

Can Unmodified Food be Culinary Art?

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You are sitting in Chez Panisse, Alice Waters' acclaimed restaurant in Berkeley, California. After an extensively prepared, multi-course meal, out comes the dessert course: an unmodified but perfectly juicy, fresh peach. Many chefs serve such unmodified or barely-modified foods with the intention that they count as culinary art. This paper takes up the question of whether unmodified foods, served in the relevant institutional settings, can count as culinary art.¹

Here's the plan. In section 1, I propose and discuss the idea that at least some food counts as culinary art. Along the way, I address some underattended-to questions about the nature of culinary art more generally, and I reveal some of its distinguishing features. In section 2, I analyze what it is for a food to be unmodified, and distinguish modification from several nearby concepts such as preparation and selection. I use sashimi as a case study for these categories. I compare and contrast the case of unmodified food to Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917), highlighting relevant similarities between the cases. In Section 3, I propose that there is a distinctive form of aesthetic trust involved in formal culinary settings, and it plays a central role in many instances of culinary art. Culinary institutions summon aesthetic trust, which helps to explain why a dish of unmodified food served in an appropriate institutional setting can count as culinary art.

1. Culinary Art

My argument will depend on the premise that food can be art. *Culinary art*, roughly, art composed of food with taste as the primary sensory modality,² is an underexplored topic in philosophical aesthetics and philosophy of art.³ I cannot do justice

¹ Plakias (2018, p. 45) also discusses the idea of unmodified food as culinary art in passing.

² Much culinary art has more than one sensory modality, including smell and vision. Though my discussion will focus on taste, these other aspects of food arguably contribute to culinary artistic status.

³ Exceptions include Plakias (2018), Kaplan (2012), Furrow (2016), Sweeney (2017), Andina and Barbero (2018) and Telfer (1996).

to the entire topic of culinary art here. But I will propose that culinary art is in fact a form of art, by way of drawing illuminating parallels between culinary art and other forms of art. Ontological questions about the nature of visual art objects have fruitful parallels in culinary art. Just as we might ask what makes a particular object count as an art object, we might ask what makes a certain food or grouping of foods count as culinary art.

Lest one doubt that there can be culinary art (in the strongest possible sense of “art”), consider that aesthetic values of visual art have direct analogues in culinary art. Just as we might ask what makes a certain piece of visual art beautiful, and in what beauty consists, we might ask what makes a culinary experience gustatorily valuable, and in what gustatory value consists. Just as a quality painting has aesthetic values such as balance, complexity, unity, and harmony, an artful meal or dish can possess the same aesthetic values.

A meal can be a vehicle for artistic intention. Just as a visual artist intends to portray a scene with a particular feeling, mood, or memory, a chef might intend to portray a particular feeling, mood, or memory in her food. As Michelangelo intended to portray David’s strength and determination, a chef might intend to portray cheerfulness or aggression in a particular dish. Chefs intend certain combinations of flavors to be gustatorily aggressive like visual artists intend combinations of colors to be visually aggressive: a dish of house-cured salami and mustard is a forceful set of flavors like Rothko’s red and black “Composition” (1959) is visually forceful. A scene from Monet’s waterlilies can be serene just as a particular combination of flavors such as lavender and vanilla can be calming and delicate. And a painting can be composed in faded tones in order to evoke memory just as a dish can be composed to evoke the idea of familiar childhood foods. (“Elevated comfort cooking”, the tradition of elaborate restaurant-created versions of American home-served classics like grilled cheese and Sunday casserole, is a ubiquitous example of the focus on nostalgic culinary memory.)⁴

As visual art has representational power, food also has representational power. The Impossible Burger, a vegan burger made out of genetically modified soy, gustatorily represents cow-derived burger meat; sesame is sometimes used in dishes to gustatorily represent the taste of peanut. With both visual and culinary art, representation runs the

⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/cutting-edge-chefs-serve-food-tells-story-249512>

gamut from direct to indirect. Van Gogh's self-portrait impressionistically represents his visage but doesn't exactly capture it; the Impossible Burger represents real meat, but doesn't precisely duplicate it. A famous dessert at Le Bernardin called "Deconstructed Pineapple" consists of a hollowed-out real pineapple, impressively reconstituted as three different flavor profiles of the original pineapple. Like Van Gogh's self-portrait and other impressionistic art, the artfulness lies in the difference between the representation and reality.⁵

