

CAN FOOD BE ART IN VIRTUE OF ITS SAVOUR ALONE?

MOHAN MATTHEN

University of Toronto

Department of Philosophy

mohan.matthen@utoronto.ca

SUMMARY: Food has savour: a collection of properties (including appearance, aroma, mouth-feel) connected with the pleasure (or displeasure) of eating. This paper argues that savour is aesthetically evaluable —it is not merely “agreeable”. Further, like paradigm examples of art, savour can be assessed by how it references, or “exemplifies”, cultural norms. This paper is part of a larger project in which I develop an account of the pleasure of art. It is a virtue of my approach that it permits a much greater diversity of artforms than traditional philosophical aesthetics is inclined to allow. This includes food.

KEY WORDS: philosophy of food, aesthetic properties, culinary aesthetics, taste, food as art

RESUMEN: La comida tiene lo que en inglés se llama sabor: una colección de propiedades (incluidas apariencia, aroma, sensación bucal) conectadas con el placer (o disgusto) de comer. Este artículo argumenta que el sabor es evaluable estéticamente —no es meramente “agradable”. Más aún, al igual que ejemplos paradigmáticos de arte, el sabor puede ser evaluado por cómo refiere o “ejemplifica” normas culturales. Este artículo es parte de un proyecto más amplio en el que desarrollo una posición sobre el placer del arte. Esta posición permite una mayor diversidad de formas de arte que las que abarca la estética filosófica tradicional. Y aquí se incluye la comida.

PALABRAS CLAVE: filosofía de la comida, propiedades estéticas, estética culinaria, gusto, comida como arte

Can food be art? Some say no, because we appraise food on the basis of savour,¹ and unlike the terms in which we appreciate art, savour is completely subjective.² Others say yes, because food has qualities that go beyond savour, and it can be art in virtue of these. Both answers discount the artistic value of what most think is essential to the enjoyment of food and eating: savour. They agree that food can't be art *just* in virtue of this. If food is ever art, these critics maintain, it is in virtue of something incidental to the enjoyment of eating it.

¹ I will explain the term ‘savour’ in section 2: I distinguish it from both ‘taste’ and ‘flavour.’

² See Crane 2007 and Smith 2014 for discussion of this point in the context of wine.

I do not agree. In a series of papers, I have been trying to define *art* in a way that explains our characteristically objectivist attitude to art —the idea that there are standards that can be rationally discussed— while at the same time noticing and highlighting a role for personal response. It is one of the advantages of my approach that it welcomes a much wider range of human creations into the realm of what is legitimately regarded as art. Food is one of these. And in virtue of its savour. This is what I'll try to show here.

1. *A Traditionalist Culinary Aesthetic*

As I have been saying, it is common among philosophers and critics to discount savour as a vehicle for art. To draw the lines of the issue, let me begin by showing how it surfaces in certain heated recent discussions of modernist cuisine.

Contemporary restaurant culture lifts cooking techniques and food presentation to levels uncommon, indeed almost unknown, even as recently as the late twentieth century. Yet, it was early on sceptically treated, or even reviled, by many home cooks and traditionalist gastronomes. “Spanish foam has finally washed ashore on Manhattan Island,” wrote New York *Times* restaurant critic, William Grimes (March 29th, 2000), scornfully alluding to the “mad experiments of Ferran Adrià” (in a review of a restaurant named Meigas).³ Gordon Ramsay amplifies the theme: “A chef should use his fingers and his tongue, not a test tube,” he is reported to have said (Cunningham and Myhrvold 2019). (Apparently, he later changed his mind.) The worry is that for all of its brilliance, modernist cuisine gets away from what is centrally important to the appreciation of food.

Why would anybody think that modernist cuisine is untrue to what a chef should really be concerned with? Shen-yi (Sam) Liao and Aaron Meskin give us a clue:

El Bulli's reverse spherical olive (2005) is an elaborate reconstruction of olive oil and olive juice in the shape of an olive, using a technique that is new to gastronomy. This kind of food might to be thought to be a hybrid art form that combines haute cuisine, sculpture, various technologies, and performance art or theatre. (2018, p. 664)

Reverse spherical olives are examples of “molecular gastronomy”. First, spherical coagulates are created by gently agitating spoonfuls

³ A couple of years later, Grimes transferred to the Obituary section of the *Times*. I don't think there is a connection between the two events.

of pureed olive mixed with xanthan gum in a simmering bath of sodium alginate. Then, the spheres are infused with flavoured olive oil. (The second is the “reverse” part of the concoction: the oil osmoses in from the outside.) The final product can be thought of as a caricature of an olive: a thick liquid that flows out of something clearly synthetic, but possessed nonetheless of some paradigmatic elements of the experience of an olive. Liao and Meskin suggest that there is more going on here than just the delectation of the mouth. The Adriàs’ olive⁴ is the product of a *hybrid* art form, they say. So, one of their responses to the traditionalist’s question about the olive is that it is art, but only because it is not pure cuisine.⁵

The traditionalist’s question could have been answered the same way with regard to the great French chef, Marie-Antoine Carême, and the now well-established art of celebratory baking. Carême created elaborate confectionary-sculptures (*pièces montées*) that were used as table-settings at grand dinners, as well as elaborately crafted smaller pieces designed to revive a gourmand’s flagging appetite by piquing her curiosity at dessert time. These works advanced the tradition of sculptural baking now celebrated in the television show, *The Great British Bake-Off*. (Wedding cakes and *croquebouches* are examples of the form.) The question that arises here, as with Adrià as well, is whether the “hybrid” elements organically blend with and enhance culinary experience or are, to the contrary, “fairly distant from our ordinary culinary experiences” (Liao and Meskin 2018, p. 664). And this prompts the question: Can ordinary food be art?

In this paper, I attempt to show both that ordinary food can be art and that innovative modernist cuisine can be considered as art *on the same terms as ordinary food*. I’ll begin by attempting to reconstruct the traditionalist stance by clarifying what it means to appreciate food for its savour (section 2). With this clarification in hand, I will argue in support of the following propositions:

1. There is genuinely *aesthetic* appreciation of the savour of food —an approach to it that goes beyond sensory delectation (sections 3–7). That is, there is an attitude of appreciation that values the savour-qualities themselves, and the savouring of

⁴ The Netflix documentary *Chef’s Table* (season 5, episode 4) attributes the olive to Ferran’s brother, Albert Adrià. I’ll call it the Adriàs’ olive, assuming that both brothers played a role.

⁵ As is regrettably the norm in twenty-first century discussions, some critics went well beyond the facts, accusing Adriàs of poisoning their customers, and demanding that the restaurant post health-risk notices.

these, not just the pleasure that such savouring produces. (I'll explain this distinction and why it is important.)

Showing that savour can be aesthetically appreciated in this manner is a step in the right direction. But it doesn't show that food is *art*. For in my conception, art is not appreciated in a merely "natural" way —rather, one appreciates it for how it interacts with culturally constructed norms and expectations. In short, art's appeal is culture-specific, not universal—liking it is, at least in part, a matter of cultural learning (not just exposure). This, I will argue, is true of food. Savour is appreciated in a culturally situated manner. This is why it is art.

I will elaborate this line of thought regarding cultural construction by arguing in support of two further propositions:

2. Everyday food can be art (sections 8–9). Home cooking can participate in this kind of cultural specificity. That is, it is appreciated not merely because it tastes good (which would be "natural" appreciation), but also because of how it plays with the norms of the culture.
3. "Mad experiments" —innovative creations that traditionalists consider to be beyond cuisine— can also be considered art *on the same terms* as ordinary food (section 10). It is not necessary to invoke sculpture or technology to see them this way. They are brilliant and technically innovative ways of playing with the savour-norms of specific culinary cultures.

With these things said, I will conclude by opening a door to the sceptics just a crack.

4. Though food can be art, there is something about cuisine that is, at first sight, artistically limiting, relative to painting, music, and the like. For in addition to being culturally interesting, food must be "naturally" appealing —to put it bluntly, it has to taste good. There is no analogous requirement in painting or music. Does this demote culinary art to the lowly status of a craft devoted to oral pleasures? No. I outline a possible defence (section 11).

