?
Doug: I like fresh vegetables. I like green peppers.
GAF: How would you describe it to someone who's never had one?
Doug: I don't know how I would describe it. I wish it was something easier like fish or something. I have no idea. (Personal interview, Stan's).

* * *

GAF: What are your personal favorite foods?
Dana: Pizza.
GAF: Why do you like pizza?
Dana: I really don't know. I guess I just like the taste of it.
GAF: What do you like about it?
Dana: It's spicy. Do people have answers for that question? I don't know. I've never really thought about it. (Personal interview, Blakemore Hotel)

In posing this thought experiment to sociologists, the responses were similarly ambiguous, if phrased with more sophistication. Even those who can talk about reasons for liking a food typically rely on vague generalities and metaphors from other sensory modalities. One cook whose favorite food was lobster said he liked "the delicate taste to it, the nice flavor. It's really light. It's not overwhelming or overpowering" (Personal interview, Owl's Nest). Another claims her favorite food is French bread, because it is "soft and crusty, slight bit of salt, salt is part of the great thing about eating French bread" (Personal interview, La Pomme de Terre). These discussions remind one of the ethnomethodological exercises performed by Harold Garfinkel[43] and his students. I am asking people to explicate what they had previously taken for granted – everyone knows why a pizza can be said to be good; only a "cultural dope" would have to ask – even if one didn't care for pizza.

In discussing food one relies on metaphors or similes to describe the taste, smell, texture, or looks of the food.[44] These metaphorical constructions can either refer to other foods or to some non-edible object: objects that are, when the metaphor is effective, resonant[45] for the participants within their life-worlds. The food metaphors are the easiest constructions, even when the comparisons are surprising:

> Howie says to Tim (the Head Chef) about a batch of cheese puffs that Tim had cooked: "Beautiful. These puffed up just like souffles." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)
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> * * *
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> Diane tells me that they make their veal stock very thick, "like molasses." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)

Essentially these speakers take adjectival descriptions of the food to be discussed (i.e., airy and thick) and apply them to other foods that are typified in the same way.

Metaphors, however, can go beyond comparing one food to another. A food can be compared to anything if the symbolic value of that object helps the listener understand the sensory characteristics of that food.

> Tom, one of the house captains, says to Tim (the Head Chef) about a special of the evening: "These scallops looked real good." Howie (the Sous Chef) adds: "That sauce looked like velveteen satin." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)

The shiny/smooth qualities of the sauce constitute the basis for the metaphors of velvet and satin. Adjectives such as "mellow" or "soothing" describe foods that are well-liked, even though these terms do not have any direct food relevance, but can be linked to other objects typified with the same characteristics.

Using metaphors to denigrate seems more common, and likely to carry more rhetorical force. Cooks frequently liken unsuccessful dishes metaphorically to "shit," in American culture a highly marked and generic term of opprobrium:

> Ron says to me about their new dish Fillet of Sole Santa Cruz, which the management of the hotel has added to their menu: "The sole looks like shit now. Two half bananas on top. No sauce.... Real stupid." (Field notes, Blakemore Hotel)

Here the dish lacks the markings of a successful dish in color and textures. Other descriptions are more exotic:

> Howie jokes to Lesley about the salmon she has been preparing – a whole salmon chaud froid with green sauce and relish: "What did you do, throw up all over it?" (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)
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> Howie tells me "I went to [a trendy local restaurant] and ordered lemon sole. I should have known better. It tasted like a plastic helmet. The fish was cooked to death." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)
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> Kate is making a pink spread – called Strawberries and Cream, served as a sandwich. Kate tells Don, who looks at the spread with some disgust: "We sell more of those than anything else." Don comments: "That's a gut bomb. It's like eating a rock. They're tasty, but you can't eat very much of it." Kate jokingly comments: "I don't eat it." (Field notes, Blakemore Hotel)

These judgments are grounded in the expectations that kitchen workers have of successful dishes: dishes that mix colors appropriately or are "light" and fresh, fitting into cultural ideologies of food. These expectations derive from previous experiences in kitchens and as diners. Previous experiences provide the basis for comparative judgment; they serve as points of reference or precedents for aesthetic evaluation. Cooks are continually learning as their culinary exposure increases, and each judgment is predicated on the dishes that they created and tasted previously, even as a culinary theory is discounted in the face of pragmatic experience. La Pomme de Terre's sous chef's comments on how he decides which ingredients will go well together:

> Well, half of the time I think you don't know, you just guess. If you're a good cook, you guess right. There are certain things like I would've never thought of, like basil and cantaloupe. Basil is kinda spicy, peppery. But we made a cantaloupe and pink peppercorn sorbet a little while ago, and that was pretty good too. (Personal interview, La Pomme de Terre)

The previous mixture of cantaloupe and peppercorn provides a legitimating precedent for mixing cantaloupe and basil. The critical point is that no set of rules predict with any degree of certainty what will "go with" (the "etc. rule"). The evaluation of what tastes "good" is not inherent in the food itself, but in its local evaluation, which depends on the judge having been part of a community of interest. After the fact, it is difficult to ascertain from the foodstuffs alone why certain items were defined as blending or mixing well, although one can construct rationales that justify the combination. Since flavor is, after all, a matter of preference, linked to cultural capital and the flavors one had been

exposed to, "tasting good" is related more to how one expects the food to taste – often based on its visual characteristics – than to a pure theory of taste. The expectation of dishes and deviations from these expectations are often raised by cooks:

> Diane tells me how much she likes the wild mushroom tart that the kitchen has made: "It's really good.... It's got a really earthy flavor. It just tastes like what it is. It's like eating the woods. When someone tells you the name of a dish, it's disappointing when it doesn't taste like what you expect. This tastes like what it is." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)
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> I ask Lew why he puts paprika on the fish; he seems surprised by my question, then responds: "It's a way to make it look good. If we didn't put it on, it look really white. It has no color. It looks more appetizing, instead of all white." (Field notes, Stan's)

This implicit knowledge of what a dish should "be" is at the heart of understanding the "eye" or "knack" for cooking. Yet, this belief that the knowledge of how to cook is internal further complicates the development of shared standards. Cooks may not recognize that their knowledge develops from the experiential side of cooking and on what they have learned from peers.

Shared cooking

In most large and mid-sized restaurants several cooks labor simultaneously, forming an occupational community. Cooks need not rely upon their own personal judgments about the creation or production of a dish. They can request advice from co-workers. Aesthetic judgments have the potential for becoming consensual; further, an on-going process exists by which professional evaluations develop. Previous judgments, consensually arrived at, affect the evaluation of subsequent dishes.

Cooks share their evaluation of dishes, as in the following examples:

> Diane reflects on an Avocado-Potato soup prepared as a special: "It doesn't taste like what it is.... A lot of time people expect things to taste like what they think it should. If it doesn't, they won't like it, no matter how good it is."
> Howie comments: "It tastes like avocado and potato to me."
> Diane responds: "I can't really taste the potato." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)
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> * * *
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> Diane says to Tim about a chaud-froid salmon they made: "Good salmon. It's a nice combination."

> Tim comments: "Actually I thought the salmon was pretty shitty, but the relish was good." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)

Through the trading of judgments, telegraphic but potent, cooks develop a sense of what others feel is good, even though they typically do not refer to the particular characteristics or elements of the dishes that allow them to reach their conclusions. They come to know from a compilation of judgments collected over time.

Beyond these discussions cooks collectively decide in practice how to prepare dishes. They negotiate the final outcome of some of the dishes that they cook, especially when management assigns them autonomy in the creation. Soups are notable for negotiation; steaks and items cooked to order on the line are less so. In restaurants in which cooks have the authority to create new dishes, the planning and initial preparation of a dish involves negotiation, whereas each individual production of that dish typically will not, unless a problem is noticed. The outcome of a dish is shaped by the input of members of the cooking staff:

> Tim (the head chef) and Howie (the sous chef) discuss adjustments to a strawberry sauce that will be served with smoked goose. Howie thinks the sauce is acceptable, but Tim prefers food that is more heavily spiced and herbed. Tim suggests that the strawberry sauce needs mint. He grabs a bag of mint leaves and dips one into the sauce and they both taste it, but they decide that is is still not acceptable. Howie comments to Tim: "You got to think how it's gonna go, the mint flavors with a smoked goose." Tim adds some red wine to the sauce, which they taste; then Tim makes a paste with dry mustard and red wine and adds that, which he now decides is good enough, but says to me: "It's still not perfect." Later I ask Howie what was wrong with the sauce and he said: "Nothing. It just didn't have enough oomph for him." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)

