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The Art in Gastronomy

A Modernist Perspective

THROUGHOUT HISTORY PEOPLE HAVE MADE things that transcend their primary utilitarian purpose and engage our minds in profoundly intellectual and emotional ways. We call such things “art,” and we have a highly developed notion of the difference between High Art (with a capital A) and the lesser categories of decorative arts or “mere” craft produced by artisans rather than artists. Understanding this distinction and how it has shifted over the years is important for resolving the question of whether cooking qualifies as an art, or craft, or something else entirely. This question, posed pointedly by the most recent developments in cuisine, is one of the great intellectual questions for gastronomy in the twenty-first century.

Food serves an obvious utilitarian purpose: to refuel our bodies for the task of life. We need to eat, and toward that end we devote large amounts of both professional and amateur effort toward food preparation. Much of that effort goes beyond what is needed for nutrition, because food is also a source of great pleasure. It can engage our emotions and our minds just as much as images or words can, which begs the question: Can food be art?

Food can engage our senses, our minds, and our emotions just as profoundly as carefully chosen words or brush strokes. Arguably, our relation with food is even more intimate because we consume it directly. So there is no fundamental reason that food cannot be art—it has all the right prerequisites.

On the other hand, traditional ideas about food—held by cooks, critics, and consumers—are at their foundation based on food as an artisanal craft product, not an art. The focus is on the process of manufacture, or on the food itself, with less emphasis on the thoughts and emotions triggered by the food. Food is deeply constrained by rules and traditions.

Today we view the history of art through the lens of a sophisticated intellectual framework built by generations of art critics and historians. Our concept of what is art, and what is not, is informed by this corpus. Artists in every discipline—painters, photographers, architects, musicians, poets,

and novelists—grew up in and interacted with this framework. Chefs have been strangely absent.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a movement called Modernism shook the foundations of Western art, architecture, and literature. The French Impressionists are among the most famous of the early Modernists, and they helped establish Modernist thought in painting. They viewed themselves as an *avant-garde*—a French term for a military group that scouts ahead of a main force. Their

William Morris sought to bring the world of artisanal craft into modern practice; Walter Gropius created the Bauhaus to remake architecture, graphic arts, typography, ceramics, and other aspects of design. Nobody in that era created a Bauhaus of food.

exhibitions in the 1870s caused shock and scandal, as well as a deep revision in how we think about painting.

Longstanding aesthetic standards and theories of painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature were assailed, ransacked, and renovated by a succession of Modernist movements that each brought its own take on the nature of aesthetic dialogue. The very notion of a shocking, artistic *avant-garde* is a Modernist invention, an idea explored by many art historians and literary critics, including Renato Poggioli in his landmark book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. The actions of a controversial *avant-garde* became the standard approach to revising artistic thought. Poggioli



Above: Sea urchins from Île-aux-Moines in Brittany with saffron and nasturtium velouté sauce.

COURTESY OF ARPÈGE

concludes: “With terms borrowed from medical science, but here used neutrally and applied—so to speak—to the physiology rather than the pathology of culture, we can say that avant-gardism has now become the typical chronic condition of contemporary art.”¹

Modernism touched nearly every aspect of human creativity. Yet somehow cuisine was immune. The very people who were renovating art, architecture, design, and literature sat down to discuss their radical theory over very conventional meals. William Morris sought to bring the world of artisanal craft into modern practice; Walter Gropius created the Bauhaus to remake architecture, graphic arts, typography, ceramics, and other aspects of design. Nobody in that era created a Bauhaus of food.

The only major foray into gastronomy by proponents of Modernism occurred among the Italian Futurists, who took up food as a tool in their overall aesthetic program. Public banquets and events served bizarre foods designed to shock people. Pasta was attacked in manifestos as “an absurd Italian gastronomic religion,” which they wanted to ban in favor of the “ideal” Italian diet based on “scientific principles,” as documented in the *Futurist Cookbook* published by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1932.²

Superficially, Marinetti’s book may appear to be a Modernist take on food, but closer examination reveals it as the proverbial exception that proves the rule. Marinetti’s purported goal was the scientific renovation of the Italian

diet but, as Cecilia Novero observes in *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde*, “No one could miss the fact that the proposed diet and then the staged banquets were nutritionally impractical, even when supposedly scientifically grounded. It was evident that the diets and the banquets were conceived literarily and were theatrically staged, as many reviewers remarked.”³