2. *Savour: What We Enjoy in Food as Food*⁶

Discussing the aesthetics of food, ordinary language tends to speak of *taste* —“This tastes so good”, a guest gushes to her host. And as the organ of taste, we speak of the *tongue*. A chef should use his tongue, Gordon Ramsay said.

Scientifically speaking, though, this is too narrow a conception of our sensory experience of food (Spence, Auvray, and Smith 2014; Smith 2015). The taste-buds in the tongue detect only the qualities, sweet, sour, bitter, salty, umami, and (possibly) fatty. But obviously we make many more food-discriminations than those that derive from combinations of these five to six qualities. In the mouth, fruits such as cherries, pineapples, apples, and raspberries, different kinds of meat and cheese differ in many more dimensions than these.

There are, over and above what we get from the taste-buds, additional sensory inputs relevant to the gustatory experience of food. Here’s what we have in addition.

Retronasal olfaction Vapours from food in the mouth rise up and pass over smell receptors in the nose in the direction opposite to that when we sniff outside odours through our noses. Olfactory sensing from the mouth is called “retronasal” to distinguish it from “orthonasal” olfaction, or external smelling. Retronasal olfaction doesn’t make us aware of odour that we experience when we sniff food. It is a separate process (though it starts with the same receptors). And it contributes to flavour, not smell.

Trigeminal stimulation As well, food excites the trigeminal nerve, which is located in the face, producing sensations of irritation such as the heat of mustard, the coolness of mint, and the fizziness of sparkling water. (Auvray and Spence 2008)

Sensory information (a) retronasally gathered by the smell receptors and (b) registered by the trigeminal nerve is smoothly integrated with (c) information gathered by the taste-buds to produce a unitary quality that scientists refer to as *flavour* (Auvray and Spence 2008; Spence, Auvray and Smith 2014). Taste qualities are evidently components of flavour —mangoes and apples are both sweet. But retronasal olfaction and trigeminal irritation provide many other complexities of what we call “tasting”. Hold your nose while you chew on a cherry and it tastes no different from a raspberry; in the

⁶ I am very grateful to Barry Smith, Ophelia Deroy, Jonathan Cohen, and the editors for help and suggestions regarding this section.

absence of retronasal olfaction, many of the distinguishing elements of these fruit flavours vanish. Let Coca-Cola or Dom Perignon go flat and their flavours are very different: the trigeminal component is missing. Though it has these components from the nose and the face, flavour is the quality we seem to “taste” in the mouth.

But flavour is also too narrow. For there are many other qualities that traditional food offers the gourmet.⁷ *Inside the mouth*, there is temperature, texture, and mouth-feel: with these, the sense of touch is paramount. Then, there is audition: crunch, crispness, and fizz have substantial sound-components that once again emanate from inside the mouth. *Outside the mouth*, all the senses (bar taste and retronasal olfaction) play a role. There is aroma and orthonasal olfaction—very important to beverages such as coffee, tea, wine, and soup, soft foods such as cheese and stone fruit, grilled meat, aromatic Mexican and Indian dishes, etc. Again, there is sound: the sizzle of a steak or of sizzling rice soup, the crack as you snap a chicharron or break through crème brûlée, the sound of a spoon cutting through crumble, or a fork through pastry. And then there are visual characteristics: even disregarding late twentieth century innovations of plating, we have the rich sear on a steak, the red of tandoori chicken, the saffron colour of biriyani, the colour of a ripe mango, the crema on an espresso, and the viscosity of molasses clinging to a spoon. All of these would be acknowledged by the traditionalist as part of the appeal of food.

The qualities I have mentioned figure in what I will call *naturally connected food-perception groups*. For first, they are *perceptual*: that is, they are not merely qualities of subjective experience; rather, they are sensory signs of qualities that the food possesses independently of experience. To put it in a deliberately reductive way, chicken soup smells, looks, and tastes like chicken soup because it *is* chicken soup. The visual appearance, the aroma, and the flavour help tell us what it is; they are identificatory. And second, these sensory qualities form natural associations—each is a member of a group of *other* identificatory qualities in the food that are found conjoined (a) because of the nature of the food and how it is prepared, and (b) because of innate and learned associations formed by our perceptual

⁷ Scientists differ about which of these should be included in flavour. Bartoshuk and Duffy (1998) include qualities revealed by retronasal olfaction working together with taste; Auvray and Spence (2008) include “the trigeminal system, touch, and so on”. My account is designed to steer a path between these restrictive and inclusive accounts by distinguishing between core and penumbral elements of food-experience.

and learning systems.⁸ Things that look and smell like chicken soup likely possess the other sensory properties of chicken soup. Thus, the aroma does not merely tell us what the dish is; it also predicts other characteristic sensory qualities that the soup has.⁹

These perception groups are the foundations of the experiences we enjoy when we eat food. Qualities experienced *in the mouth* take priority here. Out-of-the-mouth aroma and colour are important because they predict, enhance, and smoothly blend with in-the-mouth experience. For instance, the colour, visible oiliness, steaminess and aroma of chicken soup are part of *culinary* experience, because they predict, and are thus integrated with, in-the-mouth hot-chicken-soup experiences. A sip of chicken soup provides you with an experience that lasts several seconds, starting with the aroma when you spoon the soup into your mouth, and terminating well after you swallow. Because of its natural connections, the steamy aroma of the soup *before* you sip it forms a part of a natural progression of experienced qualities that continues as you sip it, savour it in your mouth, and then when you ruminate upon the after-taste *subsequent* to your swallowing it.¹⁰

Come back now to the objections of traditionalist critics to modernist cuisine. I suspect that it largely comes to this: the out-of-the-mouth qualities that modernist chefs create are *not* parts of naturally connected food-perception groups —specifically, they do not naturally predict in-the-mouth experience and are not integrated with them in virtue either of their own physical nature or of the nature of our sensory systems. The claim is, for instance, that the technical virtuosity of modernist kitchens is directed to qualities unrelated to

⁸ I would like to exclude qualities that predict solely because of local social, cultural, or economic norms. For instance, price might help identify fish eggs as caviar, but price is not part of a naturally connected food-perception group because it doesn't identify the food in virtue of (a) or (b). Similarly, you might be more confident that the vinegar in your dressing is made from apple cider because you're in an apple-growing region. But this is not a natural perceptual-association either.

⁹ Korsmeyer (2012) travels in the same direction as I do. She aims to “weld together tastes (*sic*) sensations and assumptions about the identity of what enters the mouth and to argue that the sensory properties of foods are inseparable from what we take the objects we eat to be” (p. 92). I think “inseparable” goes too far, but concur that extra-flavour perceptions of food are central to culinary experience when they are part of identity-revealing natural perception groups.

¹⁰ Such progressions may also incorporate cross-modal associations: for instance, a brassy musical accompaniment might enhance “bright” flavour notes. Here, the tone does not predict the identity of the food, but it smoothly blends with the flavour. I'll put this interesting possibility aside: traditionalists would be sceptical, in any case.

how the item feels when it is taken into the mouth. Grant Achatz's antenna skewer is an extreme example. This is a self-supporting device that holds a bite of food angled toward the diner, so that she can eat it hands-free —a kind of fork that does not need a hand. This is one of a series of table-service items especially designed to present small dishes dramatically. Obviously, it isn't a natural part of a food-perception group, because *any* food that is firm enough can be skewered: the presentation artistically combines with the food experience, but it does not naturally associate with the in-the-mouth experience. Some say the same of the Adriàs' "olive": the technique might be extraordinary, but the resulting form does not predict or enhance what you experience when you take it into your mouth. (The criticism is misdirected, as I will explain in section 10 below, but it is presumably what lies behind what Josep Maria Fonalleras, quoted by Cunningham and Myhrvold (2019), meant when he said that Adrià was more interested in "mathematics" than cooking.)

This is how traditionalists regard modernist innovations. They focus on unintegrated out-of-the-mouth experiences. Indeed, many *violate* rather than harmonizing with expectations. Their appeal rests on factors outside of natural food-perception-groups. The innovations of modernist cuisine are thus not about the core experience of food in the mouth. They are about something else —or so traditionalists say.

