

## **Creativity, Imagination, and the Culinary Arts**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter explores what it can mean to say that culinary products (*i.e.*, recipes and their outputs) are creative. It answers this question by distinguishing between three different kinds of creativity (idle, productive, and super-productive creativity) and two different kinds of creative domains, locked-in and expandable ones. It argues that culinary products can be creative in the three different ways just mentioned and that, accordingly, the creative domain constituted by the culinary arts turns out to be an expandable one.

### **Keywords**

Creativity, Culinary Arts, Kinds of Creativity, Creative Domains, Imagination, Gastronomy, Constitutive vs Adventitious Values, Ferran Adrià, René Redzepi.

### **Introduction**

Food is of course not a recent human obsession<sup>1</sup>. However, unless living cut off from civilization, one couldn't have failed to spot a significant cultural trend of the last decades: the establishment of the culinary arts as a major creative endeavor. In these most recent developments, the culinary arts have been represented as a central locus of creativity and great chefs as models of creativity benefitting from yet unknown levels of cultural credit for practitioners of the culinary arts, as epitomized in Netflix's hugely successful *Chef's Table* series<sup>2</sup>. In that respect, the culinary arts fit the general pattern of "creative ethos" characterizing

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<sup>1</sup> See, *e.g.*, Freedman 2019 for historical information about food and our relation to it.

<sup>2</sup> See Groszlik and Kyle 2022 for an analysis of the figure of the chef as a creative genius in *Chef's Table*.

contemporary culture described by Florida 2011 and Reckwitz 2017. World-class chefs such as René Redzepi, Massimo Bottura, or Ana Roš are celebrated as creative icons, and many recent books, TV shows, and documentaries have taken the topic as their focus<sup>3</sup>. In short, the culinary arts have become a central pillar of our contemporary creative culture, on par with the rest of the arts.

This development raises the question of what it can mean to be creative in the culinary arts? In considering this question, this chapter will deviate slightly from the standard handbook format. Because there isn't, at the moment, much philosophical literature on the topic<sup>4</sup>, the discussion will be more first-order than second-order: I will explore what it can mean to be creative in the culinary arts rather than what people might have said about the topic.

My strategy will be to articulate two sets of distinctions: a) a general threefold distinction between kinds of creativity (idle, productive, and super-productive creativity) and b) a two-fold general distinction between two kinds of creative domains (locked-in and expandable ones). These distinctions are inspired by creativity as displayed in the culinary domain and are particularly suited to account for it, but they should also have more general application and contribute to our understanding of creativity generally.

At different points in this chapter, I will use a fictional character as a rhetorical tool. I call them the Cultural Snob. The Cultural Snob need not be a grouchy ascetic who can't even be bothered by food. They might even be a bit of a foodie, though one that remains skeptical about the rise in cultural standing of the culinary arts. For them, the culinary arts constitute an important cultural phenomenon, though one that is severely restricted in its creative and expressive capacities compared to other, somewhat grander, arts. Hence, they conclude that

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<sup>3</sup> See, *e.g.*, Redzepi 2013a, Questlove 2016, Gordinier 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See Engisch 2020 for an earlier philosophical take on the issue and Questlove (2016), Horg and Lin (2019) and Stierand (2020) for non-philosophical literature.

creativity in the culinary domain cannot be that big of a deal<sup>5</sup>. Part of my aim will be to convince them that they are wrong.

The plan is the following. In the first section, I clarify some background issues about the culinary arts and their relation to creativity. In the following three sections, I introduce the notions of idle, productive, and super-productive creativity and apply them to case studies in the culinary arts. In the fifth section, I introduce the distinction between locked-in and expandable creative domains and characterize the culinary arts as an expandable creative domain. I close by offering some remarks about the relation between creativity in the culinary arts and imagination.

## **1. Arts, Art, and Creativity**

What does the expression “culinary arts” mean? One way to get entangled in that question is to focus on the traditional distinction between so-called “fine arts” and “useful arts” and to wonder where the culinary arts fit. Is cooking more like painting and sculpting or manufacturing chairs and tables? I contend that we would do better by staying away from such issues. Not only are there good reasons to deny that they rest on a sound conceptual basis (see, *e.g.*, Wolterstorff 2015), it is also unclear what the real benefit would be of attempting to place the culinary arts within this framework. As a result, I won’t be concerned with the distinction between fine and useful arts. Also, I won’t be concerned with whether creativity as displayed in the culinary arts could speak in favor of treating them as fine art.

Instead, by “culinary arts” I will understand a set of practices revolving around the making and serving of culinary items, that is, things that we can eat and drink. This covers the work of chefs, who invent and realize recipes, but also of, *e.g.*, bakers, winemakers,

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<sup>5</sup> Maybe they would find themselves in agreement with Roger Scruton in his discussion of the aesthetic dimension (or rather lack thereof) of wine (see Scruton 2009, Chap. 6). See Todd 2010 for a rebuttal of Scruton.

mixologists, and the like. And the issue I will be concerned with can be put as follows: How can we best conceive the different ways creativity can be displayed in the culinary arts?