As so often happens in hierarchical organizations,[46] the outcome of the negotiation is shaped by the structural power in the kitchen as well as by the opinions of these two men who respect each other – yet, one of them has the obligation to decide. Aesthetic standards in organizations ultimately are constrained by hierarchy. Power and authority are also evident when the head chef is absent:

> Howie has just finished making a fish terrine and says to Diane: "Why don't you take a taste of that terrine and see how it tastes with that [red bell pepper sauce]?" Howie, Diane, and Denny (the Day Cook) all taste it, and Howie comments: "It might be kinda strong." Denny comments, "It might be better hot." Howie responds: "Tim wanted to run it cold.... Why don't we put a hold on that." (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)

Similarly cooks discuss the dishes that they are about to prepare, even when their judgments do not correspond to their personal attitudes. Cooks must learn to analyze dishes so as to prevent their aesthetic standards, often grounded in their class positions, from blocking their professional judgment, as in this discussion of steak tartare, disliked by all the discussants:

> Mel (The Head Day Cook) comments about the Steak Tartare they are fixing: "They'll be a lot of gassy people around."
> Paul (the Head Chef) notes: "I can't eat it."
> Mel adds: "I don't like the capers in it."
> Eddie (the maitre d') jokes about the sauce: "Put a little sterno in there. It needs something."
> Paul: "It needs the meat."
> Eddie tells Paul that he put in some tabasco and pickle relish and they agree it tastes fine, but when I taste it later it isn't very spicey. (Field notes, Owl's Nest)

This dialogue depicts the practical dynamics of the shaping of dishes. Further, these occasions help to build a sense of what good cooking consists in. While such an understanding is typically implicit – that is, not overtly referred to – cooks recognize that their socialization consists of learning from colleagues how to prepare particular dishes. A co-worker can set cooking standards, although of course there are some settings in which the production of colleagues may be defined as negative exemplars:

> Bruce comments about the crepes that other cooks make: "They'll make them lopsided. I like to see a perfect crepe. I like to hear people say [the Owl's Nest has] the best crepes in town. When you hear something like that you put more pride into them." (Field notes, Owl's Nest)

Yet, because of professional solidarity, and perhaps because cooks typically define each other as cooking well, such negative comments are less common than positive judgments.

Talking aesthetic theory

Although aesthetic judgments are ultimately grounded upon evaluations and experiences of particulars, cooks occasionally construct culinary theories. These "theories" are not theories in a classical sociological (or scientific) sense, but are extended metaphors – "folk theories" – that permit the cook to think about a diverse range of

food products. Given the fact that these workers do not perceive themselves to be intellectuals, but emphasize their working-class backgrounds, culinary theories are incomplete, and were found explicitly primarily at La Pomme de Terre, the restaurant with the greatest desire to claim haute cuisine status and the greatest need to construct a theory of art to justify its self-identity.[47] An explicit, verbal theory of culinary classifications is a luxury of those with intellectual pretensions, time, and an appreciative audience.

Because of the difficulty of specifying the taste of dishes and because it is equally hard to define in advance which foods "go together," cooks create meaning from metaphor. In this way these culinary theories represent a "poetics of cooking."[48] Metaphors allow cooks to communicate about what they think they are doing in a way that transcends the immediate culinary problem. For example, a cook may talk about "brightening" the flavor of a dish; another dish may be criticized for not having enough "oomph."

In a more extended vein, the Head Chef at La Pomme de Terre referred to taste as being functionally equivalent to a musical octave, borrowing an already well-established cultural theory. He indicated that, in some measure, he attempted to create dishes the way he imagined a composer might create a symphony:

> [My sous chef] was making a soup and he called me for assistance in finalizing the seasoning, so I thought about it, and it was just missing the high end taste, the flavor, it didn't have any spark to it, so it just came to mind, boom, all of a sudden. I thought, gee, it's kind of like a musical octave. ... It's a good basic analogy for preparing foods and flavor as far as I'm concerned. (Personal interview, La Pomme de Terre)

Later he expands this metaphor:

> Tim says that he sees a dish like "an octave," in that you need elements from all parts of the octave to give it harmony and balance. Specifically he mentioned how he changed the sweetbreads recipe on the menu. The previous style of preparation placed the sweetbreads in a Madeira sauce with mustard seeds. Tim said that because it was spring he wanted to "lighten it up." He decided to cook them with Shiitake mushrooms, saying that these mushrooms give the dish a woodsy taste, and he felt that he needed something that would balance the mushrooms and "lighten" the dish. He finally decides to add apples. (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)

Although this undoubtedly is a useful analogy for this cook, it will help other cooks little, unless they are *already* aware of what is wrong and

how to fix it. That is, they must be able to share the dimensions of meaning of this metaphoric structure, even while being unconscious of the implicit models. As Sclafani suggests, many people simply "do" aesthetic work without having internalized any theory of art: formal and elaborated theories of art are a luxury of the professional aesthetician. In the first example, it is significant that this "high end" involves a "spark," but the source of this spark is left implicit, part of the tacit practical knowledge that the cook must bring to the stove. The spark might be supplied by pepper, chile, orange, chocolate, cinnamon, basil, or oregano, but it should alter the unmarked taste of the foodstuff. What this spark should be is provided by shared experiences of cooks – these people have tasted and created dishes together. They have solved problems together.[49]

An aesthetic theory does not require the explicit metaphor of a music symphony to be usable, other images are found in other settings, even when the metaphors are not extensive:

> Barbara, the Pastry Chef, tells me that she doesn't much like "decorating cakes" – that is, with flowers and strings – the traditional wedding cake designs. She tells me: "I'm really not too crazy about that. I think those cakes look too gloppy. I think it looks too much like what you go to Target's [a discount department store, which sells bakery products] to buy." Later she adds: "I don't like the look that's achieved by a lot of gaudy flowers. ... I like things to be simple." One time she is making a dense chocolate cake, and tells me "I'll put some fruit on here, so it looks a little more abstract." Barbara puts four raspberries on the cake, and then covers the top of the cake with a chocolate lace. (Field notes, La Pomme de Terre)
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> * * *
>
> Charles says to Al: "Al, can you jazz the mushrooms up a little bit." Al responds: "Yeah, I did." Al had added butter and pepper to the sauteed mushrooms. (Field notes, Stan's)
>
> * * *
>
> I ask Herb how he goes about deciding where to place fruits on the fruit plate. He answers: "you have a dark, then a semi-dark, then a light [fruit]. That's what I try to do. You always want to have a balance of colors." (Field notes, Blakemore Hotel)

These examples suggest that underneath local judgments of foods and dishes, cooks maintain unstated ideologies or visions about what foods should be, drawing upon such cultural values as simplicity, jazziness, or balance, found in other aesthetic realms. These are attempts to make sense out of what might appear to customers to be merely idiosyncratic decisions. When coupled with the collective discussions by cooks and their negotiation with each other, these images extend beyond the indi-

vidual cook to influence others in the kitchen, and through occupational mobility may influence co-workers at other restaurants.

The limits of culinary talk

Arguing that cooks are concerned with aesthetic issues and that they discuss these issues might seem odd to those who expect a richer and more elaborated discourse than that discovered in these ethnographic settings. The remarks of chefs may appear somewhat thin. It is evident from these data, and from those who have observed or worked with cooks, that aesthetic discourse is not detailed in most kitchens – certainly compared to philosophers, but even compared to those head chefs or food critics in the upper reaches of culinary scenes. In a sense, these cooks are not talking about "cuisine," as elites define it, even though they are concerned with the sensory domain of food. One would find more elaborate, artistic discussion among chefs in the "better" restaurants in the major culinary centers of New York,[50] New Orleans, San Francisco, Paris, and Lyon. Like many occupations,[51] the culinary profession has segments or fractions. Some of those might be constituted as art worlds. Discourse is responsive to the concerns of the community and the training of the discussants.

The cooking world in the Twin Cities cannot be said to be a fully developed "art world," and for that reason is generalizable to those cooking communities that lack an "haute cuisine infrastructure."[52] Most diners wish to eat well, rather than to "think about" food. The large majority of cooks do not conceive of themselves as involved in artistic production per se, but they are concerned with occupational aesthetics. In this they are like most occupations, in which the sensory qualities of the product or service is important. For a fully developed art world, three characteristics are necessary: an active social network, a recognized aesthetic theory, and public legitimation of the art. In the Twin Cities, none of these characteristics was present: a reality that limited the elaborateness of the rhetoric and images available to cooks.