Let me, then, offer a new concept, defined as follows:

The *savour* of food¹¹ is that combination of its qualities that we *perceptually* discern and apprehend inside the mouth, together with those perceived outside the mouth *subject to the proviso* that the latter predict, or are in other ways naturally integrated with, qualities discerned in the mouth.

This conception of savour is admittedly not precise; it is indeterminate at the edges. Nonetheless, I would claim that the concept has three virtues: (1) it has a legitimately naturalistic core and is

¹¹ "Savour" is, of course, more usually used as a verb, but it can be used as a noun. (Paloma Atencia reminds me that the Spanish 'sabor' is standardly a noun, as is 'savour' in French.) Additionally, as Ophelia Deroy insists in conversation, 'savour' used as a verb has a positive valence: you savour good things, not bad. I want to cancel this implicature. The *OED*'s primary sense of "savour (n)" is "Smell, aroma, and related figurative and extended uses". And its second meaning is "Flavour, taste, and related figurative and extended uses." I want to use it in a way that includes both, and a lot more as well —the visible attributes of a well-roasted chicken, for example. It is an unusually broad usage, I acknowledge.

quite determinate in most cases, (2) it is useful for understanding what people appreciate about food as food, and (3) it comes close to capturing traditionalist attitudes to cuisine.

My diagnosis of the traditionalist critique is that it assumes that appreciative eating consists of discerning and enjoying *savour* as a unified temporal sequence. Everything else is incidental. (The critique is, like the concept of savour, somewhat indeterminate at its edges.) Plating, for example, enhances visual appearance, but it isn't part of cuisine because it isn't relevant to savour. It is a part of restaurant culture, to be sure, but it would be appropriate here to speak of hybrid elements. Similarly, Carême's sculptural creations and the Adriàs' liquid olives include non-savour visual elements that are better regarded as the product of "sculpture, various technologies, and performance art or theatre" than of cooking.

The questions that we have flagged for investigation reduce then to this:

Can the sensory enjoyment of savour be *aesthetic*?

Or:

Can food be the object of aesthetic appreciation in virtue of its savour alone?¹²

Can it, moreover, be art?

3. *Can Savour Alone Be the Basis of Food Art? An Example to Test Intuition*

Now, the question that I have just posed is somewhat less than precisely defined because the concept on which it rests, *savour*, is itself not precise. And I can't make it more precise because it is meant to help capture the fuzzy intuitions that lie behind traditionalist attitudes to food, as reflected in the even fuzzier traditionalist critiques of modernist cuisine. But we can bring it down to earth with an example that deliberately excludes certain non-predictive qualities.

Take some traditional dish —say red mole, or shami kebab, or coq au vin. These dishes are made to be enjoyed in the traditional way, i.e., just by eating them. No one would say that they were products of what Liao and Meskin call a "hybrid art form". They involve no contrived textures or sculptural techniques: they are created simply by chopping and grinding things up, combining them in different

¹² Cp. Liao and Meskin: "A trickier issue has to do with whether the food of everyday life may possess aesthetic value in virtue of its flavors and odors" (2018, p. 665).

ways, and heating them in different ways in different sequences for different lengths of time.

For the purposes of the present inquiry, let's begin by focusing on one of these dishes, an example of what the French call *cuisine bourgeoise*:

Coq au vin You are served coq au vin. It is not plated, restaurant style, but just brought to the table in a casserole and ladled out with accompaniments, as in a home meal. When it arrives from the kitchen, you smell the wine and chicken; when it is ladled onto your plate, you see the sear on the pieces of chicken, and small onions and mushrooms nestling among them in the sauce. When you put it in your mouth, you experience the warmth, the rich winey flavour, texture, and unctuous mouth-feel of the sauce, and the combination of soft onions, bite-resistant mushrooms, and chewy chicken—all of this congruent with how it presented itself on your plate. After you swallow it, you enjoy the lingering after-taste of chicken-fat, wine, onion, and herbs.

What I have described is the *savour* of coq au vin. Though it might be unclear in many other cases what counts as savour and what does not, I have attempted to construct *this* example so that there is nothing else *in the food* to experience.

The question reduced to this experience is the following: can you have an *aesthetic* experience of coq au vin eaten in this way? My answer is yes.

Additionally: Can it be *art*? My answer, again, is yes, and even more so if it is innovative. (Perhaps, if the preparation is rigidly conventional, it should be considered a product of *craft*, not art, but I am unsympathetic to distinctions of this sort—art vs craft, fine art vs decorative art, high art vs folk art, and so on. I will not discuss the issue here.)

4. *Foundations I: What We Want from Any Account of Cuisine as Art*

We need a framework to assess the claims of cuisine. I will approach the subject from the perspective of my own theory of aesthetic pleasure and my conception of art (Matthen 2015, 2017, 2020). There are two strong reasons for invoking pleasure in this context. One is general: aesthetic experience is infused with positive affect, and pleasure helps us link to this. The second is more specific to the

subject-matter. Clearly, our enjoyment of food is pleasure-linked. Severing this connection would be as incongruous as an attempt to understand painting without mentioning vision. Moreover, it is this link to pleasure that causes many philosophical detractors of cuisine to be ambivalent—they say that it shows that eating consists merely of sensory gratification.¹³ The virtue of my theory of aesthetic pleasure is that it shows why this way of dismissing the claims of cuisine is not just misguided, but flat out wrong.¹⁴

Obviously, I am going out on a bit of a limb here: my theory can be, and has been, contested, and so the framework I adopt will have its detractors. Fortunately, nothing turns on mine being the *only* theory that does the job. My approach is an attempt to accommodate four features of the case that I regard as essential. I claim my account scores well on all four.

The first is that, as I said above, appreciative eating should be shown to be, at least ideally, an aesthetic experience. In other words, it should link up with other art-appreciation experiences. I will make this connection in sections 6 and 7.

Second, there is a cognitive aspect to any aesthetic experience—such experience does not consist merely in affect. Consequently, the discussion does not turn on whether a purely affective response to food can somehow be dragged into the realm of the aesthetic. Rather, the question is whether a cognitive experience of food can be considered aesthetic in virtue of being affective in a certain way. My view is well-fitted to this task because in my theory, aesthetic pleasure is an affective accompaniment of an act of cognitive focus on an object.

The third constraint is that, as with all art, food should be susceptible to rational criticism on an objective basis. You may like ragu Bolognese or you may not. Either way, it is ruined when made with round tomatoes. A critic who down-rated a restaurant because its ragu did not use San Marzano tomatoes is *correct*—it's not relevant that you happen to like a sweeter tomato. Similarly, a biriyani may

¹³ Kant, for example, requires that aesthetic appreciation should be indifferent to the actual existence of its object—it is an attitude that is not based on this kind of interest. But clearly our attitude to food is consumption-based—merely imagining the savour is not sufficient for appreciation.

¹⁴ In various publications, particularly Matthen 2018, I have built a version of aesthetic hedonism on the back of my theory of aesthetic pleasure. In the present context, nothing turns on this theory of value. Someone like Keren Gorodeisky, who holds that aesthetic value is response-independent, can nevertheless agree with my theory of aesthetic pleasure.

be complex in texture and beautifully layered in spicing. These are objective virtues that a critic would be objectively wrong to discount, notwithstanding her indifference to the actual meat used in the dish—chicken instead of the goat-meat she prefers.

The fourth constraint comes from the fact that some aspects of the appreciation of food vary with personal, cultural, and circumstantial factors in ways that are beyond rational criticism—for example, I may not enjoy meat cooked with sweet fruits or I may particularly enjoy coconut-milk curries. Clearly, this kind of culinary preference is an important component of food-appreciation.¹⁵ But there is no right or wrong about it. So, the objectivity required by third constraint is tempered by a certain tolerance for the variability of taste. It ought *at least sometimes* to be possible, especially in a domain like cuisine, for two people to disagree about the value of a dish without one being wrong.

