

# Toward a Gastronomic Criticism

## From Good Taste to Haptic Taste

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I am not a critic. My business is to give recommendations.

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**Abstract** *In this essay, I propose a different approach to gastronomic criticism through a new theory of taste, that is, an unconventional model of gustatory perception. I show that what is usually understood today as 'food criticism' is a distortion of it in terms of a mere exercise in reviews and ratings. This distortion is linked to a corresponding conception of the gustatory experience, where mainly, if not exclusively, sensible aspects referring to an objective and static conception of food are taken into account. This objective and static conception is consistent with and supportive of the contemporary domain of visual food images, understood as immediate outputs of the gastronomic reality. As an alternative, I propose a haptic taste, that is, engaged and involved, processual and multisensory, as a model for a new kind of gastronomic criticism. Haptic taste can contribute to the creation of a contemporary gastronomic critique that, consciously reaping the increasing power that visual images have in the digital age, deconstructs them by arranging them along planes where they are experienced and questioned.*

### 1. Criticizing is Not Reviewing: A Different Approach to Gustatory Experience

In this essay, I propose a different approach to gastronomic criticism through a new theory of taste, that is, gustatory perception. I show that what is usually understood today as 'food criticism' is actually (and of course, this is subject to exceptions) a distortion of it in terms of a mere exercise in reviews and ratings. This distortion is linked to a corresponding conception of the gustatory experience, where mainly, if not exclusively, sensible aspects referring to an objective and static conception of food are taken into account. I shall call this conception *optic taste*, to point out both

the prevalence of the visual element in all its medial aspects, as is evident today, and the fact that the gustatory experience itself is modeled on the standard conception of sight as a distal and objective sense. Instead, I propose a *haptic taste*, that is, engaged and involved, processual and multisensory, as a model for a new kind of gastronomic criticism.

Underlying my argument is the distinction between the criticism and the review: a distinction that is very often all but nullified. What is mostly understood by 'gastronomic criticism'? In general, it refers to food, drink, and restaurant reviews; an activity that often produces journalistic communication based on the development of rankings, awards or, more simply, advices and recommendations. The food critic is seen, with rare exceptions, as the one who reviews and rates. Are we sure that this conception of criticism is right or, more modestly, that is what we still need today? Do not get me wrong: reviews and recommendations are of course legitimate and I do not advocate their disappearance. I am not arguing that they should disappear. I argue, however, that a difference between their nature and function, and those of criticism, must be established. Similarly, I do not deny that gustatory perception implies also some skills to detect the sensory qualities of a food; however, it is not to be reduced to that, and a new approach to taste is needed precisely to go beyond that conception summed up in the expression 'good taste.' I suggest an alternative, according to which gastronomic criticism should not be concerned with reviewing and evaluating, at least not in the first instance (Perullo 2019). For while criticism is reflection and discernment (cf. Barthes 2007), a review is an expression of value that arises – often in an immediate and noncritical way – from the application of standard criteria over many cases, thus producing a comparison and thus a classification. To criticize is not to review, much less to make rankings and lists of the best kitchens, the finest wines, the top cafés, pizza joints, or ice cream parlors. In this sense, TripAdvisor – but also the Michelin Guide and the Fifty Best Restaurants ranking, to name the three most important contemporary industry benchmarks – are all reviewing devices and not critical tools. Today, what goes under the name of 'gastronomic criticism' is actually a huge reviewing apparatus, based on both traditional (guides) and new (web) media.

## 2. From Good Taste to Haptic Taste: The Ecological Perception beyond the Visual Objectification of Food

Along the same line, an effective gastronomic criticism calls for a theory of taste that does not reduce it to the ability to recognize tastes and smells, but that opens it to the ability to connect them to the experiential and ecological (i.e., socio-cultural, en-

vironmental) processes presupposing them.<sup>1</sup> In contrast with an optic approach to tastes and tasting, in some previous works I have suggested the notion of *haptic taste*. I do not mean by 'haptic' just a synonym for touch, because the tactility of the haptic is not a *grasping*; rather, haptic taste is explorative, open and not immediately judging. Moreover, it is trans-sensory: it accords a particular privilege neither to touch nor to sight. Hence, haptic taste describes a perceptual engagement deeply involved in the processes of experiencing food and beverages; it is an attitude focused on processes rather than on objects (Perullo 2018b). Whereas the optic approach perceives objects understood as outcomes, as crystallizations in stable and standard features, the haptic approach, instead, perceives processes. Not considering food in the terms of an object takes us back to a different way of perceiving, but also of representing it.