Social network. In my four months of research I found little of the social networking necessary for the recognition of a subcultural art world. I never witnessed a chef or cook visit the kitchen of another restaurant unless the visitor had been a former employee. Employers never visit their former employees. Although cooks and chefs dine at other restaurants, they do not eat in their occupational role, but as cus-

tomers. When there, they never visit the kitchen. Further, when asked their favorite restaurants, cooks do not name the recognized "best" restaurants in the community, but middle-brow restaurants. The head chef at La Pomme de Terre claims that his favorite restaurant is Stan's Steakhouse because "it's laid back and casual," insisting that he is "a normal sort of eater." Eating for this skilled chef is not a mark of identity. The chef at the Blakemore Hotel made an equally revealing comment when asked about his favorite restaurant. He named a well-regarded hotel restaurant, but made the point that:

> I haven't been there in years. ... If I go [there] it's not for me. I do not go there for my enjoyment; I go there to take someone who's going to be impressed. It's for their enjoyment. I'd be just as happy to go to McDonald's. (Personal interview, Blakemore Hotel)

No cook or chef claimed a network of cooks in the Twin Cities with whom they discuss the development of their work. The one local occupational organization, the Midwest Chefs Society, is composed primarily of those involved in trade education and institutional cooking. Only one cook at the four restaurants attended meetings of this group, and he was a trade-school student whose instructor was president of the society.

This lack of informal or formal organization retarded the possibility of a more richly developed collective discussion of the "poetics of food" that transcended individual restaurants; it also prevented cooks from self-consciously seeing themselves as a group. In turn, their lack of self-consciousness of their occupational position prevented such formal and informal groupings from developing.

Artistic Theory. As the data suggest, cooks do have aesthetic standards, and they converse about these standards; however, they have never developed an intellectual grounding for these standards, and to outsiders the discourse may appear vague, as meanings are constituted by past experiences. As Becker[53] notes, workers require a recognition of conventions and a shared definition of art for an activity to be deemed an art. In the Twin Cities no such collective charter exists. The discussion of the worth of a dish typically occurs in the local context of that dish alone, rather than in a transcendent attempt to create a larger ideal of what cooking should involve. When I asked the Head Chef at the Owl's Nest about his philosophy of cooking, he answered that he wanted to do "a good basic cooking." He wanted his restaurant to be a "real

good scratch house" – meaning that they would create dishes from original ingredients, rather than use convenience foods.

This attitude is fostered by the absence of "professional education," which might convey a philosophy. Instead, most cooks in the Twin Cities, lacking cultural capital, were taught to cook in trade schools (Technical Vocational Institutes) or learned on the job. There is no font for a culinary philosophy – no courses on food theory, no books that emphasize this component of culinary work that prospective cooks are encouraged to read.

Public Attitudes. In most art worlds, theory is not developed by the artists themselves, but by those who surround them. Critics provide the intellectual grounds by which work is transformed into art – by which it is given cultural legitimation. In the culinary world, such critics are few and far between. To be sure, restaurant reviewers are found in the Twin Cities, and one was an important arbiter of quality. Yet, these individuals do not serve as cultural conservators, but as consumer guides. No one provides the linkage from the world of cooks to the world of artistic tastemakers. This absence of public recognition is evident in the fact that neither of St. Paul's two newspapers had a regular restaurant critic during my research. The Minneapolis paper had a part-time critic who wrote a review every two weeks. When she resigned, the paper did not replace her for several months. Such would have been unthinkable for the visual arts, theater, film, or television.

In summary, the lack of community, the lack of theory, and the lack of public support, coupled with the largely working-class backgrounds and trade-school training of the cooks, limits the extent of aesthetic talk that one finds in this occupational setting. Through shared experiences and the need to produce work efficiently that is enjoyed by clients, these cooks have developed a practical language, grounded in their experiences – a sociolect – that serves their purposes as competent workers who need a "strategic vocabulary," permitting them to get things done. Yet, this is language that committed food writers, upwardly mobile customers, and earnest "foodies" consider banal, inadequate, and lacking in poetry.