Culinary art, like visual art, can also be symbolic: a common offering in Australian restaurants is an attempt at the American burger and fries (so labeled and explicitly conceived), intended not just to mimic the original version, but to represent American flavors, values, and generous quantities. Dishes and meals often symbolize an entire food culture, tradition, and history, like Rome's famous *cacio e pepe*. And there are meal *homages* to other famous meals, like NeXT chef Grant Achatz' homages to famous dishes from French Laundry and El Bulli.⁶

Culinary art, like visual art, is also open to interpretation. As we sometimes sense that there is a *point* to a piece of visual art, but we cannot immediately discern what it is, we sometimes sense that there is a point to a certain dish, and are charged with its interpretation. As we are left to decipher the Mona Lisa's mysterious expression, for example, we are sometimes charged with interpreting a creatively composed combination of flavors, like chef Janos Wilder's chocolate jalapeño ice cream. Food, like visual art, can be a conceptual challenge.

Some art works, particularly musical works, are repeatable. Generally, meals are also repeatable art works: prominent chefs frequently serve different tokens of the same type of meal. Recipes are to meals like orchestral compositions are to performed symphonies.⁷ Nonrepeatable culinary art works do exist, however: arguably, pop-up meal collaborations and one-off creative culinary experiments amount to nonrepeatable culinary art.

⁵ Whether these examples count as representation rather than, e.g., mere reference or resemblance is a matter of debate. Thanks to two referees for drawing my attention to this point. See Korsmeyer (2002, pp. 128-131) for the view that food can be referential via property exemplification.

⁶ NeXT, French Laundry, El Bulli, and Le Barnardin are prominent, widely acclaimed contemporary restaurants to which I will periodically refer throughout the paper.

⁷ For a theory of recipes, see Borghini (2015).

Some works of visual art are individually complete, whereas others are to be evaluated in the context of an entire show or series. Similarly, some individual dishes are considered complete works by chefs, whereas others work in the medium of the full twelve-course meal. Though I intend my foregoing discussion to apply to instances of unmodified food served in a particular dish, some of my remarks will apply to instances of unmodified food served in the context of a full meal.

Both visual and culinary art stem from a process of artistic labor and creation. Visual artists paint and sculpt; chefs prepare a recipe or a menu, prepare the ingredients, and cook. The process of artistic creation distinguishes art from naturally occurring visual and culinary beauty, like a beautiful mountain vista or a delicious wild berry. Consumption of art by viewers or eaters also plays a central role in establishing status as an art object.

Culinary art is subject to what Wollheim (1980, p. 43) called the *bricoleur problem*: “why certain apparently arbitrarily identified stuffs or processes should be the vehicles of art”, while others are not. Most theories of art draw a distinction between a scribble drawn by a toddler displayed on Dad’s refrigerator and a scribble drawn by a major artist displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Similarly, a theory of culinary art might draw a distinction between a grilled cheese sandwich prepared for a quick take-away lunch and a grilled cheese sandwich served as the fourth movement of a multicourse high-concept meal at Alinea.⁸ As museums and marketplaces play a role in influencing what counts as art and particularly as “high art”, restaurants and culinary marketplaces play a role in influencing what counts as high culinary art.⁹

This list of parallels is not exhaustive. Where we look for parallels between culinary art and other forms of art, we will find them. At the very least, the numerous parallels between culinary art and other well-established forms of art give culinary art a seat at the table (as it were): some food can be art.

Now, assuming that food can count as art, it is natural to wonder where the boundaries are between artistic and non-artistic food objects. It cannot be the case that

⁸ For further discussion of this problem, see Lopes (2014).

⁹ Low concept culinary art, including well-executed food served from food trucks, also deserves consideration as a form of culinary art.

everything we eat counts as culinary art, from our daily multivitamins to our hastily-consumed packaged granola bars. I turn now to a specific question about such boundaries: whether unmodified food, such as the perfectly juicy peach, can count as culinary art. Just as we might wonder whether and why an otherwise unmodified object placed in a renowned museum counts as art (“Hey, I could have done that!”), we might also wonder whether and why an unmodified food object is a candidate for culinary art.