The notion of 'good taste,' as is well known, was born around the middle of the seventeenth century, in the modern context of bourgeois society and the new forms of state and democracy (Agamben 1999: 13–27). As early as the 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu highlighted well the connection between the emergence of good taste and the question of class representation. In the case that concerns us here, this kind of taste is shaped along a progressive autonomy of food value from its contexts, its ritual, symbolic, communal meanings, assuming the recognition of 'good' just as in reference to the object. Within this framework, the 19<sup>th</sup> century (with Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin) witnesses the birth of modern gastronomic criticism: it involves evaluating a food, meal or drink by recognizing its sensible qualities. The qualitative value of food becomes disengaged from its ecologies, that is, from the set of processes – temporal, geographical, ritual, and convivial – that make it possible and illuminate its deeper meaning. In other words, only the outcome, the 'product,' matters more and more. Now, my thesis is that this reduction of food from the whole processes that originate it to the mere sensible qualities attached to the object runs in parallel with a certain idea of gustatory experience, from which originates the idea of criticism identified with reviews, ratings and recommendations. Limiting the taste experience to the sensory, albeit multisensory, profile of food is a two-dimensional and horizontal operation; it is the *optic* approach to gustatory experience (see Perullo 2018b, 2020). In parallel, identifying gastronomic criticism with reviews and evaluations of food and restaurants means objectifying and classifying them. This is a legitimate but reductive move.

When and how did this reduction of processes to objects, this reduction of the value of a work and perception, come about? The question is complex, requiring a lengthy analysis that would take us away from our topic. To cut a long story short: this change concerns the formation of modern subjectivity and sensitivity within a

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1 I use here "ecology" in the sense developed by J.J. Gibson with the notion of "ecological perception" (1966).

changed scientific, philosophical, social and economic framework. But this is the framework still in force today, embodied in media channels, via their use of visual imagery and its corresponding vocabulary. Of course, this is not to deny the importance of images or sight in gustatory processual and haptic perception. On the contrary, according to the haptic approach, sight and taste are in continuous correspondence, dialoguing and interrogating the perceiver far beyond the immediate sensory qualities of food (Perullo 2018a).

As it is well known, the very notion of criticism, as well as the one of 'good taste,' is modern, and is an expression of essentially modern feeling/thinking that arose within the realm of aesthetics (a modern discipline, born in 1750) especially with reference to art (see Dickie 1996; Perullo 2017). However, if today critics (of fine art, or literary critics, or even film critics) were to be asked to list the landmarks of their respective disciplines, their answers would be more solid and certain compared to those by food critics faced with the same question. In gastronomy, which to this day seems to enjoy endless media success, it is very difficult to find undisputed points of reference. Why? It should be remembered that this social and cultural practice immediately developed through two channels: amateurship – the paradigmatic case being that of Brillat-Savarin – or journalism: it seems that the first restaurant review appeared in 1859 in the *New York Times*, significantly anonymously.<sup>2</sup> To the amateurship and anonymity, I return to later. Let us now reflect on the relationship between journalism, reviews, rankings and recommendations, and gustatory perception.

The birth and development of gastronomic criticism did not come about because of scholars, scientists or academics, but mainly because of journalism. Food criticism flourished within a model – precisely that of journalism – based on current affairs that has prevented the creation of a broad, perspectival and diachronic cultural canon (as was the case, for art criticism or even, more recently, for film criticism). It is true that, in general, every criticism is a modern attitude that shares similar assumptions. First of all, the assumption that there is a judgmental and evaluative act on the part of a subject (often, an individual) towards an object (or work). Secondly, as observed before, this paradigm is rooted in the modern idea of taste, precisely in the birth of 'aesthetic taste,' conceived as something that, on purpose, can overlook the contexts in which a work of art is immersed. Modern conception of taste focuses first on shared criteria of judgement considered, in a peculiar sense, 'objective,' that is, 'intersubjective' (Hume 1760); and then, with the blooming of scientific accounts on taste, on a referential sensory analysis, more and more objectifying the gustatory experiences and detaching them from the contexts they unfold.