The goal is to provide a theory of food as art that satisfies these four constraints.

5. Foundations II: Aesthetic Experience as a Kind of Pleasure

Let me, then, offer my characterization of aesthetic experience. First, aesthetic experience of an object is grounded in *cognitive focus* on *non-evaluative* or *factual* features of that object. When you gaze at a snowy mountain range, or read a poem, or listen to a song, you are “contemplating” these objects—that is, you form and mentally engage with a cognitive representation of their descriptive properties. Now, this kind of cognitive focus is mentally demanding and sometimes very difficult: you have to take in multiple features of the object, synthesize these into an object of interest, and entertain the resulting representation over a period of time. Positive aesthetic experience *motivates* and *eases* this activity. It makes the demanding act of cognitive focus less costly and more beneficial (Matthen 2016). You can focus on the descriptive properties of a song better and less effortfully if it is a song you enjoy—it’s this kind of facilitating enjoyment, or pleasure, that counts for me as aesthetic.¹⁶

Summing this up:

¹⁵ See section 11 for a suggestion about why deliciousness is important.

¹⁶ There are echoes here of Kant’s notion of disinterested pleasure, for the aesthetic pleasure I take in cognitively focusing on an object makes the act of focusing desirable independently of any other consequence that it might have; see Matthen 2017.

A subject S 's experience E of an object, O , is positive-aesthetic if

- (a) E is essentially an act of cognitive focus on the descriptive properties of O ,
- (b) E is pleasurable/enjoyable, and
- (c) the pleasure/enjoyment of E motivates, releases, and facilitates its continuation, at least until fatigue, satiety, and other extraneous influences intervene. That is: were it not for the fact that cognitive focus on the descriptive properties of O is pleasurable/enjoyable, S would find it pointless and difficult to maintain her cognitive focus on O .

On this account, positive-aesthetic experience is perceptual/cognitive focus on the descriptive properties of an object that *because of its pleasure* enables a continuation of itself.¹⁷ (To be clear: this self-reinforcing structure is not infinitely sustaining; ultimately, it will be cut short by such extraneous inhibitors as fatigue or satiety.) The pleasure involved in the experience is thus not merely consequent upon cognitive engagement with the aesthetic object; it is, in addition, a component of the subject's agency in maintaining that cognitive engagement.¹⁸

Note that on this notion of the aesthetic, *correctness* does not enter the picture. It is entirely possible that some find mountains aesthetically positive and others, on the contrary, find plains to be so. Aesthetic pleasure, on this account, is self-reinforcing affect that attaches to cognitive focus on descriptive character; nothing we have said so far makes such affect objectively justified. Objectivity enters the account later, when we are concerned with art.

6. Demarcating the Aesthetic: Three Cognitive Experiences

With this account of aesthetic experience in the background, let me recast Noël Carroll's (2000) much discussed thought-experiment of two individuals confronting the same aesthetic object. Carroll wants to show that you can't *define* aesthetic experience as experience valuable for its own sake. To this end, he argues that it is possible

¹⁷ A definition of negative aesthetic experience does not trivially fall out of this. Possibly, it could be defined by invoking a sense of *displeasure* that disrupts or discourages cognitive engagement. See Matthen 2016 for related discussion.

¹⁸ See Matthen 2017 and 2020, for details.

for two individuals to have type-identical experiences of one and the same object that one values for its own sake and the other for some other reason. Since the experiences are alleged to be type-identical, but only one is valued for its own sake, it follows that aesthetic experience cannot be defined as experience valued for its own sake (2000, p. 206). My version of the experiment is a little more complicated: it involves *three* individuals, and so I will rename them.

Let's start with two individuals, as Carroll does. In his telling, the aesthetic object is a painting, but since art-objects raise special issues of their own, I'll begin with a natural object: a mountain landscape. One individual, Anushka, examines the scene for a geological survey; the other, Bimal, examines it "for its own sake" (whatever this means). We stipulate that both cognitive acts are satisfying, and are equivalent with respect to, conditions (a) and (b) in the definition of a positive-aesthetic experience above: that is both, are enjoyable acts of cognitive focus on the same descriptive features of the landscape. I'll stipulate in addition that both individuals take in the same descriptive features of these peaks.

Carroll says we cannot say that one of these acts is aesthetic and the other not. Since both subjects experience the very same things—they focus on the same features of the object, process them in the same way, etc.—he says, the two experiences must be "type-identical" (2000, p. 205). And since Bimal's attitude seems to be aesthetic, he concludes that Anushka's must be too. The experience itself isn't changed by the difference of motivation.

As more than one philosopher has pointed out (cf. Iseminger 2005; Levinson 2016, chapter 3), this is a faulty line of reasoning: clearly, two mental states can be cognitively equivalent—they can have the same content and be arrived at by the same cognitive process—and yet be different in affect, tone, potency, and continuity. For instance, Anushka, the surveyor, might notice, but might not *care*, that the glaciers in the high valleys glow blue-green against the icy peaks, while this is one of the things that motivates Bimal to keep gazing. So, Bimal's experience might change in motivationally relevant ways if the colour contrasts were different, but Anushka's would not.¹⁹

In my account, affect and motivational force are crucial: they figure in the self-reinforcing structure of positive-aesthetic cognitive

¹⁹ In virtue of the pleasure condition (b), I am following Levinson's (2016) insistence that the affective tone must be *experienced*; it cannot merely be a discursive evaluation.

focus on the descriptive properties of a target object. And this is where my two individuals' experiences come apart. Bimal's pleasure in viewing the mountain scenery reinforces his act of viewing that scenery. Anushka's experience, on the other hand, is sustained by an interest outside the mere act of contemplation. And this is an important difference because Anushka's cognitive focus on the mountain range would peter out when her external motivation is removed, while Bimal's experience, being internally self-sustaining, would not be limited in this way. (Bimal may, of course, lose his motivation because of fatigue or other inhibiting influences, but this is equally true of Anushka.) In short, Anushka's experience fails condition (c) of the definition of a positive-aesthetic experience. It is not self-sustaining by the pleasure it generates. Bimal's is.

This kind of affective difference would also be relevant to the *agential force* of Anushka's and Bimal's states. Let's assume, as per condition (b), that both Anushka and Bimal take pleasure in what they are doing. Anushka loves measuring mountains and the pleasure she takes in the task motivates, releases, and facilitates her activity. Bimal, on the other hand, is captivated by the craggy contours of the mountains and the way that the glaciers nestle blue in their lofty valleys. This motivates, releases, and facilitates his visual activity too. But presumably, the differences in their aims is going to make a difference to what aspect of their activity is reinforced by pleasure. Once Anushka has produced a credible result, she is no longer motivated to look at the mountain. To Bimal, however, the activity is temporally open-ended; he just keeps gazing until he gets tired or finds something else to do. So, though both feel pleasure, the motivational structure of their experiences is different. The reason why Anushka's attitude is not aesthetic is that it is not self-maintaining through the pleasure it generates.

It's worth noting at this point that while Carroll is wrong to insist that Anushka's cognitive focus on the mountain is the same as Bimal's, other accounts are inconclusive about why it is different. Levinson says that aesthetic experience is "grounded in aesthetic attention to the object" and includes positive affective response "to the perception itself or the content of that perception" (2016, p. 39). It's not clear to me why Anushka's attitude fails this test (barring the circular stipulation that her attention is not "aesthetic"). On the account I have given, the difference between Anushka and Bimal is that in her case (but not Bimal's) the agential feedback loop from perception to pleasure and back to perception detours through her love of scientific observation, and is severed when her scientific

observation is concluded. Perhaps this result is secured by the “for its own sake” stipulations Levinson and others make, but I believe that my way of building pleasure into the agential complex has, at least, the virtue of clarifying this issue.