Rather than being a genuine attempt to create a Modernist gastronomy-as-art, Marinetti used food as a medium for his broader Futurist ideology. The goal was not to make gastronomy into an art form of its own; rather, it was part of a program to bring all aspects of life (including food) into the Futurist agenda. The most telling point is that Marinetti’s rhetoric is not about the aesthetics of food as such; his theoretical rationalizations for Futurist cuisine were instead founded on ideals that lay outside the realm of gastronomy. If nutrition is the primary ideal related to food, Marinetti’s nutritional thinking was transparently a fraud. Ultimately, the Futurist adventure with food was no more about gastronomy than eating live goldfish at a fraternity hazing; both stem from the shock value of violating culinary conventions. This posturing succeeded in attracting attention but failed to create a genuine gastronomic aesthetic. Indeed, the striking lack of a Modernist revolution in food

could be taken as Exhibit A in the argument that gastronomy, at least of that era, was not an art, and people did not really think to treat it like one.

Among European countries France has long been considered to have the greatest national interest in cuisine, so it is a logical place to look for culinary evolution and revolution. The haute cuisine of France was subject to many revisions and innovations over the years, as evidenced by the evolution of the nation's cookbooks. These books both documented and standardized the culinary practices of their eras. La Varenne, along with other cookbook authors including Nicolas de Bonnefons and François Massialot, recorded the development of a new French cuisine that replaced the cooking of the Middle Ages. They codified the cuisine that was being created for seventeenth-century French aristocrats.

Following in the footsteps of La Varenne, Marie-Antoine (Antonin) Carême documented French cuisine in a series of books culminating with *L'Art de la cuisine française*, published in five volumes beginning in 1833. Carême was also one of the first celebrity chefs, popularly known as “the king of cooks and the cook of kings.” Through the course of his career, he cooked for the Prince Regent of England, Tsar Alexander I of Russia, and the Rothschild banking family.

Half a century later, as the Impressionists were shaking up the art world, Auguste Escoffier became the natural successor to Carême. Escoffier's *Le guide culinaire*, first published in 1903, served as the definitive manual for classic French cuisine. It streamlined and codified the cooking of Carême and others, and introduced numerous innovations in everything from kitchen organization and management to food service and presentation.

Escoffier was known in the press of his day by a very similar title to the one that had been applied to Carême: “the emperor of chefs and chef of emperors.” Like Carême, Escoffier spent much of his career outside France, working with César Ritz to create the Savoy Hotel in London and later the Ritz Hotels (including the Carlton in London). Although Escoffier cooked for kings and dignitaries, most of his time was spent preparing food for the public, in fancy hotels like the Savoy, Ritz, or Carlton. He also planned the menu and staffed the kitchens for the cruise ships of the Hamburg-America Line. His clientele was wealthy; compared to Carême's era, however, cooking was now a far more democratic and public event, available to anyone who could afford it and not confined to aristocratic or royal households.

Escoffier's *Le guide culinaire* is Exhibit B for the notion of gastronomy as a craft, because it is relentlessly about production and organization. Escoffier was in many ways

the Henry Ford of the professional kitchen. He established the brigade system to manage production and keep uniform standards. He did something similar for organizing service in the front of the house, a system that has been the foundation of kitchen organization in high-end restaurants for the last century. His masterwork was fundamentally motivated by gastronomy as a manufacturing process rather than as an art. It was Carême for cruise ships. At the same time that Modernist movements were busy attacking the rules of the old order and remaking art, architecture, and literature, Escoffier was setting up a new culinary dogma that emphasized production and management as a means to quality. He was an artisan striving to run a factory rather than be an artist.

As a result, French gastronomy retrenched for the next sixty years, building on Escoffier's model. Eventually, by the 1960s, a few young French chefs began to take issue with the system. Many of them had trained with Fernand Point, a brilliant chef whose career began in the age of Escoffier but then took a different turn. Point developed his own experimental cuisine, anticipating the changes that his protégés would perfect. Ultimately, his role as a mentor for the next generation of chefs was even more important than his own direct contributions.

Point's former students began to experiment and abandon tradition, creating lighter menus, introducing lower-fat sauces and vegetable purées, borrowing ingredients from non-French cuisines, and plating dishes in the kitchen instead of at the table. All of this experimentation stirred up controversy, and soon it had a name: Nouvelle Cuisine. This concept was promoted by the food critics Henri Gault and Christian Millau of *Le nouveau guide*. Gault and Millau, with their friend André Gayot, had founded the *Guide* in 1969 to protest the Michelin guide, which they criticized as “a stubborn bastion of conservatism” that ignored “the new generation of French chefs who had guts.”⁴ The inaugural issue of *Le nouveau guide* featured a cover story on Bocuse, Guérard, Louis Outhier, Alain Senderens, and forty-four other chefs under the headline “Michelin: Don't forget these 48 stars!” In 1972 Gault published “The Ten Commandments of Nouvelle Cuisine,” giving the movement a name and essentially launching a publicity campaign that helped Nouvelle Cuisine reach a wider audience. At the same time it was also a publicity magnet for the Gault-Millau guide; what better way to promote *Le nouveau guide* than with a Nouvelle Cuisine?