Modern criticism, however, arises in a social context where wealth and culture often go together. In other words, if in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and still in the first part of the

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2 See: <https://www.nytimes.com/1859/01/01/archives/how-we-dine-by-the-strongminded-reporter-of-the-times.html>

20<sup>th</sup> century, the man of good taste, the cultivated and educated person, is also the person with financial means, from here onwards this link has been dissolving. Today, indeed, it is perhaps more common for culture and money to be in opposition. This has enormous consequences both in the field of taste perception and education for an amateur approach (those with sensibility and attention often do not have the means to afford certain experiences, so they forgo them) and in the field, mirrored, of the profession. In fact, working for a food newspaper or a magazine does not necessarily imply having high sensibility, education and attention to food.

On the one hand, what today goes by the name of 'gastronomic criticism,' is an expression typical of the modern Western and bourgeois consciousness it emerged from. On the other hand, by creating the very notion of a 'culture' of taste and of good taste, this consciousness has been responsible for the reduction of food to a mere object.<sup>3</sup> However, there is one important difference, as the reduction of the so-called food critic to the journalist today suffers from a double difficulty. As mentioned before, early modern critics had the possibility to practice their gastronomic expertise, although reduced to the objectual attitude, with freedom and without needing to be salaried. Nowadays, instead, this is far from a given. People write, review, evaluate quite often without having sufficient experience to do so, limiting themselves to the bare minimum, caught in a publishing production mechanism that does not allow for any kind of long experience and education. In the 'hit and run' journalism, the capacity of gustatory perception is very limited. We are thus faced with the situation whereby the modern model of taste judgment towards food, already reduced to an object of sensory analysis, undergoes a further, this time definitive, degradation. However, the often little skill possessed by the reviewer goes by the wayside or is even completely irrelevant, because the immediacy and haste evaluations and recommendations are consumed by do not even allow it to be noticed. Precisely in this context, paradoxically, food as an object to be sensitively enjoyed disappears too: only its media representations remain, and the judgments that are made about it, which are then valid in themselves. To paraphrase Lautréamont (1870: 8), we might say that when criticism is mixed up with the carousel of lists, recommendations and reviews, judgments about food and drink become more valuable than the food itself.<sup>4</sup>

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3 These reflections arise from more general research I have been developing starting from *Taste as Experience* (Perullo 2016) and which then has become part (with particular attention to wine criticism) of *Epistemology* (Perullo 2020). In the specific field of restaurant criticism, I have reflected at great length on the articles of Lisa Abend (2018) – one of the exceptions who actually knows how to tell apart a review from gastronomic criticism.

4 On this aspect, I draw on the analysis provided by Agamben (1999).

### 3. The Birth of Modern Gastronomy and the Rise of the Expert

Of course, the responsibility for this situation does not rest with individual reviewers. As already made clear, the notion of 'gastronomic criticism' as a socio-cultural practice is a modern phenomenon and, as such, expresses the characteristic tensions of modernity. It arose in the Europe of bourgeois society, for a new public willing to pay for individual experiences of pleasure and aesthetic appreciation untethered from ritual and community: the birth of museums, exhibitions and restaurants, of course, goes hand in hand with that of criticism. In the specific case, the restaurant is a French invention of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Appelbaum 2011), but a century earlier, we can already see the emergence of the gastronomic approach we have described as the reduction of food to an object whose sensitive qualities constitute its value, both cultural and economic. Consider the case of wine. In a small treatise on the cultivation of vines and olives (published in 1766, but his trip to France dates back to the century before, during the 1670s), John Locke (1766) writes about a famous Bordeaux, Château Haut-Brion, he visited after tasting a bottle in a London tavern, being most impressed with its taste and price. The rise of the wine market coincides with the development of the restaurant as a brand. The restaurant is a place where one has the opportunity not only and not so much to feed themselves, as to appreciate the skills of a maker who is able to create something that a normal person could not cook, especially not within a domestic kitchen, due to the lack of specific capabilities (acquired mostly through professionalism) and tools.<sup>5</sup> As was the case in the transition from ancient and medieval art to modern art, so in the transition from ancient and medieval cuisine to modern cuisine the emphasis begins to fall on free and individual expression of creativity, which is represented as a form of professional expertise. On the side of the eater's experience, that is, gustatory perception, the recognition of such skills is equally individual, but not as free: the canons of good taste are codified according to rules that follow different factors. Some of these factors are closely related to the market economy. When a restaurant becomes a cultural *and* commercial activity, it turns into a space of exchange between audiences and critics. Whereas, in the *Ancien Régime*, a cook like François Vatel could still express his art thanks to patronage, from then on, this became impossible. It is via the relationship with the spectator and the marketplace that the question of cuisine and its criticism must be investigated; and the moment the spectator, from being a mere enjoyer of the aesthetic experience, is also able to take on the role of its critic, the question becomes somewhat more complicated.