One way to understand this question is as pertaining to creative processes as they occur in the culinary arts. Understood in that sense, the question concerns how creativity is brought about in the culinary domain. This is an issue that food psychologists and hospitality researchers have been interested in for an obvious reason: the culinary arts are a business within which creativity is conceived of as a tool to achieve economic success. Understanding better the creative processes behind culinary creativity could therefore be a source of revenue. For instance, food psychologists Jeou-Shyan Horg and Lin Lin write that,

The role of a chef has changed from a craftsman to a creative inventor who constantly thinks of improving the culinary quality through re-designing the restaurant's menu to appeal to the consumers. Creative dishes could attract more consumers, enhance competitiveness of the restaurant, and make the restaurant unique. (Horg and Lin 2017, 463)

In a similar vein, hospitality researcher Marc Stierand writes that,

a better understanding of culinary creativity is vital for the advancement of the hospitality and tourism industry that has long been considered a laggard with regards to creativity and innovation and is in urgent need of meaningful rejuvenation. (Stierand 2019, 296)

This chapter will take a different focus. I will have little to say about the process side of culinary creativity. This is excusable, at least in part, because the topic of creative processes

is covered in other chapters of this volume (see, *e.g.*, Introduction and Chapter 13), and, also, because I doubt that culinary creative processes raise specific enough philosophical issues that would deserve separate treatment.

Instead, my focus will be on how we should conceive of the *results* of creative processes in the culinary arts—what is standardly referred to as creative products. My reason for doing so is two-fold. On the one hand, misunderstanding how creativity can be displayed within a domain carries the risk of misunderstanding the domain itself. This is particularly true of the culinary arts and arguably part of the problem with the Cultural Snob we met above. On the other hand, there is a general lesson for creativity at large to be learned from understanding the relation between creativity and the culinary arts. As we shall see, the culinary arts nicely illustrate how creativity in a certain domain can be understood in a layered manner and how creativity can lead to profound changes within a certain domain. The final distinction I will offer between locked-in and expandable creative domains will play a key role in that respect.

My process toward reaching this goal will be a gradual affair. I want to start by looking in detail at what we might refer to as rather jocular instances of creativity. Looking at a cake that is visually indistinguishable from a bowling ball, one might say: “Look, this is a creative culinary item,” before using this judgment to confirm the prejudice that creativity displayed in the culinary arts can’t matter much. However, as we will see, things are more stratified and complicated than that.

## **2. Idle Creativity and the Culinary Arts**

### *2.1. Idle Creativity*

Throughout this chapter, I will assume a standard conception of creativity according to which something is creative only if it is novel and valuable (see Introduction for details). As a reminder, the notion of novelty at play is qualitative, such that for some  $x$  of kind  $K$  to be novel,

$x$  must be qualitatively distinct from all other  $K$ s. This notion of novelty can be made more or less absolute by varying the comparative class in question. My focus here will be on an absolute understanding of it, what Boden has called “historical creativity” (Boden 2010, 30). In addition, I will assume that this standard conception appeals to a weak notion of value, according to which for something to be valuable, it suffices that it is a valuable instance of its kind, whether or not it is valuable *tout court*. As a result, a certain tool might be creative even if it is only valuable as an instance of the kind of tool it is, and not valuable *tout court*<sup>6</sup>.

A recent, well-developed account of creativity along these standard lines has been offered by Paisley Livingston, who argues that,

Some  $\alpha$  is a creative action or achievement just in case  $\alpha$  manifests originality as an effective means to its end. (Livingston 2018, 121)

An important point about Livingston’s account is that he is explicitly not trying to define creativity but, rather, to *explicate* it. That is, he is not trying to give necessary and sufficient conditions that all cases of creativity must meet but, instead, to offer an account that spells out “a good thing to mean” (Livingston 2018, 108) by the term. Accordingly, there might be *bona fide* cases of creativity that his account might not be able to capture. One contender is what I will call cases of *idle creativity*.

Imagine two long wooden sticks used to fetch apples. Both are equally instrumentally valuable, *i.e.*, equally effective means to their end: fetching apples. Imagine further that one of these two sticks is also nicely carved and, moreover, the first of its kind to be so. A good case can be made in favor of the claim that this second stick, unlike the first one, counts as a creative apple-fetching stick. Indeed, being carved makes the stick not only novel, it also makes it

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of this point, see Gaut 2018.

valuable. However, since, by assumption, the two sticks are equally effective means to their ends, then we cannot use Livingston's explication of creativity to understand in what sense the carved stick is creative.

Here is why. To judge whether the end of an is realized more or less effectively, we must look at the kind of which that item is an instance<sup>7</sup>. In the case of apple-fetching sticks, this aim is to fetch apples. Therefore, being creative for an apple-fetching stick manifests originality as an effective means to fetch apples. But this is precisely what our carved apple-fetching stick does not. Yet, it is creative. I will now offer a supplement to Livingston's explication that can countenance that fact.

In order to describe the case more precisely, let me begin by introducing a distinction between two kinds of values things can bear: a) constitutive and b) adventitious values. A value  $V$  of an item  $i$  of kind  $K$  counts as a constitutive iff  $V$  is a value that bears on the evaluation of  $i$  qua  $K$ . On the other hand, a value  $V$  of an item  $i$  counts as adventitious iff  $V$  is a value that does not bear on the evaluation of  $i$  qua  $K$  (see, *e.g.*, Stecker 2019; Engisch 2022). In the case at hand, a constitutive value of an apple-fetching stick is one that bears on it as an apple-fetching stick. The kind "apple-fetching stick" being a purely instrumental one, its related constitutive values are the ones that make a stick good at fetching apples. Of course, such a stick can also bear other values than these instrumental ones, but these will count as merely adventitious<sup>8</sup>.