Many of the chefs championed by Gault and Millau quickly garnered respect and Michelin stars, but the new style drew fire from established French food critics. In the United States, one of Nouvelle Cuisine's chief critics was

celebrity chef Julia Child, author of the bestselling *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Child saw the new movement as an affront to the logic and grandeur of French cuisine. She particularly disliked the Nouvelle Cuisine penchant for serving barely cooked meat and vegetables, which she believed did not properly develop the “essential taste” of the ingredients. She also accused Gault and Millau of “pushing the *nouvelle cuisine* relentlessly,” to the point of “browbeating” restaurants that didn’t embrace a Nouvelle Cuisine ethos.⁵

Despite this criticism, the movement took hold of the culinary landscape in France and around the world in the 1970s, and it continued to shape French cuisine for many years thereafter. The first wave of Nouvelle Cuisine represented a real revolution, analogous in some ways to Impressionism—at least with respect to rebellion against the establishment and the attendant controversy. Many long-cherished aspects of Escoffier’s *grande cuisine*, such as sauces made with meat extracts and thickened with flour-based roux, were discarded. The system of the restaurant changed as well. Escoffier had championed service *à la russe*, in which waiters carved roasts at the table and brought diners individual portions. A cardinal rule of this approach (in the best restaurants, at least) was that the diner started with an empty plate, onto which the waiter placed all of the food in front of the diner. The kitchen had no control over plating or presentation. Nouvelle Cuisine featured plated dishes assembled in the kitchen by chefs who could labor over them and transmit the presentation unfiltered by the waiter’s service skill (or lack thereof). This style enabled a revolution in the design and presentation of plated dishes.

Yet, in another sense, Nouvelle Cuisine was a rather limited revolution, because it was all about techniques and ingredients. The famous ten principles of Nouvelle Cuisine championed by Gault and Millau all have to do with rather technical aspects of cooking and include banal pronouncements that few could disagree with: Commandment One is “Thou shalt not overcook”; Two is “Thou shalt use fresh quality ingredients.” They also include very narrow culinary points: Commandment Six is “Thou shalt avoid pickles, cured game meats, and fermented food,” while Seven is “Thou shalt eliminate rich sauces.” These points were a big deal to chefs and food critics steeped in the traditions of *la grande cuisine*. Even to hint that other chefs were serving food that was overcooked or made using less than the best ingredients was to throw down a gauntlet in the context of the times. Today these “commandments” seem quite ordinary. Who would stand up for bad ingredients or food that was overcooked?

One of the most interesting commandments, and one of the few that is broad and abstract, is quite pertinent to our

discussion here. Commandment Four reads: “Thou shalt not be systematically modernist” (“Tu ne seras pas systématiquement moderniste”). It is fascinating that even as Gault nitpicks the French national menu (Hold the pickles!), his primary abstract point is to state categorically that the Nouvelle Cuisine is not part of the Modernist revolution.

Gault was ready to do a sauce makeover, but he would not turn on tradition more broadly. His commandments were the culinary equivalent of the Maginot Line, a bulwark erected to defend French tradition. Yet it is exactly this line that Ferran Adrià, Heston Blumenthal, and others in the current food revolution would later breach. Gault chose a line that would ultimately be impossible to defend, leading to a failure that would cost France its position in the culinary world.

As Nouvelle Cuisine won the battle for the hearts and minds of both chefs and diners, the revolution matured into a new culinary establishment. Successive generations of chefs carried forward the torch of culinary innovation, though in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary fashion, in part because Nouvelle Cuisine carved out some independence for the chef. Escoffier (and Carême before him) had explicitly sought to establish rules and conventions. Nouvelle Cuisine gave more leeway to the individual chef, which provided much less incentive to rebel.

Outside of France, Nouvelle Cuisine sometimes had an enormous impact and sometimes barely any, depending on the country and its local gastronomic culture. In the United States, Nouvelle Cuisine was deeply influential, helping to inspire “New American” cuisine. American chefs were not steeped in Escoffier; instead, they rebelled against the doldrums of mass-produced, uninspired American food. These chefs created a distinctive New American cuisine based on regional ingredients and food traditions, but with a clear nod to Nouvelle French techniques.