The investigation will reveal interesting insights into the nature of culinary art more generally. I will suggest that, along with the distinguishing features in the previous discussion, culinary art often involves a complex interplay between the artistic intentions of the chef, the attitudes of the eaters, and the influence of the culinary institutions. Such a view accords with our intuitions about the boundaries between culinary art and non-art.

2. Unmodified Food

To begin, it will be helpful to understand what sort of food counts as unmodified. I take *modification* to involve changing food with the purpose of altering or enhancing its flavor, smell, or texture. Heating and all forms of cooking (including braising, roasting, frying, grilling, steaming, and sous vide treatment) count as modification. The addition of spices or flavors counts as modification, as does curing or pickling. Combining foods with other foods counts as modification, as when a fresh fruit salad is composed by chopping various fruits together.

Modification is different than *preparation*. Preparation includes slicing, cutting, dividing, or washing. Unmodified food might nonetheless be prepared, as in some cases involving uncooked fish and meat (frozen for food safety reasons, then sliced), fresh fruit (washed), or fresh vegetables (chopped).

Modification is also different than *selection*. A chef might carefully source and select perfectly juicy raspberries as the crowning grace of a meal. Or she might select the perfect raw fish directly from a seafood market, deciding that it among all the fresh fish will produce the best flavor. Selecting a fresh fruit or vegetable at exactly the right time of ripening, or the perfect fresh fish from a market, are both skills of culinary artistic discernment. But they do not count as canonical physical modification. (Both preparation and selection, I will suggest, do contribute to the aesthetic values of a particular dish or

meal.)

For the purposes of this investigation, creation counts as a form of modification. Many chefs grow, and thus create, their own vegetables and fruit. The food resulting from this labor does not count as unmodified, since a chef might manipulate conditions in order to change the taste of the vegetables and fruit. (That a food is created by a chef does not detract at all from its artistic merit—quite the contrary—but it does put these instances out of the domain of my central question of interest.) Food selected from a carefully chosen farmer, however, does count as unmodified: the chef neither creates it nor changes it, but merely sources and selects it.

The distinction between unmodified and modified food is best understood as an intuitive distinction rather than a stable metaphysical one, for several reasons. First, there is a difference in significance between sorts of changes in temperature: intuitively, heating counts as modification whereas freezing counts as mere preparation or preservation. Second, there are incidental causal changes in food preparation (loss of particles, demoiurization, and so on) that do not generally count as intentional, substantive modification. Incidental changes might nonetheless be intentional, as when a chef leaves cheese out of the fridge for a certain amount of time in order to achieve the desired softness, letting natural environmental factors do the job of modification for her.

Third, artistic intention plays a key intuitive role in what counts as modified. Here I will remain as neutral as possible on how big a role artistic intention plays in categorizing a particular culinary intervention as modification, because I do not think the role is straightforward. One might be tempted by the simple view: “if the chef intends to influence the taste of the food by x-ing, then x counts as modification, whereas if she does not intend to influence the food by x-ing, then x does not count as modification.” But a perfectly juicy peach can be imbued with artistic intent and meaning without being physically modified, and a heavily manipulated dish might not be the product of careful artistic intention. Artistic intention is not sufficient for a particular activity to count as modification, though it is clearly important to the concept of culinary art more generally.

Fourth, some preparation counts as modification, if the preparation is intended to alter the flavor. Sashimi, a category of food that I take to encompass fresh raw fish, crustaceans, and shellfish served in a variety of culinary settings, is a paradigm case of

this overlap in categories. One might think that sashimi counts as an unmodified food: it is neither heated nor cooked. No spices are added to it for the purpose of adjusting its flavor. It is not combined with other food for a combination of flavors. And it is not substantively changed from its original form before being served.

But sashimi is carefully and artfully prepared insofar as it is sliced and served in ways conducive to bringing out its texture and taste. In serious culinary settings, it is also served at exactly the right temperature in order to manipulate its flavor. Fresh fish is carefully selected for the potential flavor it will produce when sliced as sashimi. On the skills of selection and preparation required for serving high-quality sashimi, sushi chef Kaz Matsune writes:

“Each fish tastes different. Male salmon tastes different from female salmon. [...] Generally speaking, tuna tastes good when cut thick around 1cm-2cm or 1/2-1 inch for sashimi . When cut into paper thin, tuna loses its flavor. However when it comes to Toro/Tuna Belly, you need to cut it thin due to its fat content. If you cut Toro into 2cm thickness, it may be too overwhelming, thus killing the delicate flavor the belly meat has.