The idea is now the following. The carved apple-fetching stick is novel and valuable, but its value is adventitious, not constitutive. That is, being carved is a novel and valuable way to be for an apple-fetching stick, but not one that bears on the constitutive value of apple-

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, not all kinds would fit the job. The kind in question must be what Judith Jarvis Thomson calls a "goodness-fixing kind" (Thomson 2008, 21).

<sup>8</sup> Of course, one might also be tempted to describe the case as one where the carved stick gives rise to a new kind, carved apple-fetching sticks, for which aesthetic value is constitutive. But whether there is indeed such a kind would arguably depend on further factors, such as the coming to existence of a certain practice surrounding them. By assumption, this is not the case here.

fetching sticks, *i.e.*, their instrumental value. I will call this kind of creativity *idle creativity* and will define it as follows:

**(Idle Creativity)** Some  $x$  of kind  $K$  displays idle creativity iff  $x$  is a qualitatively novel  $K$  that is adventitiously valuable (and meets other suitable conditions for creativity).

The label of “idle creativity” is supposed to reflect two facts. First, items that display idle creativity are genuinely creative. Second, the creativity manifested by items that are idly creative doesn’t impinge on their constitutive value. As such, idle creativity can result in something being valuable, but not really in the way that, following Livingston, it should be valuable, *i.e.*, constitutively. For instance, carving an apple-fetching stick certainly did result in something creative. However, unlike other forms of creativity in the domain of apple-fetching sticks, it did not open an era of apple-fetching sticks better at their task.

### 1.2 *Idle Creativity in the Culinary Arts: Case Study 1*

The plot of the Netflix cooking competition show *Is It Cake?* is simple. Contestants have to reproduce ordinary objects in the form of a cake. Imagine hamburgers, bowling balls, watermelons, purses, and suitcases all constructed entirely out of cake and looking like their genuine counterparts. If a contestant fools a panel of judges, such that the judges can’t tell which is the cake and which is the real object, they win \$5000.

After my first encounter with the show, I was left with two conflicting intuitions. On the one hand, it was hard to deny that the cakes amounted to impressive creative displays of culinary abilities—something that should have pushed me to judge these cakes and their makers as displaying culinary creativity. On the other hand, it was hard to shake off the sentiment that such creative displays of culinary abilities, though fun, were also a bit phony (not to mention



wasteful and also mostly unappetizing)—something that should have pushed me in the direction of judging these cakes and their makers as failing to meet any sensible benchmark for culinary creativity.

One might attempt to resolve the conflict by relying on the idea that these cakes amount to creative display of culinary abilities by appealing to following plausible principle:

**(Creative Abilities Principle)** If some  $x$  of kind  $K$  amounts to a creative display of  $K$ -abilities, then  $x$  amounts to a valuable  $K$ .

In our case, if a culinary item (*i.e.*, a cake) results from the creative display of culinary abilities (*i.e.*, baking), then it amounts to a valuable culinary item (*i.e.*, a valuable cake). However, one problem with this reasoning is that it attempts to justify that the cakes are valuable as cakes by appealing to the idea that they amount to creative displays of culinary abilities. But one might suspect that this *presumes*, rather than establishes, that the cakes are valuable as cakes. Indeed, how could we judge the display of culinary abilities as creative (instead of, say, merely fun or resourceful) independently of their resulting in a creative culinary item? We need something else, *i.e.*, an independent account of the fact that the cake is valuable as cake.

Maybe support for this claim could be found in the obvious fact that these cakes are *bona fide* achievements, *i.e.*, they are, as Gwen Bradford puts, activities “comprised by a process and a product, where the process is difficult, and competently causes the product” (Bradford 2015, 25). Moreover, as Bradford further remarks, there is something intrinsically valuable in being able to competently cause a product through a difficult process (Bradford 2015, 92). The difficulty of the task and the competency manifested in completing it are

themselves a source of value, and this, one might think, could be the source of the value of the cakes as cakes.

The problem is that, as Bradford remarks, we cannot simply collapse the value derived from the process and the value of the product (Bradford 2015, Chap. 4). A task with a ridiculous aim could be difficult to complete and be competently completed, but its product might not be valuable. This answer, therefore, turns out to be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it reflects well our judgment that making these cakes is an impressive feat. On the other hand, as remarked by Bradford, since the value of the process is distinct from the value of the output, this does not allow us to attribute value to these cakes *as* cakes. We remain empty-handed.

Maybe a better strategy would be to look at some of the good-making features of these cakes. As should be obvious, their prime good-making feature is their ability to represent ordinary objects so well that they turn out to be deceitful. This is what, in the context of this show, makes the cakes good, and this is the feature that the culinary abilities creatively displayed strive to realize. But, and here is the rub, even though there is no denying that the creative display of culinary abilities allows the cakes to possess these good-making features, there are reasons to doubt that these features would make them good as cake. In other words, the Creative Abilities Principle turns out to be false.