The same effect occurred in the United Kingdom, where a generation of “New British” chefs emerged, adamant that British food was not synonymous with bad food. As in the United States, the French example helped lead a movement toward higher-quality food and dining. New American and New British chefs borrowed techniques from Nouvelle Cuisine, but more important than any single technique or principle was the idea of revolution itself; the notion that one could successfully mount a new movement in food. This belief empowered a generation of chefs to throw off the shackles of past mediocrity and strive for the best.

In contrast to the American and British “New” movements, it is hard to find any Nouvelle movement in Italian cuisine. A few Italian chefs—including Gualtiero Marchesi,



Above: Ferran Adrià tasting sauce in the kitchen of his restaurant, *elBulli*, Roses, Spain, June 16, 2007.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAMUEL ARANDA/GETTY IMAGES

Nadia Santini of the great restaurant Dal Pescatore, and Luisa Marelli Valazza of Al Sorriso—used some principles of Nouvelle Cuisine to inform their interpretations of Italian culinary themes. A more recent example is Heinz Beck, who was born in Germany but for years has been considered one of the top chefs in Rome. The refined and sophisticated Italian cuisine produced by these chefs definitely owes something to Nouvelle, but it never constituted a revolution or a movement. Perhaps one reason is that there was no unified Italian cuisine to rebel against. Indeed, Italy itself was not unified as a country until 1870, and no Garibaldi of cuisine ever attempted to forge a centralized notion of Italian gastronomy; instead, it remained a patchwork of regional culinary traditions, mirroring the fragmented political landscape of principalities and city states that ran Italy from the Renaissance onward.

In Spain, the effect of Nouvelle Cuisine was also limited. The movement was clearly an inspiration for the Spanish Basque chef Juan Mari Arzak, who created his own distinctive style that would inspire later Spanish chefs. But throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the cuisine of Spain was largely unaffected by the developments outside its borders.

The Nouvelle Cuisine movement was not, by itself, the long-awaited Modernist revolution in cooking but was instead a precursor to it, much as there were artistic movements that anticipated some aspects of Modernism. Nouvelle ultimately was about revising some of the rules in

the craft of cooking without revising the pervading artisanal craft mentality. Its focus was on the product and its creation, not on the intellectual and emotional impact it triggered.

Yet the impact, or reception, is key to the Modernist project in art and in literature, which posits art as a dialogue between artist and audience. It fell to Ferran Adrià to bring this point to cuisine. Adrià has become famous for his highly technical and unusual food, and has frequently been named the greatest chef in the world. Yet those accolades are almost beside the point. The real message of Adrià's food is that gastronomy is a dialogue between chef and diner.

In classical cuisine, the vocabulary of that dialogue was often constrained by tradition or convention. Diners come to a meal with a tacit understanding of what is possible and familiar, based on their previous dining experiences. The chef, at least in traditional cuisine, comes prepared to cater to these preconceptions. Adrià broke these constraints by creating novel foods that provoked a reaction, forcing diners to reassess their assumptions. This intellectual approach to cuisine became central at Adrià's restaurant, *elBulli*. It was not enough for the food to be delicious; it also had to elicit thoughts and feelings. While other chefs might work to optimize the purely gastronomic qualities of their food, like taste and texture, Adrià had a higher goal. Did the food



Above: Andoni Luis Aduriz's sun-ripened red fruit with beet bubbles.
RESTAURANT MUGARITZ. PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSÉ LUIS LÓPEZ DE ZUBIRIA

make people think, make them react emotionally? How did it change the dialogue?

Adrià's preferred term for his style, "techno-emotional cuisine" (first coined in 2008 by the Catalan journalist Pau Arenós), reflects this dual goal. Culinary technology produces the effect, but the ultimate impact is emotional. Before Adrià, chefs had primarily focused on making dishes that were unique in their details, their specific combinations of flavors and textures. Only rarely did chefs seek to make a dish that was the first of its class or kind. Instead, they tended to focus their creativity on developing refinements of existing dishes. These creations joined a small number of signature dishes that marked their careers, and that would be served for many years.