[...] [How] you cut determines how the sashimi tastes. You need to be able to determine just by looking at the fish. This takes years of experience - looking at fish every day for many years. Let's just say even if you mastered sashimi knife skills but you know nothing about fish, then you are unable to make the great tasting sashimi because you have no idea how to slice it for great taste.”¹⁰

Paradigmatically unmodified food, in contrast, is not sliced, cut, or changed in order to alter its taste.

Fifth, some selection might also count as modification. Consider a chef who places one raspberry with four cranberries rather than four cranberries with one raspberry. (Suppose that she prefers the dessert to be tart rather than sweet, and uses the

¹⁰ <https://www.quora.com/Does-a-sashimi-chef-really-need-that-much-skill-Pure-sashimi-is-just-nicely-cut-fresh-fish-The-fresher-the-fish-the-better-the-taste-So-what-exactly-is-the-top-sushi-chef-in-the-world-really-doing>

contrast between the berry flavors to achieve this effect.) In selecting one balance of berries over another, the chef intentionally modifies the overall taste of the dish, as well as the gustatory contrast between the berries. Even though the chef merely chooses the combination of berries, this sort of selection meets some criteria for modification, since it is performed with the goal of manipulating the taste of the dish.

Even if the distinction between unmodified and modified food is largely intuitive, it is a useful framework for understanding the role of physical intervention in the creation of culinary art. It is fruitful, for example, to view chef-composed dishes as existing on a continuum from unmodified to modified, with the untouched peach on one end and a highly manipulated *coq au vin* on the other. This framework can help us to understand why we might count both dishes as culinary art, despite their differences. I turn now to this topic.

3. Unmodified Food as Culinary Art

Thus far, I have highlighted the parallels between culinary art and other forms of art, and discussed what counts as unmodified food. In order to bring these threads together—to begin exploring the circumstances under which unmodified food can count as culinary art—it will be helpful to have a general idea of the distinguishing features of culinary art more generally. Instances of culinary art, I will suggest, generally involve a complex interplay between the artistic intentions of the chef, the attitude of the eater, and the influence of culinary artistic culture. Since some unmodified foods involve these aspects as well, they can count as culinary art.

Reconsider the perfectly juicy peach served at the end of a long, well-thought-out restaurant meal. Note that the peach has many of the hallmarks of art noted in section 1. A peach can have aesthetic values like complexity and balance. A peach can be a vehicle for sophisticated culinary artistic intention: it might serve as a fresh palate-cleanser after a particularly heavy or spicy dish, or might have intrinsic qualities that the chef wishes to share with the consumer. It can have representational and symbolic power, as when it is used in a seasonally-themed meal to represent the freshness of spring. A peach can be a product of artistic labor and skill, as when a chef chooses one at precisely the right stage

of freshness to serve. And a fresh peach can be served in formal contexts such as restaurants, and thus be recognized by the culinary marketplace as an object worthy of artistic praise.

Culinary art often involves a chef who wishes to impart a particular sort of culinary experience to an eater.¹¹ While this is paradigmatically done through complex combinations of foods and flavors, it can also presumably be done through a single piece of unmodified food. Combining or changing food isn't necessary for imparting sophisticated artistic intention. Sometimes a chef simply wishes to call attention to certain aspects of the food that might otherwise go unnoticed.¹² Alice Waters serves the peach for dessert at Chez Panisse because she takes it to be “perfect and impossible to improve upon”.¹³

Artistic intention alone cannot be sufficient for creating culinary art, however. If the artistic intentions of the chef are enough to create culinary art, the ontological powers of the chef are too great. As Zimmerman (2002) notes about such a theory of visual art:

“Baker thinks we sometimes bring things into existence by thinking about them — at least, this follows from her view if objects can become artifacts (tools and works of art and monuments, for instance) simply by our thinking of them as such. A piece of conveniently shaped driftwood becomes a coffee table by being brushed off and brought into the house, a urinal becomes a sculpture when hung on a wall in a museum and given a title ... But do we really believe that anything new comes into existence when we do such things?” (2002, p. 333)

If mere artistic intention were enough to create art, then an artist could create a piece of art merely by thinking certain thoughts about it. Similarly with culinary art: if artistic