All of this might lead us to resolve the tension mentioned above by judging the display of culinary abilities to be creative while refraining from attributing creativity to the cakes themselves. But this sounds rather infelicitous. After all, how could we distinguish between creative and non-creative displays of abilities without appealing to the outputs of these displays? I propose putting the whole confusion to rest by appealing to idle creativity. Yes, the cakes result from the display of creative abilities, and yes, the cakes themselves are creative outputs. However, this doesn't entail that they are thereby valuable as cakes. That is, they have features that make them valuable and cakes, without thereby making them valuable as cakes.

In support of this analysis, let me point out that Carolyn Korsmeyer has made a similar point in her seminal discussion of the artistic status of food. Commenting on what she calls “culinary stunt,” namely the making of realistic sculptures and fac-similes made of food to be served in lavish banquets by illustrious historical predecessors of the contestants of *Is It Cake?* such as Marie-Antoine Carême (1784-1833), she says that,

Admirable as feats such as Carême may be, their intricacy seems important chiefly as a culinary stunt, the rendering in sugar and flour and fish paste of what is customarily done with mortar and bricks and lumber. Without detracting from the amusement and wit of such pieces, and indeed some times their genuine commemorative Significance, we may say that the use of food for this kind of display seems at best derivative of the art forms it emulates—architecture, sculpture, and theater, as a rule. (Korsmeyer 1999, 126)

As she puts it, there is something derivative about such feats. That we use food for them is a contingent matter, a pure vehicle or medium to display abilities. As such, they don’t aim to realize creatively constitutive values of culinary items. This fact can be further emphasized by taking into consideration that, in a show like *Is It Cake?*, key decisions concerning the cakes, for instance, the way they look or taste, are taken not in the light of maximizing constitutive values of cakes such as, say, taste and nourishment, but, rather, adventitious values such as their ability to deceive in their representing ordinary objects.

Time to sum up. Watching a show like *Is It Cake?*, one might judge that the cakes realized by the contestants are creative. As should now be clear, I agree. However, this judgment should be qualified: they are creative only in one way things can be creative within a domain. That is, they display idle creativity. Does this mean that all creativity displayed in

the culinary domain is idle? Of course not. In the next two sections, I will focus on instances of creativity in the culinary arts concerned with constitutive, rather than adventitious, values of the culinary domain. In other words, I will focus on culinary creativity proper, *i.e.*, creativity that, in some sense or other, impinges on the constitutive values of the culinary domain.

## **2. Productive Creativity and the Culinary Arts**

### *2.1. Productive Creativity*

I contend that to understand culinary creativity properly, it is helpful to do two things. First, to distinguish between two general sub-kinds of creativity, productive and super-productive creativity, and second, to understand how culinary creativity can take either form. This section will be concerned with productive creativity and the next with super-productive creativity.

Let me start with the following abstract principle:

**(Productive Creativity)** Some  $x$  of kind  $K$  displays productive creativity iff  $x$  is novel and valuable in a standard sense for instances of the kind  $K$  (and meets other suitable conditions for creativity).

The basic idea of this principle is simple. Imagine two apple-fetching sticks again. The first is, again, a simple long stick of wood, a rudimentary but helpful tool. The second is a long stick of wood to which a mechanically controlled pair of thongs has been attached, the kind of apple-fetching stick known to any contemporary appleist. These two sticks share a same constitutive value: being good at fetching apples. In that sense, being good at fetching apples is a standard sense for apple-fetching sticks to be good. However, the second stick clearly “manifests originality as an effective means to its end,” as Livingston puts it. Or, as I prefer to put it, attaching mechanical thongs to the piece of wood resulted in an instance of productive

creativity: it gave rise to an apple-fetching stick that was novel and constitutively valuable in a way that is standard for instances of its kind, *i.e.*, being good at fetching apples.

The distinction between idle and productive creativity is quite natural—which doesn’t mean that it hasn’t been overlooked in the philosophical literature on creativity. One reason for this fact, I contend, is that productive creativity might be considered the standard form of creativity usually displayed and focused on. It amounts to what we might call the exploration or bettering of a specific domain, whether it is a technical one (*e.g.*, apple-fetching sticks, cancer treatments, or electric cars) or an artistic one. Indeed, in both cases, the idea is that each domain is governed by a constitutive value or set of constitutive values, and productive creativity involves these constitutive values being realized in novel ways—manifesting originality as an effective means to its end, as Livingston has it.

The notion of “exploration” just used might be reminiscent of Margaret Boden’s notion of “exploratory creativity” (Boden 2011, 33; see Introduction), and one might take it that we could do with Boden’s typology. However, let me point out that the distinction between productive and super-productive creativity I am sketching differs from Boden’s. Although, as we will see later, my notion of super-productive creativity bears affinities with her idea of a “transformation of conceptual spaces” (Boden 2010, 32), productive productivity overlaps but doesn’t align with her other notions. In particular, productive creativity can occur either via what she calls combination or exploration, as both can result in the bettering of a domain. That is, one can be productively creative either by “making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas” (Boden 2010, 30) or by exploring a conceptual space and discovering possibilities of that space that “hadn’t [been] glimpsed before” (Boden 2010, 33). One suggestion to see how her set of distinctions and mine relate to each other is to regard mine as being specifically concerned with the value criterion and as an attempt to provide a typology of creativity in terms of different ways to realize this criterion.

The notion of productive creativity introduced and its relation to Boden's standard typology clarified, let me now turn to its application to the culinary arts in the following subsection.