I have been enjoying Joël Robuchon's wonderful mashed potatoes at his various restaurants for more than two decades. Robuchon did not invent the concept of vegetable purees, or of mashed potatoes—the status of signature dish rests on his subtle refinements, which contribute to a flawless execution. Adrià, on the other hand, takes culinary creativity to an extreme. He came to view unprecedented novelty as the cornerstone of his cuisine—something that should occur in every dish, every night. This thinking is the direct opposite of the "signature dish" approach. At elBulli, each dish is supposed to be a new creation—ideally new in its kind and type as well as being novel in a smaller sense.

The dish generally will not be repeated after the first season in which it is served. If you really like a dish at elBulli, enjoy it now, because chances are you will never have it again. Adrià's "signature" is nothing as static as a dish; it is a method, a process, a dialogue.

Adrià's innovations are not limited to existing categories. He changed the structure of his menu, beginning by eliminating bread, then the cheese and dessert carts. He systematically examined every convention in cuisine. Why are some foods served sweet and others not? What is the role of cocktails in the dining experience? Why should food be served with traditional silverware? Or plates, for that matter? He examined and re-imagined each and every aspect of the culinary process.

He also invented purely conceptual dishes, which represent his notion of culinary deconstruction. Adrià created dishes with familiar flavor themes but presented them in entirely novel, unconventional ways. Here is what he says about deconstruction in his book *elBulli 1994–1997*:

It consists of taking a gastronomic reference that is already known, embodied in a dish, and transforming all or some of its ingredients by modifying its texture, shape, and/or temperature. This deconstructed

dish will keep its essence and will still be linked to a culinary tradition, but its appearance will be radically different to the original.

For this game to be successful, it is essential that the diner has gastronomic memory, since the absence of references turns the concept of deconstruction into mere “construction” based on nothing...the result has a direct relationship with the diner’s memory, in that although he may not see that he has been served a familiar dish, he later establishes a direct connection between the flavor of what he is eating and the classic recipe; in other words, he recognizes it.⁶

This sort of deliberate, systematic theorizing is expected in literary or artistic work, but not in a cookbook. Other chefs had played tricks on diners—Baked Alaska, for example, was a nineteenth-century invention in which a meringue served hot from the oven hid the surprise of cold ice cream inside. Or chefs would create new takes on old dishes, and in doing so anticipate some aspect of deconstruction. Of course, in literature and the visual arts it is common to reference previous artistic production and juxtapose it with other concepts in a new framework. Indeed, allusions are a primary tool for all artists.

What is unique to Adrià and elBulli is the systematic way in which he has created and written about concepts like deconstruction as a tool for culinary creativity. He has self-consciously created his culinary art as part of a program to implement a comprehensive aesthetic theory. Other chefs operate at the level of dishes; and certainly, even before Adrià, chefs created dishes that, with hindsight, can be seen to have offered a new format to a classic flavor profile. The difference is that Adrià has operated at the theoretical and conceptual level from the outset. He knew he was deconstructing dishes, and he spoke and wrote about it explicitly even as he was doing it. Such an approach is akin to the processes from which Modernism in other aesthetic disciplines arose. But it was unprecedented in cuisine.

Viewed in this light, we see how limited the Nouvelle revolution of the 1960s and 70s was. Adrià did not merely combat single features of culinary tradition, such as roux-thickened sauces or pickles; he attacked every convention in food, including many that we did not even realize existed until his innovation pointed them out.

The reaction to Adrià’s introduction of newfangled savory foams serves as a good example. Traditional cuisine is full of foams, including whipped cream, soufflés, mousses, and sabayon. They are ubiquitous in pastry and desserts but also exist in savory cuisine. Yet when Adrià began using an instant whipping siphon to create new savory foams (*espuma* in Spanish), the effect was electric. Some loved it, some hated it, but either way his *espumas* drew sharp

reactions from food critics around the world. Even though the first savory foam was introduced in 1994, the strong reactions survive to this day. British food writer Rose Prince recently wrote about a dinner at The Fat Duck: “Like a good girl I cleaned my plate, loving some perfectly cooked salmon, until a dish arrived called ‘Sound of the Sea’ covered with foam. I don’t do foam. The fun ceased. It is probably something to do with owning a spaniel who eats too much grass but the *eau de nil* spume on the plate made me want to fetch a mop.”⁷

My own view, and that of many others, is that Sound of the Sea is both brilliantly conceived and quite delicious. Ms. Prince likens it to dog vomit and goes on to say that its presence not only ruined her entire meal but even colored her view of Blumenthal and his cuisine. Anyone can not care for a dish or ingredient, of course, but her objection is stronger than that. Her response makes it clear that the foam is an affront, an unnatural act that she ought not be asked to “do.”