¹¹ Barbero (2018) holds that food can be a “semantic vehicle” for a chef. In the case of a well-created Bloody Mary, for example, the drink functions “as a vehicle for the mental representations of the person making the Bloody Mary and for the appreciation of those who drink it.” (p. 358)

¹² For more relevant discussion of artistic intent, see Irvin’s (2005) discussion of artistic sanctions. Sanctions, roughly, are acts and communications by the artist that are intended to draw attention to features of the work. Sanctions can be part of the process of creation, or they can be extra-procedural (e.g. discussing the work in an interview or giving the work a title.) According to Irvin, sanctions are to be taken into consideration in the interpretation of artwork.

¹³ <https://www.washingtonian.com/2012/01/31/a-qa-with-alice-waters/>

intentions were enough to change a piece food from non-art to art, then many more things would count as culinary art than are intuitively so.¹⁴

In addition to the artist's intentions, art paradigmatically involves interaction between artist and viewer. One distinguishing feature of art is that it is often interpreted as such by the viewer. In a museum, the viewer interprets the paintings, but not the lit up exit sign, as art. When one enters a museum, one is primed to view certain objects as art in addition to viewing them as mere objects. This propensity to view certain objects as art upon entering a museum points to a more general phenomenon: *aesthetic trust*.

Trust engenders a type of hopeful expectation about a particular aesthetic situation. As Jones writes of trust more generally, "Trust is optimism about the goodwill and competence of another." (1996, p. 7) Aesthetic trust is a positive attitude borne from an artistic consumer to a particular artistic experience that disposes her to see particular objects *as* art. Trust also involves the belief that thought and sophistication have gone into the creation of a particular aesthetic experience. Examples of aesthetic trust abound across aesthetic categories. We are often inclined to view the objects we see in museums as art. We are inclined to view the music we hear at a concert as aural art. And we are disposed to identify perfume as a kind of olfactory art. Viewing something as art produces an inclination to give it a close sort of aesthetic attention—to be open to its aesthetic qualities, and to more closely and thoughtfully examine them than we otherwise might.

There is a distinctive form of aesthetic trust adopted by those who eat in certain formal culinary settings. Trust involves a hopeful expectation had by an eater, directed towards a particular culinary experience. The attitude is based on optimism about the experience that the food will generate, and a disposition to attend to food in a particularly close way. In the case of the peach at Chez Panisse, one is inclined to pay particularly close attention to the flavors and subtleties of the fruit *because* one believes the chef is

¹⁴ There is a background issue about the metaphysics of art objects to which I cannot do justice to in this paper: what metaphysical relationship the art object bears to the material that makes it up. A special version of this issue arises for readymades and unmodified food. Evnine (2013) takes up the specific question of the ontology of readymades.

intending to communicate something through it.¹⁵ As the placement of a painting in the right sort of museum disposes it to be attended to as art, so, too does the serving of a dish in a restaurant dispose it to be evaluated and attended to as a form of culinary art. When one enters a restaurant, one places a certain amount of trust in the chef's vision, and the culinary experience resulting from that vision. One is inclined to treat the peach as culinary art, I suggest, because one has a sort of artistic faith in the chef and in the restaurant.¹⁶ Aesthetic trust also encompasses a kind of interpretive charity about what a chef is trying to accomplish. The presence or absence of aesthetic trust helps to explain why food served in restaurants is often treated and attended-to differently than food served at book parties in private homes—even great food.¹⁷

Aesthetic trust does not create culinary art on its own. Aesthetic trust is neither necessary nor sufficient for a particular dish to count as art. A meal can be culinary art even with a distrustful eater. One can imagine a particularly grumpy, distrustful food critic with low expectations who is nonetheless blown away by an outstanding meal. A meal can fail to count as culinary art even with a trusting eater: trust can be violated by a particularly poor meal. Many foodies have had the unfortunate experience of paying for an expensive meal for which one has high expectations, only to be disappointed by the result. In these ways, culinary aesthetic trust mirrors other forms of misplaced aesthetic expectations, such as the dashed hopes after a poor musical concert, or the surprisingly beautiful and sophisticated sculpture created by the seven-year-old. Aesthetic expectations often exceed or fall short of expectations, but it is the presence of expectations that are the evidence of aesthetic trust in the first place.