## *2.2. Productive Creativity in the Culinary Arts: Case Study 2*

Productive creativity is the standard form of culinary creativity, and we could give countless examples. I have chosen to keep things simple by focusing on an emblematic achievement of so-called Modernist Cuisine<sup>9</sup>: liquid-nitrogen ice cream. Ice cream has been produced for a very long time, as its origins dates back to at least 550 BC Persia<sup>10</sup>. Despite technical innovations, the standard method for making ice cream has remained broadly the same since then. Namely, raw ice, or a similar source of cold, is used to slowly freeze a custard. The process is a bit time-consuming, but it is full-proof and delivers excellent results.

However, in the 1980s, as so-called Modernist Cuisine was finding its way, chefs and food scientists teamed up to find new ways to produce all sorts of food, including ice cream. A long-standing innovation they came up with was replacing the standard method of making ice cream with a new one consisting of adding liquid nitrogen to the base mixture. Now a staple in every high-end cuisine, its use was first made popular by avant-garde chefs such as Heston Blumenthal<sup>11</sup>. Its results are impressive: ice cream made instantly in a fog of nitrogen.

Taken by itself, the time factor of the procedure verges on the gimmicky, as no one really needs ice cream to be made in an instant—a factor which, taken alone, would probably result in idle creativity. However, instantaneousness becomes crucial once we consider its effect on the texture of the ice cream. Indeed, a mixture that freezes instantaneously forms

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<sup>9</sup> About Modernist Cuisine, see Myhrvold, Young, and Bilet 2011, vol. 1 and Engisch 2020, section 3 for a rough and ready contextualization.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.kavehfarrokh.com/ancient-prehistory-651-a-d/achaemenids/the-unknown-origins-of-ice-cream-in-ancient-iran/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19870668>

much finer ice crystals which, in turn, result in ice cream with a much improved, almost silky, texture. And texture, certainly, figures among the features of an ice-cream that count as a good-making feature of it *qua* ice-cream. That is, it counts as one of its constitutive values or, at least, as one component of one of its constitutive values.

Nitrogen ice cream thus turned out to be a display of productive culinary creativity, one that impinges on a constitutive value of ice cream. Nitrogen-based ice cream is therefore valuable *as* ice cream. However, though standard, this form of culinary creativity might not be the only one, let alone the most significant for the culinary arts.

Indeed, our Cultural Snob would be right if culinary creativity amounted at most to bettering features of culinary items like texture. Conceived merely as such, culinary creativity would be a great source of hedonic value and an extensive source of variations thereof, but one that can't express much beyond that. In other words, in the culinary domain, there would be space for variations in ways to be valuable in a standard sense but not for new standards of value altogether. This would substantiate the contention that the culinary arts are minor ones. In the next section, I will challenge this assumption and argue in favor of the claim that creativity as displayed in the culinary arts can also be super-productive.

### **3. Super-Productivity and the Culinary Arts**

#### *3.1. Super-Productive Creativity*

Items that display productive creativity are novel and valuable, though their novelty doesn't extend to the way they are valuable. Even if it is true that having a silky texture is a novel and valuable feature of liquid-nitrogen ice cream, having such an improved texture is not a new way for a culinary item to be valuable. "Everything must change so that everything can stay the same," one might think is the motto of productive creativity.

However, sometimes creativity results in something more, where things are so novel that their novelty impinges on how instances of their kind can be valuable. This is the phenomenon I will refer to as “super-productive creativity”: displays of creativity where things are not only novel and valuable in a standard way, but novel and valuable in a new way. Here is the idea encapsulated in the form of an abstract principle:

**(Super-Productive Creativity)** Some  $x$  of kind  $K$  displays super-productive creativity iff  $x$  instantiates a new way for  $K$ s to be valuable (and meets other suitable conditions for creativity).

For instructive reasons that I will substantiate later in the chapter, I won’t be able to illustrate this third notion using a further round of apple-fetching sticks. I will therefore turn to the most worn-out example in philosophical aesthetics: Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*. The work, an upside-down urinal, was initially submitted (and accepted, though never exhibited) by Duchamp under the pseudonym of “R. Mutt” to the 1917 inaugural exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York.

There is no question that *Fountain* is a creative artwork. And if it is creative artwork, it is thereby valuable as an artwork. However, in what way is it valuable as an artwork? “How pleasant is its chaste simplicity of line and color!” writes Louise Norton of *Fountain* in *The Blind Man*, the New-York based art magazine co-edited by Duchamp in which a defense of the work was mounted after the decision of the Society of Independent Artists not to exhibit it (Norton 1917, 6<sup>12</sup>). But this, of course, is just more irony: what makes *Fountain* valuable as an artwork doesn’t reside in its aesthetic properties. Arthur Danto poignantly expresses this point:

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<sup>12</sup> [https://monoskop.org/images/6/6f/The\\_Blind\\_Man\\_2\\_May\\_1917.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/6/6f/The_Blind_Man_2_May_1917.pdf)



What would have provoked Duchamp to madness or murder, I should think, would be the sight of aesthetes mooning over the gleaming surfaces of the porcelain object he had manhandled into the exhibition space: “How like Kilimanjaro! How like the white radiance of Eternity! How Arctically sublime!” (Bitter laughter at the *Club des artistes*.) (Danto 1981: 94)

So, if the artistic value of *Fountain* doesn’t reside, not even the least bit, in its aesthetic properties, what makes it artistically valuable? The editorial of the already mentioned issue of the *Blindman*, attributed to Beatrice Wood, puts us on the way:

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not 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. (Wood 1917, 5).