Who would have guessed that the dining public harbored such strong views about such a simple thing? Why is whipping air into cream (or a sabayon or mousse) okay in one context but utterly radical in another? Implicitly, it seems, the dining public holds deep assumptions about which things should be frothy or foamy and which shouldn’t. There is a politics of foam. Adrià’s creative impulse exposed these assumptions and made us confront them on the plate.

Adrià was not alone in taking this approach to food. The revolution in cuisine that he started on a lonely stretch of Catalan coast has broadened to a movement of chefs with a similar goal. Heston Blumenthal, of The Fat Duck in the United Kingdom, has a cuisine very different in its details than that of Adrià, but it shares the notion of the dining experience as a dialogue between chef and diner. In a training manual written for The Fat Duck staff in 2003, Blumenthal described his approach at the time as part of a hypothetical dialogue with guests:

In all cooking there is science—some say much art—and sage traditions that must be understood in relation to the diner. Our challenge is to discover these relationships, demystify the culinary traditions and, with that knowledge, create an experience that reaches beyond the palate.

This is the culinary cornerstone of The Fat Duck. Though it sounds a little Shelleysque, in its truest sense the approach is fundamental. Every aspect of dining must be in harmony. This goes well beyond music choice or décor. For a dining experience to be full it must ignite all senses and awaken the soul.

At The Fat Duck we enjoy challenging traditional techniques and theories, even those in place for centuries. We don't challenge these techniques because they are wrong. We look at the cause and effect of centuries of tradition; pair that with evolving knowledge and the overall effect of those things that make up you, our guest.

Blumenthal and Adrià are the furthest along in their careers, but a whole movement of chefs, including Grant Achatz, Homaro Cantu, David Chang, Wylie Dufresne, and David Kinch in the United States; Andoni Luis Aduriz, Quique Dacosta, Dani García, and Joan Roca in Spain; and dozens of others around the world are participating in and taking the movement forward.

This movement is the true intellectual heir to Modernism, and for this reason I think it should be called Modernist cuisine. It shares a number of key characteristics with Modernism. A small avant-garde seeks to overthrow the establishment rules. Change and novelty are valued both as a tool for reforming the intellectually bankrupt rules of the past and as a virtue unto themselves. The Modernist kitchen could easily adopt the command made decades earlier by Ezra Pound to "Make It New!" The creative process is informed by theory and deliberate conceptualizing—these chefs explicitly seek to confront diners and have a dialogue with them. Finally, these chefs are distinctly and self-consciously modern in their outlook, taking whatever technology is available to push forward the realm of the possible. Their message to Gault would be the opposite of Commandment Four; they clearly want to be systematically modernist.

Some have labeled this kind of cuisine "postmodern," but that only begs the question of what the Modernist phase could have been. Nouvelle Cuisine is a poor candidate—as we have seen, its founding commandments included the explicit aim *not* to be "systematically modernist." Nouvelle Cuisine was also terribly brief. In the other arts, Postmodernism supplanted Modernism only after a century, give or take. In cuisine, Gault's commandments came in 1972, while Adrià's aesthetic program got underway in the mid-1980s and burst onto the scene in full force in the mid-1990s. Even if we look back to Escoffier, his cuisine is another poor candidate. It featured "modern" refinements in the sense of advocating efficiency and addressing cruise ships and hotels rather than royalty, but aesthetically it hued to Carême's line. It did not repudiate past traditions—it simply made them more accessible, and it lacked most of the essential characteristics of Modernism.

The primary reason for calling Adrià's cuisine "post-modern" is that art, architecture, and literature are in a

true postmodern phase. But why should that mean that cooking is there, too? A superficial distraction is that some terms—like Adrià's use of "deconstruction"—are also used in postmodern theory. Apart from the name, there is little resemblance. The point in deconstructed dishes is simple counterpoint, rather than the deeper analysis that Derrida seeks. Indeed, Adrià's deconstructed dishes celebrate and reinforce the culinary truths of the familiar dishes they are based on, rather than expose their underlying contradictions. As it turns out, the term was suggested by an architect who dined at elBulli, and owes more to simple appropriation of a name than what is really at play.

A fair question to ask is why the long delay in bringing Modernist thought to food? The answer is something of a mystery, which I do not pretend to answer fully. Nevertheless, we can look at a few clues. The first is that Modernism did not come at the same time to all fields. Scholars differ on the movement's precise origins. Immanuel Kant arguably initiated the critical essence of Modernism in philosophy in the 1770s. Edouard Manet's work in the 1860s, and the Impressionist exhibition of 1870, brought a modern perspective to painting. The poetry of Rimbaud in the 1870s was another Modernist milestone. Modernist thought in music is often dated to Schoenberg's atonal composition in 1908. And truly Modernist architecture rose to prominence only in the 1920s.