¹⁵ My main example involves a prominent high-concept restaurant, but it need not: many eaters exhibit similar forms of aesthetic trust in diners, food trucks, and even Starbucks. The trust creates an expectation that what one is about to experience is the product of an artistic vision from some sort of culinary artist, whether that be a highly praised expert in molecular gastronomy, a long-serving chef at a greasy spoon diner, or a corporate scientist designing a highly replicable cup of coffee.

¹⁶ There are at least two possible *explananda* in the peach case: the aesthetic qualities of the peach itself, and the aesthetic qualities of the peach-in-relation-to-other-dishes, e.g., as a palate cleanser. My discussion of aesthetic trust is intended to target the former, though some of my remarks apply to the latter case as well.

¹⁷ Lopes (2014, p. 138-139) proposes a two-pronged approach to explain why some instances of artistic media count as art, while others do not. Particular kinds of art have different “medium profiles”, or processes by which objects are transformed into art objects via artistic intentions. Medium profiles have associated “appreciative practices”, or contexts that ground aesthetic norms and values ascribed to various artistic media.

Though aesthetic trust is neither necessary nor sufficient for culinary art, it plays an important role in the art/ non-art distinction. We have many excellent culinary experiences that do not, intuitively, count as art. The spot-hitting cold beer on a hot day, the juicy hamburger after avoiding meat for a stretch, and the (otherwise undistinguished) glass of wine with dinner are all extremely pleasurable gustatory experiences. But these sorts of experiences are not paradigmatically accompanied by the sort of careful attention that is the hallmark of aesthetic trust. Aesthetic trust is an attitude held in certain situations that disposes the eater to pay careful attention to the qualities of the experience and the artistic intention behind it, rather than just its pleasantness.

Aesthetic trust is explanatorily important because it helps distinguish unmodified food objects that count as art from those that do not. Think, for example, of all of the peaches growing on the tree that a farmer will eventually pluck in order to hand over to Alice Waters. At time t , they are on the tree. At time $t+1$, they are washed and placed on plates in order to be served to customers. At time $t+2$, the courses appear on tables in Chez Panisse. At what times do the peaches count as culinary art? Intuitively, not all of the times: they are not culinary art when they are on the tree. Nor are they culinary art, arguably, when they are simply sitting in the restaurant kitchen on plates ready to serve, after having been given the go-ahead by the chef. Rather, they become culinary art when they are served to customers who have culinary expectations about the food—when they are objects of culinary attention. The chef intends to convey artistic meaning through the food, and the customers expect to discern this meaning. Customers in Chez Panisse, for example, expect a particular sort of culinary experience backed by sophisticated artistic intention. They are primed to give the juicy peach a particular sort of aesthetic attention that they would not otherwise give fruit at home—even the very best fruit.

Now, what else makes the juicy peach at Chez Panisse different from a similarly perfect peach served in other settings? Suppose that a friend hosting a book group at her home dispenses some similarly perfect peaches as a mid-discussion snack. Not much, if anything, distinguishes the Chez Panisse peach from the book group peach. Their tastes and textures may be almost identical. Perhaps the book group host even procures the peach from the same farmer as the professional chef. Similarly with a perfect peach served as a sample at a farmer's market booth. Here, too, the peaches are not intrinsically

different.

Rather, extrinsic differences make the peaches importantly unlike each other. They are different *because* they are served in dissimilar culinary settings, each with different extrinsic relations and culinary expectations. There are the surface differences of the surroundings: the coarse formality of the restaurants, the waiters, and the chef's kitchen differ from the environs of the book discussion group or the farmer's market. There are the economic and transactional differences involving the peach: one pays for a restaurant meal, whereas one does not usually pay for a book group. There are institutional differences: a restaurant is a different sort of social entity than a book group. There are differences in quantity and type of media attention: Chez Panisse is bound to garner the attention of food critics, whereas book groups and farmer's market booths generally do not. A book group, a farmer's market booth, and a restaurant are all treated very differently by culinary marketplaces and food critics.

Exactly how much of a role culinary marketplaces and critics play in determining what counts as culinary art is an important question for our purposes. As museums and galleries play a large role in determining what conventionally counts as art, so, too, do chefs, professional restaurants, and food critics.