Now, I want to consider a third individual, Chandra. When *he* gazes at the scene in Banff, it fills him with a sublime feeling of wonder and awe, which makes him feel one with the divine. Chandra is a bit like Bimal in that he too is motivated to keep looking for an indefinite period of time; unlike Anushka, his motivation does not cease when some extrinsic goal is achieved. However, Chandra is different from Bimal in different respect, and a bit more like Anushka. For even if Chandra has to keep looking at the mountains to maintain his sense of wonder, his cognitive focus on the descriptive properties of the mountains is not self-reinforcing. Rather, his focus is motivated by and goes through something that is externally generated, namely his sense of awe and wonder. Thus, like Anushka, he does not satisfy condition (c) above. But Bimal does satisfy condition (c) —for him, the pleasurable act of cognitively focusing on descriptive features of the mountains sustains itself.

Now, intuitions vary on how to assess Chandra’s state. Some might think that it qualifies as aesthetic. The ninth century Indian theorist, Bharata, thought that aesthetic experience was tied up with *rasa*, or emotional response (Pollock 2016; Lopes 2019), and perhaps he would have classified Chandra’s spiritually elevated state as positive-aesthetic.²⁰ And it’s possible that this state would also qualify as aesthetic under the “for its own sake” rubric that Levinson endorses. However this might be, I will adopt here a more restrictive notion of aesthetic enjoyment. My thesis is that aesthetic pleasure creates a self-reinforcing feedback loop from and to cognitive focus on descriptive features. Perhaps my notion is overly restrictive, but we don’t need to adjudicate this question definitively here. For as we’ll see, Bharata’s stance is less relevant when it comes to cuisine. So, I’ll simply stipulate that I want to ground my case for the possibility of an aesthetic experience of cuisine on my notion of positive-aesthetic experience as self-reinforcing cognitive focus on descriptive features.

²⁰ Bharata was primarily concerned with dramatic poetry and the *communication* of social emotions, such as love, fear, and longing. So, extending his theory to natural objects is a bit of a stretch.

7. *Three Parallel Cognitive Experiences of Cuisine*

Coming back now to the coq au vin example, it seems to me that one can envisage approximate counterparts of Anushka, Bimal, and Chandra. The first is a restaurant executive, Amélie, who consults on restaurant-management. She loves her work. So, she takes a keen interest in savour and its economics: by tasting the dish, she knows the ingredients and how it is cooked. She is able to give good advice: use free-range chicken, which is dearer, but balance this by cooking with cheaper wine, which doesn't have too adverse an effect. This interest motivates her —she is pleurably absorbed by her task; she resists other distractions. But like Anushka, her interest qua professional terminates once she arrives at a conclusion. Her professional interest does not motivate her to linger. Of course, Amélie might enjoy eating coq au vin as well, and this may cause her to linger. But this is simply to acknowledge that attitudes of different kinds may sometimes co-exist. Amélie's gourmandizing tendencies do not show that her professional expertise produces the very same affect as her love of food.

Now, put Amélie next to Benoît, a highly discerning customer in the restaurant, who is equally interested in the savour. He enjoys not just eating but tasting —he luxuriates in cognitive focus on the details. Food is not just something that Benoît enjoys scarfing down; he takes joy in his perceptual engagement with the descriptive properties of savour. Put Amélie next to Benoît: both satisfy conditions (a) and (b) above; they both maintain cognitive focus on descriptive characteristics of savour, and in both cases this cognitive focus is (though in different ways) the source of their enjoyment. The difference is with respect to condition (c). Amélie's enjoyment of tasting the food is not self-motivating —though she is aware of the balance of acid and fat in the dish, this is not what motivates her to take another bite. As a restaurant professional, she takes pleasure in figuring out how to achieve the best savour in a way that makes economic sense, and once she has done this, she is no longer interested in tasting. The difference between her and Benoît is motivational. She is concerned with restaurant management; he is motivated by enjoyment of perceiving savour.

Now, our two tasters are very comparable, in terms both of expertise and of affect and motivation, with the first two mountain-watchers we considered before. Both enjoy cognitive focus, but for different reasons. Amélie enjoys analysing what she eats in order to optimize the economics of its production; Benoît's interest in

analysing savour is a part of his enjoyment of eating. His experience of food is analogous with Bimal's of mountains. Shouldn't we then count Benoît's experience as *aesthetic*? Isn't his interest self-reinforcing (at least, until fatigue or satiety sets in) in just the same way as Bimal's is, though the source of his pleasure is different? I believe it is. Benoît is cognitively focused on the construction of savour. This focus is enjoyable. His enjoyment of the experience of focusing on savour reinforces his act of savouring it. It contrasts with Amélie's enjoyment which (like Anushka's) is externally motivated and ceases when that external motivation ends.

At this point, let's introduce a third character, Charles (pronounced in the French way, of course). Charles loves food and he is quite discriminating. But what he loves about it is the sense of replete well-being that rich food gives him. He is a bit like Benoît in that he enjoys *good* food best: when the onions in coq au vin are made from a package from the freezer, he tends to eat less than when they are painstakingly peeled and braised for the occasion. But though he is discriminating in this way, he does not perceptually focus on the qualities of food that cause him to like it. This is not what he enjoys. His response to food is discriminating but not perceptually so. His growing sense of repleteness is *caused* by certain descriptive savour-features, but not by the *perception* of these savour-features.

I think that it is implausible to think of Charles' experience as aesthetic. His counterpart, Chandra, feels something elevated when he looks at a mountain. Though his emotional state is not grounded in cognitive focus, it is nonetheless a spiritually positive response to perception of the object. And some might be tempted to think of Chandra's experience as positive-aesthetic simply because it is spiritually high-toned. Whatever one thinks of this assessment of Chandra, the same cannot plausibly be said of Charles' response to food. Very few people seriously believe that there is anything spiritually elevated in eating coq au vin. So Bharata's *rasa* theory doesn't come into play here. (I believe this is a defect of *rasa* theory, but this is not my point here.)

However this may be, this is not for me the relevant difference between Charles and Benoît, or between Charles and Bimal for that matter. The difference is that with the two Bs, their cognitive focus on the details of an object is self-reinforcing through the pleasure that characterizes that cognitive focus. But with the two Cs, cognitive focus is not self-reinforcing in this way.

The kind of pleasure that I want to emphasize can be highlighted by contrasting all three of our characters with a fourth, whom I will

call Mr. Smack-My-Lips. This individual simply likes to eat; he is not particularly discriminating, much less is he cognitively focused on, or even aware of, the components or structure of cuisine. Mr. Smack-My-Lips likes some of things he eats and dislikes others. But because he lacks focus, his enjoyment is not motivated by it.

It seems to me that when philosophers say that one cannot appreciate food aesthetically, they are not thinking of Benoît. Rather, they are thinking of Charles, or perhaps even of Mr. Smack-My-Lips. They think that just as Charles is eating in order to get a feeling of repleteness, and Mr. Smack-My-Lips is filling himself up with food without cognitively focusing on it, so also Benoît is savouring food so that he can get sensory gratification. But this neglects the self-reinforcing kind of cognitive focus on savour that Benoît experiences.²¹

The conclusion I draw from this discussion is that the pleasure that we get from tasting food can be positive-aesthetic because it can satisfy the conditions specified in section 5 above. There is a kind of pleasure that accompanies certain acts of analytic tasting that reinforce that very act of analytic tasting.²²

8. *But Is It Art? The Role of Secondary Attractors*

Though there is a kind of perceptual focus on savour that counts as aesthetic, this is not sufficient to make food *art*.

I have argued elsewhere (Matthen 2015) that art-objects have *primary* as well as *secondary* attractors. The *primary* attractors are features of an object that we enjoy for no reason other than that we are so constituted as to enjoy them after sufficient exposure. Perhaps, Bimal used to like mountain scenery better than desert landscapes, but maybe he had hardly ever seen a desert and he found them weird. But now he has moved to Abu Dhabi and he has learned to appreciate the desert. But he still likes mountains better. These

²¹ Crane (2007) thinks that the aesthetic is defined by the public accountability of affectively-tinged assessments such as “beautiful,” “elegant,” and “refined”. He thinks that these are *cognized* in the case of aesthetic objects, including wine. I don’t think that this is right. People from non-European taste-cultures may not find wine (or French food) appealing, and as I’ll argue later, this lack of attraction is not always reversed by mere exposure. So, I claim, it is a virtue of my account of aesthetic experience that it is not defined by cognitive content.