So, depending on exactly which dates you choose, there are arguably many decades of delay in Modernism. Why did it take a century between Kant and the Impressionists, or half a century between Manet and the first titans of modern architecture? Seen in this context, the delay in bringing a Modernist approach to the kitchen is the extreme end of a continuum, not something unique.

A different line of reasoning is that Modernism in cuisine did not occur to anyone. The intellectual champions of Modernism in art, architecture, and literature apparently did not view gastronomy as part of art and design. Gropius, for example, supported ceramics at the Bauhaus, but his decision was controversial, and when the Bauhaus leadership changed the program was eliminated. Marinetti perhaps came closest but, as we have seen, he exploited cooking rather than championing it. The failure of his Futurist cuisine may even have dissuaded others.

Meanwhile, no gastronomic intellectuals emerged to bring Modernism into the kitchen. The "great man" theory of history is hotly debated, but the fact remains that no great chef emerged to take cuisine in that direction. In fact, nearly the opposite occurred. A great man (Escoffier) did show up, but he turned out to be a vigorous supporter



Above: Heston Blumenthal's flaming sorbet.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOMINIC DAVIES © 2008

of orthodoxy rather than the avant-garde; more burgher than bomb-thrower.

The critic Clement Greenberg famously argued that the world of culture is balanced between the forces of kitsch that cheapen and dumb it down and the artistic avant-garde that resists it—a bit like an oppressive regime kept in check by freedom fighters (the guerilla movements of the avant-garde). Imagine a world parallel to Greenberg's where the guerilla fighters never showed up, and the forces of kitsch triumphed. That is the world of cooking. The oppressive regime in this case is the world of mass-produced food, which over the course of the twentieth century utterly revised what we eat. This tyranny has no tyrant—it is de Tocqueville's "tyranny of the majority" created by the unthinking choices of millions of consumers pandered to by an agro-industrial complex. It took a century before the first chef-artists (Adrià, Blumenthal, and colleagues) showed up with a true Modernist avant-garde.

Other names for this culinary movement include "molecular gastronomy," the same name that has also (confusingly) been applied to the scientific study of fine cuisine by Hervé This and others. This, the self-proclaimed leader of the molecular gastronomy movement, argues that the name should be exclusively reserved for what he sees as a

new scientific discipline. He thinks that the new cuisine practiced by Adrià and others should be called "molecular cooking." The chefs involved agree that "molecular gastronomy" is inappropriate; the real importance of their cuisine is not the technical tools and techniques that enable it, any more than the chemistry of paint is the essence of painting.

One of the most notable things about Modernist cuisine is that it self-consciously strives to be art. Wishing does not make it so, but even aspiring to the status of art poses interesting challenges. Part of the point of art as a dialogue is that the artist is in a position of control. Because we are not all used to surrendering control so completely to a chef, this forced surrender is one of the persistent criticisms of the new cuisine. Frank Bruni, of the *New York Times*, had this to say about chef Sam Mason in a review of his restaurant Tailor:

His words appear alongside a photograph of him looking pensive, above both an enormous copy of his signature and a sketch that depicts the piece-by-piece construction of one of Tailor's avant-garde dishes.

They say, “I know I’m not gonna change the way people think about food, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna let them change the way I think about it.”

So there you have it. Mr. Mason’s personal vision trumps your pleasure. His conviction matters more than your response. This, I suppose, is the very definition of artistic integrity. But it’s not the prescription for a great restaurant.⁸

Perhaps Bruni just didn’t enjoy his meal, but he appears to dismiss the notion that the chef has a role other than compliant servant. Bruni’s attitude is striking, particularly compared to Mason’s rather mild statement of resolve to follow his own culinary compass. Bruni seems to be saying that a great restaurant bends to the will of the customer, without the “artistic integrity” he finds so antithetical to a “great restaurant.” This reaction is shared by many. But food as an artistic dialogue means that the diner is no longer in control—indeed, ceding control is a fundamental part of the process. Not everyone is eager to do that.

Consider a steakhouse as a counterpoint. In a typical American steakhouse you order the precise cut of meat that you want (and often its weight in ounces) and state the precise level of doneness you prefer. The meat comes with nothing on the plate—you must order the side dishes separately. Even sauce for the meat is a separate line item. The steakhouse chef is not entering into dialogue apart from soliciting the diner’s every wish. He has no control whatsoever.