Modern gastronomy has developed within this scenario. With perfect consistency, the notion of good taste was thus gradually eclipsed or, rather, mixed with that

5 The French word *chef* expresses well this axiology: according to the historian Jean-François Revel (1982), a chef is a man able to invent what has not yet been eaten at home.

(born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) of 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen 1994). At this point, the notion of good taste should be further clarified, in that it embodies the very zeitgeist of modernity. Despite its derivation from taste as a physical sense, good taste is a cultural performance, which differs partially or even completely from taste as a 'natural' sense. In fact, for a good portion of aesthetic theorists (just think of Kant), good taste is not about the ability to take pleasure in food and drink at all but is a specific and peculiar faculty. Good taste in reference to gastronomy thus becomes an appendage of the cultural discourse and, as is well known, the concept of the 'man of taste' has been subjected to major questioning like that of the classic study of Pierre Bourdieu (1979). Since then, a plethora of social studies has also investigated the relationship between taste structures and social classes. It is almost trivial today to note that the man of taste is mostly an adult male, white and bourgeois, educated and affluent – the landscape has only changed slightly to this day. As has been pointed out many times, the first figures traceable to gastronomic criticism are anything but professionals, but rather laymen and amateurs. Laurent Grimod de La Reynière – considered its founding father, with his *Almanach des Gourmands* (1802–1813) – was a lawyer and heir to a great family fortune. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin – who promoted the term *gastronomy* throughout the world, becoming synonymous with it – was a member of the Constituent Assembly and a magistrate. Outside of France, the Italian Pellegrino Artusi – who codified a notion of Italian national cuisine (the first edition of *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* dates back to 1891) – was the son of a wealthy textile merchant. This situation was to remain typical for a long time to come: enthusiasts, amateurs, and dilettantes would wedge themselves into the food domain so as to reflect a new cultural sensibility. However, as already said, among those founders, as in many members of the wealthy bourgeoisie of the time, money and knowledge were still closely related. One could be cultured and have good taste – of course, not only for food, but for art, letters, and life in general – while having a lot of money; indeed, certain cultural 'experiences' were only accessible to those with money in their pockets. This decreed the rise and success of the bourgeoisie, where the separation (if not even opposition) between knowledge and money embarked on its ultimate decline. Such a process marks the vicissitudes of the so-called gastronomic criticism. Hence the question: in order to be considered fully cultural activities, compatible with study and research, must cuisine, food, and criticism – at least for the time necessary for the establishment of a code external to everyday and mundane journalism – be disengaged from the market and thus from the economy? And what kind of perceptual attitude towards gustatory experience would this move require?

The activity of reviewing in regard to wine emerged and developed in affluent English-speaking countries (Shapin 2012): first in England (home to the 'Masters of Wine') then in the United States. That of restaurants, on the other hand, first came about in France, partly because of the origin of the phenomenon itself. According

to the historian Jean-François Revel (1982), *chef*, as already stated, refers to one who creates food that, in terms of ingredients and techniques, is unattainable in the domestic dimension. The *Michelin Guide* began publishing lists of hotels and restaurants with stars in France in the 1920s, in Italy only from 1959. It should be recalled that in France, in the 1950s, Robert Courtine joined *Le Monde* to write the weekly gastronomic column, under the pseudonym 'La Reynière'; meanwhile in Italy, Luigi Veronelli, a philosophy graduate, anarchist and libertarian, founded the magazine *Il Gastronomo* (1956). Based on socio-economic differences, an ensuing school of gastronomic journalism developed in each country: while England, the United States and France dominated the field, Italy was instead a backward country in this respect until the 1960s, with a society disinclined towards food discourse wallowing in thematic reviews. Such practices began to come into being from the 1970s with Veronelli, only to explode over the following decade, with names, publishers, and acronyms still to be found to this day.

#### 4. Gustatory Experience Exceeds the Sensory Qualities of Food

I believe that the recovery of the amateur dimension allows both the foundation of a gastronomic criticism that is not reduced to an apparatus of reviews and evaluations, and the possibility of a haptic and ecological taste, involved with values that do not deal with food as an object to be measured through its sensitive qualities. Despite its elitist origin, in fact, the figure of the amateur provides gastronomy with a depth and breadth that the exclusively professional dimension currently prevents.