What Wood seems to be after here is the idea that Duchamp’s artistic achievement must be understood as a conceptual one. He turned a most ordinary object into an artwork, thereby creating a new thought for that object, *i.e.*, “This is an artwork.” As a result, he opened up a new way for artworks to be valuable, *viz.*, to be conceptually interesting. Indeed, after all, what makes *Fountain* an artwork? This is the perennial question.

Therefore, *Fountain* doesn’t just display productive creativity; it displays super-productive creativity. Its specific way to be artistically valuable, *i.e.*, to be conceptually interesting, opened up a new way, now standard, for artworks to be valuable *as* artworks.

But is what is true of the domain of art also true of the culinary domain? That is, can super-productivity also occur in the culinary arts? To the surprise of some, maybe, the answer

here is positive. As I will argue, a good example of this fact is Modernist Cuisine and its aftermath.

### 3.3 *Super-Productive Creativity in the Culinary Arts: Case Study 3*

Humans have been eating and drinking forever. However, the culinary arts as we know them, *i.e.*, the practice of preparing and serving food in the context of public establishments, is a relatively recent one. As remarked by Elliott Shore,

People in the Western world have eaten away from home for centuries, but the restaurant as opposed to the inn, foodstand or other modest convenience or necessity, has existed for merely 250 years... It is only in the last fifty of those 250 years that we can start to speak of the move towards the phantasmagoric array of food, of atmosphere and of styles of service that have made the restaurant such a successful and ubiquitous feature of the modern culture of taste. (Shore 2019: 263)

Indeed, it is only with the wane of the *Ancien Régime* society and the advance of Bourgeois society that chefs found their way outside of private estates and inside public establishments. Much later, in the wake of the post-WWII economic successes of the Western world, restaurants became an element of mass culture. The result of this long process, in a nutshell, is a conception of the culinary arts that moved away from being either occasions of “modest convenience or necessity” or lavish banquets to become something completely different: an opportunity for a culinary experience. Let me label this process the Consolidation of the Culinary Arts—or just the Consolidation for short.

A first element of the Consolidation was the creation of a whole culinary culture, that is, a set of conventions and expectations that structure the culinary experience. We are so used

today to the notion of a restaurant as a place that offers a culinary experience rather than, as Shore puts it, “a place of local gathering or traveler’s refuge that also offers food” (Shore 2019, 264), that we tend to forget that our culinary culture is the result of a construction. As Shore puts it,

Certain facets of restaurant dining now seem so natural or automatic that it is worth noting that they are based on culturally and historically specific rules and expectations... Although these expectations might not explicitly occur to someone routinely dining in a restaurant, they are established characteristics that have defined the institution since it sprung to life fully formed in the 1760s in Paris. No such institution was available to the West before. (Shore 2019, 265)

A spirit of creativity steadily marked the culinary culture issued from the Consolidation. Whether we mention the pioneering innovations of Auguste Escoffier in codifying a modern conception of the culinary arts at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the advance of the Nouvelle Cuisine in France in the 1970s, or the emergence of fusion food in the 1980s, many have been at work to display productive creativity in the culinary arts. Namely, many have worked to maximize and diversify standard constitutive values of the culinary domain, particularly pleasure and nourishment<sup>13</sup>. However, at some point of the Consolidation, the culinary arts seem to have ended up in a situation very similar to the one art, according to Hegel and Danto, once found itself:

[Hegel] seems to have felt that there was a time art, all on its own, “yielded full satisfaction.” But then there came a time when it needed something other than itself to

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<sup>13</sup> See, *e.g.*, Myhrvold, Young, and Bilet 2011.

yield satisfaction, and that “not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is.” In brief, art gives rise to the question of its true identity, and when that happens, it has become the occasion of philosophy. (Danto 1992, 8)

This is the mark of Modernism and its different manifestations that, in various ways, questioned the very nature of art, culminating in artistic stunts like Duchamp’s *Fountain*. In the 1980s, something similar happened to the culinary arts under the pressure of Modernist Cuisine.

There are different ways to characterize Modernist Cuisine. On the one hand, one cannot escape a characterization in technical terms as Modernist Cuisine is well-known for having been inspired by, and having relied right from its beginnings on, a new set of techniques and ingredients taken from what is now called “food science” such as liquid nitrogen, gels, xanthan paste, sous-vide, and the like. The result of the application of these techniques has sometimes been referred to by practitioners, food critics and journalists as “molecular gastronomy,” reflecting the science-driven approach to cooking behind the Modernist Cuisine ethos and the science-like aspect of some of its results, such as edible fluorescent balls, foams of all kinds, and drops of gel.

As central as this technical description might be, the ideological core of modernist cuisine lies elsewhere: in the concepts that these technical elements serve. Indeed, these technical elements are at the service of a grander idea, which Myhrvold, Young, and Bilet refer to as “deconstruction” (Myhrvold, Young, and Bilet 2011, 37), but which I would rather dub the “self-reflective” enterprise of Modernist Cuisine. What I mean by this is to be understood chiefly in terms of the conventions and expectations resulting from the abovementioned Consolidation.