²² Perhaps I could be regarded here as adding flesh to the bones of Cain Todd’s speculation: “it is not absurd to say that I am drowning in the ethereal sound of Tallis’s *Spem in Alium* in something like the same sort of way that I am drowning in the ethereal taste and smell depths of the Château Haut-Brion” (2014, p. 149).

attitudes are just rooted in Bimal's constitution, partly innate, partly learned. There is nothing more to it than that.

Similarly, I like the buzz of Szechuan peppers because after having been exposed to them sufficiently, that is just the way I am. And if—even after extensive exposure—you don't like them, that is simply because that is not the way *you* are. This difference comes down to the way we are, or have come to be. There's no point in you and me arguing about the tastiness of Szechuan peppers: our liking just depends on how we are constituted. Now, think of cognitive focus. My cognitive focus on a dish containing Szechuan peppers is aided by my liking Szechuan peppers; yours is impeded by your disliking them. Like Benoît, we both enjoy focusing on the details and construction of its savour. But because you don't like this particular flavour, your cognitive focus on the dish is impeded by your dislike. My experience is positive-aesthetic; yours is not.

Now, the *secondary* attractors of art-objects are those that we enjoy focusing on because they satisfy certain culturally learned attitudes. Think of a poem in sonnet form: that is fourteen lines long in iambic pentameter. A sonnet may be pleasing because the rhythm and content are catchy. These are its primary attractors. It may be pleasing also and additionally because the artist intended the audience to register that it is in sonnet form and appreciate how this form has been executed (e.g. how the stress falls on 'I' but not on 'thee' in "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" because they are in different positions in successive iambs). Such foci of enjoyment depend not just on how a consumer is constituted, but also on culturally based coordination between artist and audience. They are what I call the secondary attractors. They are pleasing not because of how the consumer is constituted, but because she recognizes and appreciates its cultural significance.

An art object, I maintain, is one that is intentionally made to incorporate secondary attractors. The artist makes an object with certain features because she expects her audience to focus on these features in a self-reinforcing way—in short, she expects her creation to *command* her audience's engagement with it. But some of the features an artist relies on are culturally specific: that is, the audience's engagement with these depends on its grasp of its cultural significance. With respect to these secondary attractors, one *can* argue about rightness, but only relative to culturally specific expectations.²³

²³ See Matthen 2020.

Grounding enjoyment in this kind of culturally specific trope finesses the objection made against hedonists that art is not always built for the pleasure it gives. My counterclaim is that it *is* always built for pleasure, but *for this specific kind of pleasure*. It is tough, for example, to read harrowing tales of war and death. But this is a mark against their *primary* attraction. Such tales can still be miraculous with respect to their novelistic structure and linguistic power. The latter are secondary attractors.

To elaborate the role of secondary attractors, let's begin with an (over-simplified) example from outside of cuisine. Let us say that the 2/2 rhythmic line of a march is naturally appealing; it evokes a certain bodily response and certain anticipatory reactions. If this is correct —and nothing turns on the factual accuracy of the example here— the rhythmic line is a primary attractor. It is a culturally independent, untutored response that cognitive focus on the rhythm self-reinforces through pleasure. Some may not like marches, of course; others may. And it may be that some people who don't like marches come to like them when they listen to a lot of them. And it may also be that some who initially like them get tired of them. But in all of these cases, reactions are untutored and non-cultural. It just depends on how people are constituted. Crucially, they are not founded on an appreciation of how they interact with culturally specific expectations.

Now, over and above the appeal of marches, it might well be that some of them are appealing because of culturally significant embellishments. The Colonel Bogey March is particularly significant because of the obscene lyrics that were attached to it by British soldiers in World War II. In the film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, these lyrics made the tune a symbol of defiance against captivity and abuse. This significance is culturally embedded and culturally learned. It is not part of why a naïve, or for that matter, an experienced music-lover might like or dislike the tune. Further, it dictates certain culture-specific performance standards: for instance, its references to certain Nazi leaders (Hitler, Goering) must be marked by emphasizing the descending two-note interval that begins each line of the lyric. These performance standards are secondary attractors, and the reason why a particular performance incorporates certain characteristics over and above the 2/2 beat is that the audience is *enjoined* to pick these up and enjoy them as a consequence of these culturally learned associations. A performance of this sort does not mark values present in just any old march; it has self-referential meaning —“I am a song about Nazi leaders, enjoy me for the fun I make of them.”

One can argue about whether a given performance gives due weight to this meaning.

The presence of secondary attractors is, in my view, a defining characteristic of art. What do we enjoy in a painting by Mark Rothko? Not just the colours, though many report a visceral reaction to these. For there are, over and above this, many cognitively focusing pleasure reactions that depend on appreciating, for example, the quality of the paint-layering that gives Rothko's painted forms a three-dimensionality. And here there are two points of appreciation: the colours themselves and the three-dimensionality itself are primary attractors. But there is also an appreciation of *how* these effects are achieved, and an appreciation of how they blend in or contrast with techniques and traditions that the artist is a part of. Rothko anticipated that an audience with a certain cultural background would look at his canvases a certain way and he made them the way he did for this reason. It is part of a discerning appreciation of his work that we cognitively focus on these details. They are secondary attractors.

I should say, in preparation for the consideration of cuisine, that I do not think that the secondary attractors must be *intellectual*. They *can* be intellectual, of course. But there is no reason to think they *must* be. Cultural perceptual learning could be the key. For instance, a listener might be emotionally engaged by certain culturally specific tropes in music, and this might be a matter of learning to hear the music a certain way. There is no reason why this need be a matter of being able to cognize the musical tropes in question, or to intellectualize them.²⁴

9. *Secondary Attractors in Cuisine*²⁵

Now, let's bring this apparatus of secondary attractors to bear on cuisine. And here it is instructive to contrast two experiences. The first is the thought experiment proposed earlier —tasting coq au vin in a traditional home setting. The second is tasting a free-form dish of braised chicken —a dish made without the constraints of

²⁴ Cain Todd writes: “we regard an object differently when invited to regard it as an art object” (2014, p. 145). My point of emphasis is a little different: art is something meant to give aesthetic pleasure in part because it is regarded in a culture-specific way.

²⁵ I am grateful to Barry Smith for discussion of the issues in this section, and particularly for a line of questioning that made me realize the dominance of primary attractors in cuisine. In Smith 2014, Barry writes: “At the first sip one may say this is a lousy Champagne, only to learn from a second sip that this is a fine Prosecco.” My thoughts about *secondary* attractors have much in common with this.

the traditional recipe. I'll make my point by starting with an over-simplified contrast.

I want to claim that in the *coq au vin* case, the experience is, for a person knowledgeable about French *cuisine bourgeoise*, modulated by secondary attractors. For in this case, the knowledgeable person appreciates the savour of the dish in part because of how it plays into recognized conventions. For in a dish cooked, served, and consumed in a way that assigns it to a specific, culturally recognizable, class or genre—for instance, by giving it a recognizable name—we respond not just to the savour in the way a naïve taster would, but also to how this savour relates to the specific expectations that attach to the class. Savour is the cognitive focus, but the class to which it is assigned adds external constraints to what we expect of it. On the other hand, with dishes that are not classified or tagged in this way, our response is primarily to the primary savour-attractors.²⁶

Imagine, if you will, that a cook in Akbar's court at Fatehpur Sikri produced, without knowing anything about French cooking and by complete coincidence, a replica or twin of *coq au vin*. The great Mughal could ask: Does it taste good or complex or refined? But he couldn't ask: Does it conform to the established cultural paradigm of *coq au vin*, and to the extent that it does or does not, how and why? That cook would be judged by the primary attractors of his creation—and these, remember, depend on the constitution of his audience's minds and bodies—and also, inevitably, by the secondary attractors of Mughalai cuisine. But he would not be judged on the secondary attractors specific to French *cuisine bourgeoise*, because they were not known in Akbar's court. He shared no expectations with his audience that he was trying to exploit for their enjoyable cognitive engagement.