To somebody of the steakhouse mindset, the elBulli approach is bewildering. A menu may consist of forty to fifty courses, none of which the patron has any choice over. Even if you were told what each dish was up front, the names would be unrecognizable. Many of the dishes are intellectually challenging. They are the antithesis of comfort food—some of them explicitly seek to challenge you. The steakhouse set, and even a sophisticated critic like Mr. Bruni, does seem not to be ready for this.

The concept of food-as-art also brings up issues of novelty. One of the most interesting aspects of Modernist cuisine is that it is still in the phase of expanding the realm of the possible. Novelty through the creation of new dishes and techniques is the heart and soul of the new cuisine. Modernist chefs pride themselves (and become famous) for breaking new ground, and for being fiercely original. Many of them will not serve a dish they did not invent or develop (at least in part). They bristle if other chefs reproduce their dishes without acknowledgment or credit.

Think how strange this is compared to other cuisines. No one who runs a steakhouse claims that they invented

steak, or would refuse to serve a baked potato because they weren’t the first to have one on the menu. Much of traditional cuisine implicitly has a philosophy that separates the design of the food (the recipes) from its execution (the food as served). A steakhouse is perhaps the most extreme example. The product—a steak—is not unique to the chef or the restaurant. As a result, steakhouses have fetishized every aspect of the execution—selecting the meat, dry-aging it, and so on. They may also have some variations in recipe—say for a sauce, or a side dish. But there is no expectation that this will evolve over time.

Much the same thing occurs in other traditional cuisines. Many Italian-style restaurants are proud of serving dishes or “authentic” recipes from some region in Italy—i.e., designed there and then, but executed here and now. Some of the most traditionally minded chefs will proudly claim that their best recipes came not from their own creativity but were passed down from their grandmother, or somebody else’s grandmother. Their philosophy assumes that grandma knew best (she was the designer), and today we can only strive to execute grandma’s genius plan. At most, the chef’s role becomes that of a curator choosing which of grandmother’s recipes to serve to best match his or her clientele, or the available ingredients.

Most high-end traditional restaurants mix both design and execution. There is an expectation that the chef will have his or her own inventions on the menu, and the chef’s reputation rides on both the execution and the uniqueness of the dishes. Even so, there is no sense that these dishes ought to evolve over time. As a result, a chef’s signature dish—like Robuchon’s potatoes—can stay on the menu forever.

People like a degree of certainty from food. That is why they like brand names and steakhouses and signature dishes. The aptly named category of “comfort food” panders to this desire. Yet certainty is explicitly what Modernist cuisine refuses to offer—the rejection of comforting convention is central to any avant-garde movement.

The Internet has stoked the dissemination of information, which adds a new dimension to the dining experience. When a new dish goes on the menu anywhere in the world, the chances are very high that it will be the subject of postings on eGullet.com, chowhound.com, or Twitter, complete with digital photos and detailed explanations. People make posts to these sites from their smartphones even before they get their dinner check. Once posted, this information then reverberates around the Internet on literally thousands of cooking and food-oriented blogs.

Meanwhile, information about new techniques or recipe ideas is discussed on Modernist technique blogs like

ideasinfood.com, khymos.org, cookingissues.com, and a growing list of others. With the Internet providing instant connectivity, there is little point in trying to hide. Better to participate and be part of the community of people sharing ideas. Yet that idea is alien to the attitude of many chefs. It also works against the very aspects of surprise that are part of what they are trying to achieve.

These are just a few of the many issues that come up when you take a craft and turn it into an art. We are in the midst of a fascinating transition, which those of us involved in cuisine today are fortunate to be able to watch—a bit like getting a ticket to the First Impressionist Exhibition of 1874 to see the painters shake the art world. The Modernist revolution is more than a hundred years late in coming to the world of cooking, but now it is here. ●

NOTES

1. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1981), 230.
2. Marinetti's book is available in English translation as F.T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook*, trans. Suzanne Brill (San Francisco: Bedford Books, 1989).
3. Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 12.
4. www.gayot.com/restaurants/features/nouvellecuisine.html.
5. Julia Child, "La Nouvelle Cuisine: A Skeptic's View," *New York*, 4 July 1977, 32–34.
6. Ferran Adrià, Juli Soler, and Albert Adrià, *ElBulli 1994–1997* (New York: Ecco, 1996), 208.
7. www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/8023927/Rose-Princes-Saturday-column.html.
8. Frank Bruni, "Artist at Work: Taste if You Dare," *New York Times*, 21 November 2007.