The core idea here is the following. As part of the Consolidation, a first iteration of the notion of culinary experience was forged: essentially, as a pleasant, unreflective experience

characterized, in its best cases, by instances of productive creativity. But we owe Modernist Chefs a second iteration of the notion of culinary experience that takes itself to be explicitly self-reflective. That is, a culinary experience that plays with, challenges, and reflects on some core expectations and conventions governing the culinary experience. As Myhrvold, Young, and Bilet put it, describing the work of Ferran Adrià, probably the most influential of the Modernist chefs:

Diners come to a meal with a tacit understanding of what is possible and familiar based on their previous dining experiences. The chef, at least in traditional cuisine, comes prepared to cater to diners' preconceptions. Adrià broke those constraints by creating novel foods that could not help but provoke a reaction, forcing diners to reassess their assumptions... It wasn't enough for the food to be delicious; it also had to elicit thoughts and feelings. (Myhrvold, Young, and Bilet 2011, 37)

We could give many examples of Adrià's practice as described in this quote. Still, one example serves the purpose particularly well: his recipe for liquid chicken served with solid sauce<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, it seems essential to properly assess this recipe that we consider non-sensory, cognitive elements, such as surprise or satire. As a result, such recipes are not just novel and valuable in a standard way for recipes to be, *e.g.*, by being conducive to nourishment and sensory pleasure. In addition, they are also valuable in a novel way for recipes to be so. In that respect, Modernist chefs such as Adrià have displayed super-productive creativity in the culinary arts, extending the realm of culinary value beyond the sensory and advocating a conception of culinary value that integrates cognitive elements.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Also known as *Two Ways of Presenting Chicken Curry* (1995). See photo here:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/two-ways-of-presenting-chicken-curry/jQE0rjMOPapaIA?hl=en>

<sup>15</sup> See Englisch 2020 for more details on this point and its application on cases beyond Modernist Cuisine. See also Englisch 2022 for a detailed discussion of the notion of culinary value.

#### 4. Two Kinds of Creative Domains

The distinction between productive and super-productive creativity brings to light a further distinction between two kinds of creative domains, expandable and locked-in ones. Expandable creative domains are ones where super-productive creativity is possible: they can countenance new ways of being valuable. In contrast, locked-in ones can only countenance new ways to realize already known ways to be valuable, not new ways of being valuable altogether.

Typical creative domains that turn out to be locked-in are purely instrumental ones, *i.e.*, domains that only know instrumental values as constitutive ones. This is why I couldn't offer above a third round of examples based on apple-fetching sticks. Apple-fetching sticks only possess being good at fetching apples as a constitutive value. As a result, the maximal form of creativity that the domain of apple-fetching sticks can display is productive creativity: finding novel ways to make them better at fetching apples. But we shouldn't equate locked-in domains with purely instrumental ones. Purely hedonic domains might also be locked-in ones. Take the example of sunbathing as a creative domain. Certainly, one can display creativity in sunbathing, as practitioners of so-called "perineum sunning" aptly demonstrate. But despite this, sunbathing doesn't seem valuable beyond the purely hedonic.

On the other hand, like art, the culinary arts turn out to be an expandable creative domain. This is a key element in the rejoinder to the skepticism of our Cultural Snob. Being an expandable creative domain, the culinary arts can be richly creative and expressive, as they can express different kinds of values that go beyond the hedonic in a unique, culinary way. This, I contend, goes a long way toward explaining the rise of the cultural standing of the culinary arts in our contemporary culture. (For a less intuitive and more systematic argument in favor of a distinction between locked-in and expandable creative domains, see the Appendix at the end of the chapter.)

## 5. What About the Imagination?

The imagination has been the missing variable of this chapter. In some sense, this was to be expected: since I focused more on the product rather than the process side of creativity, imagination was bound not to play a central role. Still, I want to close this chapter by making a couple of remarks about the relation between creativity in the culinary arts and imagination.

The first one is that creativity in the culinary arts involves extensive mobilization of imaginative capacities. That is, culinary experiences being multi-modal ones, if imagination indeed is the grand instrument of creativity (see Introduction and Chapter 9), then to display creativity in the culinary arts would require not only imagining in different modalities (*e.g.*, taste, smell, flavor, vision, and so on) but also multi-modal imagination in a stronger sense: namely, imaginative episodes that result from the combination of these different modalities. This is already quite demanding, but it is not clear that it would be sufficient to reach super-productive creativity. Indeed, it seems plausible that super-productivity will in addition require reasoning skills, including propositional or conceptual imagination. Why? Because super-productivity requires more than acquaintance with, and understanding of, what is already constitutively valuable in a domain. It requires being able to think about and to put into question what it means to be constitutively valuable within a certain domain in order, eventually, to contemplate novel ways to be constitutively valuable within a certain domain. Ideally, the extra skill of being able to communicate the results of these thoughts would of course be more than welcome. The possession of this full package is what is particularly remarkable in a chef like René Redzepi. In his *Journal*, documenting some of the creative endeavors he headed at his Copenhagen restaurant Noma, he writes,

Our inherited culinary ideology defined which types of food are considered luxurious enough to grace the dining rooms of the most respected restaurants. A tiny group of

‘elite ingredients’ still seem to make some dinners happy everywhere. That’s over, for me. My friend and culinary prodigy Daniel Patterson, chef at Coi in San Francisco, wrote a great article for the *Financial Times* called ‘Carrots are the new caviar’. The moral was that all ingredients have the same worth. I believe that’s true. Now all we have to do is shake off some of the traditions we’ve been carrying around, the dying relics that are waiting to be finished off. (Redzepi 2013b, 22)

What is particularly striking about such a passage is how the kind of culinary creativity Rezepe is interested in operates both at a material and at a conceptual level. In particular, he is aware of, and questions, a certain culinary ideology that conceives of gastronomy’s constitutive value in a particular way and wants the output of his creative endeavors to challenge, and eventually replace, this ideology and its conception of culinary value. This is a striking instance of super-productive creativity in the culinary domain<sup>16</sup>.