Recognizing the aesthetic role of secondary attractors strengthens a seminal observation made by Carolyn Korsmeyer.

Chicken soup possesses a variety of properties, such as flavor, saltiness, and a somewhat oily texture. The ingredients are more or less present in the final product, and the sipper of the soup may attend to them appreciatively [...] The property of (say) a subdued hint of parsnip well cloaked by onion and dill is exemplified in the soup in much the same way as being in a minor key may be exemplified in music or being blue exemplified by certain Picasso paintings. (1999, pp. 128–129)

²⁶ Kendall Walton (1970) also believes that art must be appreciated and evaluated relative to a genre; my reasons are somewhat similar to his. Jonathan Cohen (2013) applies Walton's thesis to wine.

Now, in speaking of “exemplification”, Korsmeyer is employing some apparatus introduced by Nelson Goodman. She means thereby to attribute a semantic function to elements of flavour. Chicken soup *is* oily, she says —it is *meant* to be so— and (particularly in recipes that derive from the more eastern parts of Europe) it may have a hint of parsnip. But, according to her, there is more going on here: the chicken soup not only possesses a hint of parsnip, but also *denotes* a hint of parsnip. To put it figuratively, chicken soup represents parsnip; it *means* “My flavour has a hint of parsnip”.

What could justify her in saying this? It is here, I believe, that she takes a wrong turn:

The gourmet exercising a discriminating palate is attending to the properties exemplified in food and drink. These are not simply qualities the food *happens to possess*. The gourmet does not direct attention to incidental properties that do not represent the aspects of food that demand appreciation. She does not care, for example, about the weight of the sow that discovered the truffles on the plate; *she cares only about the taste properties of the truffles themselves*. (1999, p. 128; emphasis added)

Korsmeyer points out that certain “incidental properties” —for instance, the weight of the sow— are irrelevant to tasting, and concludes that food *semantically refers to* the property that’s relevant for tasting. This selectivity does not, however, suffice to make her point, at least as far as the present discussion is concerned, because what she calls incidental properties are (arguably) simply those that are not a part of savour. So, if we take the traditionalist seriously, and insist that savour is what we appreciate when we eat it, then we have an adequate reason to explain why we don’t attend to non-savour properties. The exclusion of non-savour properties is simply not a good reason to import semantic notions into the aesthetic appreciation of food.

But now think about the secondary attractors of cuisine. Every cuisine enjoins certain kinds of techniques and imposes certain restrictions on flavour. Many of these restrictions are simply culture- or history-based. The enjoyment of these attractors is based not just on the way the taster is, but on her disposition to discover in savour-profiles the observance and employment of certain conventions. One of the things we appreciate in *coq au vin* is how its savour conforms to or subtly transgresses these conventions. To appreciate it, we need to know that it is *coq au vin*. And when we know this, we appreciate

how its creator has not only made something that tastes good, but has, over and above this, made something that respects certain cultural norms or conventions. So, contrary to Korsmeyer, I don't think that the "subdued hint of parsnip well cloaked by onion and dill" *means* something in just any soup made from chicken. But if there is a well-known kind of chicken soup that promises parsnips because of the kind of soup it is, then the manner in which it is introduced could have semantic significance, or meaning.²⁷ (Compare the self-referentiality of the Colonel Bogey march in the previous section.)

Matthew Strohl (2019) rehearses some secondary attractors that make cuisine "authentic". He imagines someone who visits "two purportedly American-style restaurants" and finds that

one of them serves their burgers with ketchup, mustard, and cucumber pickles, while the other serves theirs with pickled beetroot. If the person were asked which cheeseburger is a more authentic rendition of American fast food, the answer would be clear. (p. 159)

In a similar vein, he quotes Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz (2005), who writes:

Yucatecans, in general, tend to define the introduction of cheese and cream in "traditional" Yucatecan recipes as a disgusting development. This is not because Yucatecans dislike or do not eat cheese or cream; they do, at home and in Mexican and Italian restaurants; they enjoy these products, but tend to perceive them as incompatible with recipes that belong in the regional gastronomic canon. (Strohl 2019, p. 159)

The way I would put it is that Yucatecans dislike cheese in traditional recipes because it violates the secondary attractors of their cuisine, not because it goes against the primary attractors. This shows, first, that by preparing a traditional dish, a Yucatecan cook means her audience to focus on how it conforms to conventional norms of preparation. More importantly for my purposes, it shows how a Yucatecan preparation can and cannot be art. It *cannot* be art simply by tasting good, for then it would rely only on primary attractors. It becomes art when it *exemplifies* (as Korsmeyer would put it) or "refers to" the "regional gastronomic canon".

²⁷ Aaron Meskin tells me that Jewish chicken soup standardly contains parsnip. But French chicken soup usually does not. So Korsmeyer's flavour has a specific cultural reference—I don't know whether this is part of what she has in mind.

Such norms are found in every cuisine. Julie Sahni writes that in Mughlai cuisine:

Elaborate biriyani (*sic*) were put together with meticulous care and presented on three- to four-foot gold and silver platters, garnished with crisp sautéed nuts, crackling onion shreds, and edible pure silver sheets. Many were also given beautiful names to reflect the tastiness of the dish. (1980, p. xvii)

But Mughlai biriyani is not the only kind. While all are derived ultimately from Persian traditions, and though they are often Muslim in origin, there are local variations in many Indian cities, each cooked in a certain way with specific ingredients and local varieties of rice, and with appropriate traditions of presentation.²⁸ It would be something of a solecism to cover Dindigul biriyani with silver leaf, or to mix in cashews and almonds, or to taint it with saffron —this variety originated in a humble Hindu restaurant in South India and is often consumed as take-out. And because it is from the Coromandel coast, it is cooked with the indigenous small-grained *seeraga samba* rice, not basmati. So: when you eat Dindigul biriyani, you look for an unctuously mouth-filling and spicy flavour profile and not the delicacy and refinement of Mughlai Shahi biriyani. And you wouldn't insist on your preference for long grain rice.

Coming back to the *coq au vin* example, then: knowing how it is made is part of one way of approaching the dish. When a knowledgeable person tastes it, she tests out the traditional elements of the dish. In this way of enjoying it, these traditional elements are denotative because the dish is freighted with culturally specific expectations. A simple braised chicken would not carry the same expectations and would not, therefore, be assessed against them. And, as I said before, an accidental creation might have all of the primary appeal of the classic dish, but enjoying it would not be tinged with an assessment of how it respects the conventions of the French dish. It could not be counted as defective if it was cooked with a Shiraz from the Nandi Hills instead of a Pinot Noir from Burgundy. It is through the intentional interaction with culinary conventions —through secondary attractors, in other words— that food represents something.

This is not to say that an ad hoc braised chicken *couldn't* become art. My point is that the question doesn't depend on how

²⁸ For a description of fifteen local varieties, see <<https://www.thebetterindia.com/60553/history-biryani-india/>> [accessed: 29/2/2020].

good its savour is or how ingeniously it is made. Napoleon's chef is said to have invented Chicken Marengo by scouring the battle-ravaged countryside and creating something delicious. One imagines that Napoleon judged his creation by the speed of the cooking and its satisfying savour. Mainly primary attractors. But he could have reflected on the norms of French cuisine. There are crayfish in the dish. That's daring. It gives the eater an additional focus point, not *just* because it tastes good, but because the savour plays with the conventions.

This explains how cuisine can be art. Often, food simply instantiates certain properties that are enjoyed for those properties—a generic chocolate bar is sweet, and some like that. But it is false (I think) to say that the pleasure you take in a chocolate bar arises not just from its sweetness, but additionally from an expectation shared by some multinational corporation (like Cadbury) and consumers that it will be sweet in some specific way. But some food can be aesthetically enjoyed not just for the primary attractors of savour, but also from the appreciation of savour as a culturally constructed secondary attractors. Food becomes art when the latter play an important role in appreciation.

10. *Modernist Cuisine: Is Savour Its Focus?*

We are now in a position to see how modernist cuisine can be art solely in virtue of savour. The point is that our cognitive focus on savour can be pleasurable at least in part because of how it interacts with local cultural norms of savour.