Unless we call for public investment in pure study and education, economic matters and the immediacy of reactions required in the current flow of information will remain a shadow hanging over the issue. Art critics too have been formed through infrastructures, such as museums and galleries that are tied to the needs of the market and economic exchange. However, the kind of sensory experience required by a food critic calls for a higher financial investment. It is true, on the one hand, that an art critic needs money to travel and visit places; on the other hand, differently from visual and auditory experiences, gustatory ones can neither be reproduced nor replaced. Nowadays, media technologies make expertise in the field of audiovisual art without the need for travel. This is not so in the field of culinary art, which is experienced only through direct perception. Beyond that, the aura of art still foresees forms of patronage and freedom unthinkable in gastronomy to this day. Not everything revolves around journalism and profit. This was not the case for gastronomy, with a very few exceptions and, unfortunately, too insignificant to be taken into account: no one has ever been paid just to think; at best – and this was true up until a few years ago; by now even this is almost over – they have been paid to review. It may be that this is so solely because there are long-standing codes in the arts,

and gastronomy has to make do with histories and outlooks yet to be written. In the meantime, however, an inverted strategy should be suggested: a critique that moves from a different approach to taste. An ecological and relational approach, not immediately evaluative and therefore not aimed at reviewing. For reasons I explained earlier, this approach to taste can take root more easily among amateurs and mere enthusiasts than among professionals.

## 5. Three Examples: The Michelin Guide, TripAdvisor and the World's 50 Best Restaurants

Let us now give three examples of review models mistaken for criticism. The most important and influential restaurant ranking is undoubtedly the *Michelin Guide*. It bases its authoritativeness on codified authority and power, a self-assigned law insofar as it constitutes the guide of reference on a historical level as well. A mainstay of the modern, Western, bourgeois restaurant model, it exists as kin of that very model. In a perfectly circular way, the *Michelin* is the source of the criteria it deems objective for evaluating the quality of a restaurant. Having a critical and 'ecological' attitude towards these criteria, not taking them for granted, should be evidence for worthy criticism. Instead, passively accepting them, as if they were natural data and incontrovertible facts (for example, a table set elegance asks for certain cutlery, certain glasses and tablecloths) is symptomatic of a lack of discernment and distraction. The *Michelin* model synthesizes two different trends. On the one side, it continues the approach of authoritarian authority typical of the modern expert, that possesses good taste but also power, and of the academic, that represents the institution defining the rules of good and decent art; on the other side, it fits into the new 20<sup>th</sup>-century strand of the democratization of taste. Characteristics of this approach are teamwork but also a certain 'anonymization' of the final judgments, which are not tied to a specific and individual signature. There is a seemingly paradoxical combination between the exaltation of good taste as a judgment that recognizes food qualities and its anonymous, depersonalized leveling; from this point of view, *TripAdvisor* rankings are the consistent extreme of the principle promoted by the *Michelin*. Anonymity also seems to have moral value, because the only way to exercise a (presumptively) unconditioned and therefore 'objective' judgment is not to be recognized at all. The moral interpretation, on the other hand, may thus be turned on its head, taken instead as a sign of total immorality as dissimulation. Being reliant on the epistemologically bogus assumption that by moving the subject out of the way, only the pure fact remains as a form of unconditioned 'objectivity,' it in fact deresponsibilizes. As we see, it is still a matter of power, represented differently according to the reputation of the anonymous figures of the moment.

Seemingly opposite and despite their obvious differences, the *Michelin Guide* and *TripAdvisor* share an underlying common assumption. Of course, *TripAdvisor* is an expression of the social-cognitive revolution ushered in by the digital age and the web, with the endless proliferation of positions and 'points of view.' As is well known, *TripAdvisor* is the gastronomic exemplification of what some have called the 'death of expertise' (Nichols 2017), and therefore would appear the opposite of the *Michelin*. In actual fact, it fulfills its very assumptions. With the gradual absorption of good taste into the flow of information and media representation, the real and attentive gustatory experience dissolves thus legitimizing all opinions. In the domain of authority given by good taste, the acknowledgement of expertise takes place via the sharing of a common cultural perspective that is akin or at least comparable to that of those who, in turn, have already been granted the authority to exercise it. Now, as long as a society accepts hierarchy in social and cultural classes, as was the case in early modernity, this might just work. When, however, everything goes progressively horizontal and the idea of authority gradually weakens taking the 'democratization of taste' to its logical extreme – for this is the essence of pop culture, in which appreciation is no longer mediated by cultural training – the cogs start to stick.