Defining their exact roles in the creation of culinary art, however, is tricky. Being served in a restaurant isn't a sufficient condition for being culinary art, since not every meal in a restaurant should count as such. An Egg McMuffin served in a run-of-the-mill McDonald's probably doesn't count as a work of culinary art. Nor does every dish or meal in a high-concept restaurant count as art, due to the possibility of failed art.¹⁸ Perhaps the otherwise extremely skilled sous chef burns the rice in a way that deviates from the head chef's intention for the dish, or the meal is flat-out disgusting. Or perhaps an avant garde restaurant chef serves human fecal matter on a plate, so labeled, so that no one can or will eat it. Culinary art requires more than being served in a restaurant: the surroundings do not alone make the art.

Nor is it the restaurant's existence *qua* restaurant that makes food count as art. One can imagine a famous restaurant that undergoes extensive flood damage, after which its chef decides to serve meals in an open-air preschool playground rather than waste the

¹⁸ For a theory of failed art, see Mag Uidher (2010).

food and squander the audience.¹⁹ Here, the intentions of the chef play a role in communicating culinary artistic content, and a more central role in demarcating the food as art. What counts as a restaurant is also not as straightforward as it seems. In 2015, a Columbia University undergraduate operated a one-table “restaurant” called Pith out of his dorm room, garnering widespread culinary acclaim. He denied that what he was doing counted as a restaurant.²⁰

Even if restaurants influence what counts as culinary art in many of the same ways that museums influence what counts as visual art, the boundaries of such influence are easily interrogated. A famous boundary-testing example is Duchamp’s (1917) “Fountain”, an unmodified²¹ mass-manufactured urinal chosen by Duchamp to be displayed in several prominent museums. As such, “Fountain” is widely considered to be one of the most influential visual art objects of the twentieth century. Obvious issues raised by Fountain include whether something becomes art just because it is displayed in a museum, the extent to which treatment by art critics plays a role in its being considered art, and how important artistic intent is to the meaning and interpretation of the final creation.

There are some key differences between “Fountain” and a chef’s juicy peach. “Fountain” involves an object that commonly elicits a reaction of repulsion or disgust, and Duchamp’s other “readymades” were similarly selected because they were not beautiful or pleasing. (“Aesthetic delectation is the danger to be avoided,” Duchamp claimed.) Consumption of a juicy peach, in contrast, is intended to be a gustatorily pleasant experience. Alice Waters presumably intended to draw our attention to the purity of the ingredient and the taste, whereas Duchamp did not intend to draw our attention to aesthetic purity of the urinal. Duchamp chose objects that were already ordinary artifacts presented as artworks, whereas Waters presented the peach as art from the outset.²² Duchamp is widely considered to have intended provocation with his choice of object to place in the exhibition, whereas a chef usually does not have such an ideological agenda

¹⁹ Korman (2019) argues that restaurants can exist without being constituted by anything.

²⁰ <https://www.grubstreet.com/2015/10/columbia-tasting-restaurant.html>

²¹ Here I set aside the fact that “Fountain” is slightly modified by the addition of the signature “R. Mutt 1917”.

²² Thanks to a referee for pointing out this difference.

behind a dish.

There are, of course, exceptions to the latter point: it has become quite trendy to push the bounds of what is paradigmatically edible within and across culinary cultures. Prominent Noma chef Rene Redzepi commonly serves live ants, mold, and moss in his dishes, for example. Alice Waters serves her peach partly because she wishes to prove a point about the gustatory bounty that nature has to offer without heavy modification and manipulation of flavors. But chefs generally do not intend a cooking ideology to supersede the gustatory pleasure of the meal. I do not know of any chef who wants her meal to be gross, even if she wants it to be very interesting or to push the consumer's gustatory boundaries. Even Rene Redzepi, the ant-and-mold-utilizing chef, takes his primary artistic goal to be the creation of deliciousness.²³

The similarities between “Fountain” and the juicy peach are also illuminating. Neither object is created by its artist, though each is selected by the artist as the final product. Both the urinal and the peach are functionally interchangeable with suitably similar copies. Any other similar urinal from the production line would have had nearly identical artistic influence; any other similarly juicy peach would have had the same culinary effect. Each is granted a sort of artistic credibility in virtue of its selection. Each provokes reflection about the fundamental nature of art more generally. On “Fountain”, an anonymous editorial commented:

“Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.’ (Anon., ‘The Richard Mutt Case’, *Blind Man*, New York, no.2, May 1917, p.5.)