Earlier, I said that the *interaction* of food with culturally established recipes was a secondary attractor, and that this secondary attractor potentially made it art. The possibility that I wanted to include was that it could artfully transgress an established recipe.

Going back to the reverse spherical olive, let us imagine that it recapitulates many of the savour elements of a natural olive. When it was served at El Bulli, its savour was appreciated *not* just for its innate excellence. If it were, there would be little point in exercising so much ingenuity—why not just serve olives? Rather, it is appreciated because it draws attention to the components of the savour of olives *while patently not being an olive*. (Adrià says that it is a deconstructed olive: I take it that he means that each element of the savour is separately created.) It is in this sense that it exemplifies the savour of an olive: not only does the dish possess these qualities, it also denotes or represents them.

In the same vein, imagine a deconstructed coq au vin. It could be served in a clarified sauce, for example, with the chicken pieces showing separately from the onions and mushrooms in depths of a consommé. (Adrià's chicken curry was something like this.) Or a spaghetti a la carbonara made to remind you of an English breakfast, served with a poached egg that flows into the pasta and bacon rashers shattered at the table with a hammer. In short, think of dishes made so that part of what you enjoy about them is that their savour reminds you both of what they are and what they are not. Modernist dishes play with savour; they interact with, but do not instantiate classic recipes. Such dishes have secondary attractors —points of cognitive focus on savour that are motivated by culturally learned expectations.

It is therefore not necessary to invoke non-savour related properties to understand how the reverse spherical olive is art. It may be a hybrid artwork, as Liao and Meskin suggest —that is, it may incorporate elements over and above savour— but it is still appreciated for the secondary attractions of its savour.

11. *Concluding Puzzle: Is Cuisine Limited in Its Artistic Possibilities?*

I'll conclude by noting an oddity of food. In most art, the secondary attractors dominate. The Colonel Bogey March is a catchy tune, but the major part of its attraction comes from the cultural superstructure it has accumulated. Rothko's colours are emotionally engaging, but that's not all of his appeal: again, he relies on his audience appreciating how the pictorial conventions of Western art are violated. These works rest on secondary attractors; all art does. Indeed, in some art, the secondary attractors drown out the primary ones. Serialist music is an example: often, its primary attraction is low, but its appeal increases when followed with a score to verify its construction. Many experimental performance-art and novels are similar: they are not written to hold the attention of the naïve consumer, or even for her enjoyment.

Seemingly cuisine is different in this respect. For it seems that it *cannot* let secondary attractors dominate. However transgressive modernist cuisine may be, it must still be delicious.²⁹ Granted deliciousness can be an acquired taste, but it seems paradoxical for a

²⁹ Paloma Atencia objects (in editorial correspondence) that in the nineteenth century, people might have taken an analogous attitude to painting or music: "but it must still be beautiful". My response is that art has outgrown this, but it's doubtful cuisine will or can.

gourmet to say: “That tastes bad —or insipid— but it’s great culinary art.” In this respect, cuisine is something like erotic art: if it does not viscerally arouse, it does not qualify to be included in the genre.

Why is this? Here is a suggestion. (Here I am indebted to Carolyn Korsmeyer for illuminating correspondence.) Perhaps, the target of our cognitive focus on cuisine is second order. We appreciate not just the savour, but the enjoyment of savour —the features of savour we focus on in appreciation of cuisine is the delight it produces. We focus on painting through vision; we focus on music through audition. But we don’t necessarily focus on either through perceptual affect. Arguably, cuisine is different. The audience is invited to focus on the cultural conventions by which positive gustatory affect is achieved. The central idea is not: “Contemplate how this savour plays with cultural conventions”, but rather: “Contemplate how this savour plays with cultural conventions for making this dish delicious”. If this is an appropriate way of thinking about cuisine as art, it is possible to understand why cuisine without gustatory enjoyment is a bit like painting would be to the congenitally blind or music to the tone-deaf.

Is this a limitation on the artistic ambitions of chefs? Does it prove that cuisine is “low” art? This is a question for deeper discussion on another occasion. For now, let me rest with the observation that as far as contemporary philosophy goes, the positive claims of culinary art have mostly been overlooked.³⁰

REFERENCES

- Auvray, Malika and Charles Spence, 2008, “The Multisensory Perception of Flavour”, in *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 1016–1031.
- Ayora-Diaz, Steffan Igor, 2005, “The Taste of Yucatecan Food: Negotiating Authenticity”, in C. Korsmeyer (ed.), *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, Bloomsbury, New York, pp. 346–353.
- Bartoshuk, Linda and Valerie Duffy, 1998, “Chemical Senses”, in G. Greenburg and M. M. Haraway (eds.), *Comparative Psychology: A Handbook*, Garland, New York, pp. 25–33.
- Carroll, Noël, 2000, “Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 40, no. 2, April, pp. 191–208.
- Cohen, Jonathan, 2013, “On the Limitations of Blind Tasting”, *World of Fine Wine*, vol. 41, September, pp. 74–81.

³⁰ I am very grateful to the editors, Paloma Atencia and Aaron Meskin, as well as to Jonathan Cohen, Keren Gorodeisky, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Bence Nanay, Barry Smith, and Matthew Strohl for discussion of a number of points.

- Crane, Tim, 2007, “Wine as an Aesthetic Object”, in Barry Smith (ed.), *Questions of Taste*, Signal Books, Oxford, pp. 141–156.
- Cunningham, John M. and Nathan Myrthvold, 2019, “Ferran Adrià: Catalan Chef”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, downloaded from <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ferran-Adria>> [accessed: 01/02/2020]
- Iseminger, Gary, 2005, “The Aesthetic State of Mind”, in M. Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Korsmeyer, Carolyn, 2012, “Ethical Gourmandism”, in D.M. Kaplan (ed.), *The Philosophy of Food*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 87–102.
- , 1999, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, New York.
- Levinson, Jerrold, 2016, *Aesthetic Pursuits: Essays in the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Liao, Sam and Aaron Meskin, 2018, “Morality and Aesthetics of Food”, in A. Barnhill, M. Budolfson, and T. Doggett (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 658–680.
- Lopes, Dominic MacIver, 2019, “Feeling for Freedom: K.C. Bhattacharyya on *Rasa*”, in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 59, no. 4, October, pp. 465–477.
- Matthen, Mohan, 2020, “Art Markets Emerging: An Approach to Evaluative Diversity in Art”, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 78, no. 3, Summer, pp. 303–318.
- , 2018, “New Prospects for Aesthetic Hedonism”, in J. McMahon (ed.), *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment: Pleasure, Reflection and Accountability*, Routledge, London, pp. 13–33.
- , 2017, “The Pleasure of Art”, in *Australasian Philosophical Review*, vol. 1, pp. 6–28.
- , 2016, “Effort and Displeasure in People Who Are Hard of Hearing”, in *Ear and Hearing*, vol. 37, supp. 1, pp. 28S–34S.
- , 2015, “Play, Skill, and the Origins of Perceptual Art”, in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 55, no. 2, April, pp. 173–197.
- Pollock, Sheldon, 2016, “Introduction: An Intellectual History of *Rasa*”, in Pollock (ed.), *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 1–46.
- Sahni, Julie, 1980, *Classic Indian Cooking*, William Morrow, New York.
- Smith, Barry C., 2015, “The Chemical Senses”, in M. Matthen (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Perception*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 314–352.
- , 2014, “Wine”, in M. Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Spence, Charles, Malika Auvray, and Barry Smith, 2014, “Confusing Tastes and Flavours”, in D. Stokes, S. Biggs, and M. and Matthen (eds.), *Perception and Its Modalities*, Oxford University Press, New York.

- Strohl, Matthew, 2019, “On Culinary Authenticity”, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 77, no. 2, Spring, pp. 157–167.
- Todd, Cain, 2014, *The Philosophy of Wine: A Case of Truth, Beauty, and Intoxication*, Routledge, London.
- Walton, K., 1970, “Categories of Art”, in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 334–367.

Received: March 1, 2020; revised: December 8, 2020; accepted: January 4, 2021.