This importance of not just sensory but also propositional imagination might be of particular interest to, notably, culinary arts educators. To achieve the highest level of culinary creativity, culinary arts practitioners must not only learn how to cook, but they must also be encouraged to engage critically with what is regarded as constitutively valuable in the culinary domain.

The second important point concerns the constraints on culinary creativity and, thereby, culinary imagination. One important feature of the culinary domain is that some of its constitutive values, like pleasure, are non-contingent, partly because creative food that isn’t conducive to pleasure isn’t economically viable. As we saw, the important lesson is not that, therefore, pleasure is all there is to culinary experience. Still, pleasure is where it all starts. Imaginative episodes that underlie culinary creativity are consequently very much constrained.

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<sup>16</sup> See Engisch 2020 for details.



This might be an element to remember for those tempted to treat the culinary arts as an artistic endeavor. If both domains are expandable ones, there are nonetheless important structural differences between them. As Myrhnold puts it,

There's a big distance from [food] to art. Art doesn't always make you comfortable. No one said to Damian Hirst, "Hey, I'd really like to see a big shark in a thing full of formaldehyde." The food world has been wrestling with this for the last decades as chefs try new, weird things that don't necessarily please people immediately. Food is supposed to comfort us and then you put a foam on my plate: "What the fuck is this?" (Myrhnold in Questlove 2016, 20)

However, as we saw, thus being constrained doesn't mean being locked-in. Comfort still leaves room for substantial and challenging creative endeavors within the culinary arts.<sup>17</sup>

### **Appendix: Locked-In and Expandable Creative Domains**

Is it possible to give a systematic argument in favor of the existence of a metaphysical distinction between locked-in and expandable creative domains? Or, on the contrary, is the distinction merely epistemic such that, from a certain position, it might *appear* that a certain domain is locked-in though this might reflect nothing but a form of prejudice against this domain. Indeed, after all, who can pretend to know the bounds of creativity? In this appendix, I offer an argument in favor of the claims that: a) creative domains that have an instrumental value as constitutive value are locked-in and b) some creative domains with a non-purely instrumental constitutive value can be expandable.

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<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Andrea Borghini, Amy Kind, Julia Langkau, Kristina Pucko, and the participants to the "Imagination and Creativity" Conference, University of Geneva, 15-17 May 2023 for helpful feedback on this chapter. Research on this chapter was funded by the SNFS grant PR00P1\_201612 "Creativity, Imagination, and Tradition."

For a change of example, take drinking cups. Cups have as constitutive value a certain instrumental value, *i.e.*, being good to drink from. That is, to be a good cup means to be good to drink from and to be a bad cup means to be bad to drink from. Of course, things are more complicated than that, as cups can also bear non-instrumental values, such as aesthetic value. However, if such values are to bear upon a cup's constitutive evaluation, they must always be subsumed to instrumental value. That is, if an aesthetically pleasing cup that is good to drink from might be a better cup than a non-aesthetically pleasing one that is also good to drink from, there is no way an aesthetically pleasing cup that is bad to drink from can be a good cup.

More formally, the mere conjunction of being a cup and having a non-instrumental value such as an aesthetic one never alone entails being a good cup. Something more is needed: having some level of constitutive, instrumental value. What this means is that one can bring as much valuable novelty one wants to the domain of cups, this novelty will either impinge on productive value (either directly, by impacting instrumental value, or indirectly, by impacting a non-instrumental value that can enhance instrumental value<sup>18</sup>) or will leave instrumental value untouched, but will therefore end up, at most, in idle creativity. Super-productivity will always remain impossible. Therefore, some creative domains are genuinely locked-in.

Compare now this case with the one of a creative domain whose constitutive value is not essentially instrumental. Take, for instance, the culinary domain. What does it mean to be a good culinary item? Well, there is a here a variety of ways for a culinary item to be a good one. A culinary item can be constitutively good because it is nutritious, or because it is pleasing, or, as I have argued above, because it is conceptually interesting. That is, in the context of a non-essentially instrumental creative domain, the conjunction of being an instance of that domain and of bearing a non-instrumental value can alone entail being a constitutively valuable

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<sup>18</sup> See Stecker 2019, Chap. 9 for a detailed discussion of the relation between instrumental and aesthetic values in artefacts.

instance of that domain. There is no need for an instrumental value to play an essential subsuming role.

And here comes the important point. Who, in a creative domain like the culinary one, decides what is the set of values that, together with being an instance of the kind of the domain in question, can entail being a good instance of the kind? Well, no one! It is successful super-productive creativity that reveals us what is the nature of that set. Therefore, some creative domains are expandable.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> More details about this argument can be found in Englisch (ms.).

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