The philosopher in the kitchen

Although it is not particularly helpful to see cooks as being "guided" by a formal set of aesthetic beliefs or a clearly delimited artistic ideology, these workers are sensitive to aesthetic concerns. Food is judged not merely as a technical product, but also as an aesthetic, sensory one. The recognition of the joint instrumental and expressive characteristics of objects applies beyond the world of foods. All constructed objects are comparable to the extent that they are made for a purpose, and are to be judged, in part, on the style that is involved in the making. What I say about casseroles is as true of cabinets and cars. In each case judgments are made – judgments that have limits, that are a function of the nature of the senses, the nature of language, the habitus inhabited by the worker, and by organizational and client demands.

Cooks, as competent workers, need first and foremost a language that permits them to complete their work smoothly and well. This strategic vocabulary must overcome the reality that sensory experiences are internal; there must be external markers – precise or metaphorical – that direct the production of food. While internal experiences are internal, we are able to "externalize" these sentiments and judgments through talk, gesture, and action. Ultimately markers of evaluation are grounded in the practice of cooking and in the class fraction in which workers reside with its own norms, values, expectations, and categorizations. The family resemblances of words are known because of collective action and experience.

Second, workers need language that permits them to see themselves as belonging to a community. Even though their language is not sufficiently developed – in the scene I studied, at least – to justify the wearing of the mantle of art, it is sufficient to lead workers to be proud and self-satisfied with their craft skills.[54]

Senses are known internally, bodily. That is, whatever the sociological grounding of these feelings, and their expression, ultimately they are not accessible to others. Yet, this simple recognition is not sociologically sufficient. We do know what others feel, because of our reliance on public display. We read the self through action. This display can be generated verbally, gesturally, or behaviorally, always in a form accessible to others. The sociological problem is to transform this individual experience into collective expression, recognizing the multiple demands for impression management inherent in public display. Con-

suming pretzels, I cannot determine in theory, for example, if your sensation of salty is the same as my sensation of salty. All we can know is that we are responding to the same stimuli, and we might gain some intersubjective confidence by the fact that we both liken the taste of this food to other foods that we both have tasted, choose to drink water after consumption, brush off the salt, or make an appropriately salty face, referring to the potency of the sensation. Ultimately the shared meaning of experiential events will remain somewhat uncertain – especially when that meaning is subtle, not cataclysmic, but often good enough for purposes of interaction.

Language itself creates barriers of comprehension. Our language is not sufficiently subtle, complex, or rich in the area of aesthetic judgment to permit a rich or full set of public meanings. In discussing aesthetics Western languages are imprecise and metaphoric, and must be grounded on shared experience. The problem of talk is linked to the problem of sharing senses, and of providing a grounding for shared action. Such action can only be assumed when the parties to it accept a view of their social surround, and when they agree upon an authority system that determines who has priority in making decisions (e.g., by a hierarchy) or when they agree upon the meta-rules of negotiating.[55]

To understand food, cooks construct a range of metaphors. These metaphors and folk theories are not only localized to the individual speaker, but are spread within the kitchen community, and because of occupational mobility, the metaphors may be known beyond a single establishment. Metaphors of experience are always capable of being shared. The diffusion of aesthetic evaluation extends beyond occupations. When we speak of socialization, at any level, we refer not only to the instrumental learning of technical matters, but the moral evaluation of objects and actions – an evaluation that easily conflates with sensory judgments.

Wittgenstein is correct to recognize the definitional difficulties inherent in languages. We must settle for family resemblances that hopefully will serve us well enough, often enough. Cooking as a social scene serves not only for itself in this analysis, but for other settings in which discrete individuals come to terms with scenes that are grounded in internal judgments and a sense of sense. Aesthetic order is a domain of social order.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank the Editors of *Theory and Society* for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

Notes

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52. One reader of this article noted that even in the best circumstances, cooks must fight for aesthetic status. "Cuisine" in France is usually categorized as "artisan," rather than "art." The sources of culinary theory are typically a few important critics, published in major media outlets, such as le Reyniere in *Le Monde.* This reader suggests the interesting thought experiment of how the Minnesota restaurant world could be made into an "art world." Would awards be enough? What about state subsidies? Classes in college? Restaurants with elite boards of trustees?
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