Unmodified food and unmodified everyday art objects both call on us to consider why the particular work counts as art. In both cases, artistic intent, plus a particular sort of formal artistic setting, play roles in their apparent status as art objects. Chefs who serve unmodified food objects in formal restaurant settings imbue those objects with culinary

²³ <https://www.ft.com/content/5af296e4-df26-11e9-9743-db5a370481bc>

meaning in much the same way that Duchamp imbues the urinal with meaning.

It is not just each artist's intention that imbues the objects with meaning, however. In both cases, there is a wider social phenomenon at work in treating the object as art. Danto (1964) famously identified the network of critics, producers, marketers, distributors, and consumers of art as "the artworld". Roughly, the artworld is the artistic cultural milieu that creates social conventions which designate objects as art. Certain objects count as art at least partially in virtue of their belonging to the artworld. On this sort of view, part of what makes something an object of art is that it is treated as such by an artistic community. Theories of art and the history of art play a large role in what the artworld takes to be art. Dickie's (1969) expansion of the theory takes artistic institutions to be central to artistic status, with institutions conferring artistic status on objects worthy of artistic appreciation. An institutionalist view easily explains why Duchamp's urinal counts as art: it is treated as art by the relevant cultural institutions. Dickie wrote, "I am not claiming that Duchamp and friends invented the conferring of the status of art; they simply used an existing institutional device in an unusual way."²⁴

There is an equivalent view to be developed about culinary art. Call "the foodworld" the network of critics, producers, farmers, marketers, distributors, and consumers of food in formal culinary settings.²⁵ The foodworld clearly plays a significant role in what is to be considered culinary art. Institutions such as groups of food critics, culinary magazines, and more recently, social media, are influential in conferring culinary artistic status. The foodworld also connects and intertwines culinary culture to its own theory and history, so that they inform what counts as culinary art. According to an institutionalist theory of culinary art, what makes something culinary art is a matter of receiving attention from the right sort of institutions. A particular dish or food is culinary art because the right food critics say it is, or because it is served in the right sort of restaurant, or it has the right sort of foodie following, or some combination thereof. This view captures the extension of things considered to be culinary art by the foodworld, a sociological fact Skidelsky (2007) notes about visual art. There is a further question about

²⁴ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: an Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 33.

²⁵ Plakias (2014, p. 44) also discusses parallels between the foodworld and the artworld.

whether it is the correct metaphysical account of culinary art.

Institutionalist theories provide indispensable theoretical resources for accounting for differences between culinary art and non-art. In appealing to the explanatory power of culinary institutions in the art/ non-art distinction, one need not endorse all of the claims of institutionalism about art. If what we seek is a descriptive rather than a revisionary metaphysics of culinary art, the foodworld clearly plays some sort of key role in deciding what counts as art. The foodworld need not play the *only* role in this designation, but omitting the role of the foodworld would result in a loss of significant predictive and explanatory power with respect to the art/ non-art distinction. It is an intuitive data point, for example, that a bowl of berries served at home for a mid-afternoon snack is somehow different than a bowl of berries served as a palate-cleanser at El Bulli. Aesthetic trust explains some of these differences, but culinary institutions often play a central role in generating that trust in the first place.

What is most important for our purposes is that the foodworld clearly *does* treat a perfect peach served at an appropriate restaurant as art. The foodworld influences what counts as art in the case of the peach like the museum influences what counts as art in the case of the urinal. Even if normal consumers and food critics alike are induced to ask themselves why and whether the peach counts as culinary art, the discussion itself is an indication that the food is the subject of serious consideration as a form of art. The peach has the hallmarks of culinary art: it is a vehicle for artistic intention, it is the object of aesthetic trust of the eater in an appropriate culinary setting; and it is treated as art by the artworld. Similar examples of unmodified food will yield similar results.

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that unmodified food can, in some circumstances, count as culinary art. Culinary art, I have suggested, constitutes a robust category of art, and it has many parallels in canonical forms of visual art. Culinary art can be philosophically interrogated in similar ways. As Duchamp's readymades pose questions about the nature and boundaries of art, so, too, do instances of unmodified food served in the right culinary settings. The example of unmodified food teaches important lessons about the boundaries of culinary art more generally. Such boundaries are ripe for further

investigation.²⁶

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