Gastronomy shows this apparent paradox very clearly. Having unmasked the neither objective nor absolute nature of taste, it becomes a free-for-all. If the value of food is recognized through a good taste understood as a cultural, socially constituted performance, it will then be possible to justify everything to the extreme: *de gustibus non est disputandum* – there is no accounting for taste, as the motto goes – is only the apparent opposite of good taste. In reality, it constitutes its most radical application. A similar process happens in the field of representative democracy: by dint of voting for representatives, voters first ended up voting for themselves (slowly eroding the sense of the formation of the 'ruling class') before then toying with the notion that representative voting is no longer needed, for one may instead exercise one's power directly.

Indeed, this is how *TripAdvisor* came about. One might say that this mechanism represents the very essence of nihilism as the implementation of subjectivity as a self-fulfilling power. The power of the taste of individualistic subjectivity becomes so absolute and immediate that it can even do without the signature, that is, the author and their authority: the only real authority is that of statistics. Here, the sensibilities of not a few experts but of all those who, spontaneously, wish to take part in the game, are brought together. Have you longed for the democratization of taste? Coming right up. This regime of subordinate and unpaid reviewers, this spontaneous and anonymous tyranny of the masses is, however, at least stated and explicit: 'one is worth one,' means that, in the end, no one is worth anything. One 'works' for free for portals that make the fortunes of a few.

In this respect, *The World's 50 Best Restaurants*, a highly media-driven ranking sponsored by San Pellegrino, represents perfect continuity and, concurrently, com-

plete dissimulation. In fact, its distinguishing characteristic lies in its being a synthesis between the modern trappings of expertise and the contemporary world of digital information and the web. Even I was once called upon to become part of the jury of this highly influential ranking, made up of around 700 people including chefs, journalists and other ‘experts,’ chosen and selected largely by word of mouth and personal reference. Thanks to the internet and a series of powerful backers, this model represents the reorganization on an extensive and planetary level of those circles on the basis of class membership formed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Among other things, here the sponsors ensure the media spectacle of a model of fine dining, where those 700 ‘anonymous’ reviewers decide on the ‘best’ restaurants each year. An important note: judges are simply asked to make a self-styled declaration stating that they have visited the restaurants included on the list (everyone has to choose seven restaurants). Here are some simple questions a critic ought to ask of such a system: *best* for whom and for what? What exactly defines fine dining? Does this worldwide list imply that every restaurant in the world has been visited and rated by every juror? *The World’s 50 Best Restaurants* is a kind of Oscars in the field, but unlike in the real Oscar awards, where at least the jurors see all the films in the offing, in this case, as it is obvious, not *all* the restaurants in the world can be evaluated. How many times in a year can a reviewer visit a restaurant on the other side of the world, for example? Now, I want to stress that the underlying idea dominating this ranking is that opinions can be expressed on something that has not even been experienced directly, deeply and ecologically. Through audiovisual information, these reviewers perhaps keep informed and participate in a global conversation without feeling the need – both aesthetic and ethical – to experience. This is what ‘the judgment of the work becomes more important than the work itself’ means. Again, it would suffice to come clean: it is not criticism. The gustatory experience (both in the optic and haptic approaches) ultimately plays a limited role here. However, if food appreciation and its enjoyment neglect the gustatory experience, what will it be based on? Mainly on its pure medial information, understood as immediate visual representation: the optic approach to perception. But even if the taste experience comes into play only as a recognition of sensitive qualities of the food/object, the model will always be the optic and reductive one.

We thus arrive at another short circuit: that between the so-called culinary avant-garde and the mass media. If the avant-garde is supposed to be what produces new languages, forms and values that, for this very reason, cannot be immediately adopted by the mainstream, how can we account for the fact that self-appointed representatives of the culinary avant-garde constantly seek consensus through the most widely used means of communication? Indeed, if you have a business such as a restaurant, you may legitimately wish to make people talk about you and stay in the limelight. However – as Ferran Adrià has pointed out in many

talks and interviews<sup>6</sup> – this is precisely what impedes ‘pure’ research and the avant-garde. In this respect, too, there are key differences between the artistic and culinary spheres.

## 6. The Restaurant Business in the Age of Aesthetic Capitalism: The Case of Noma

The restaurant is a business that originates from the modern context of the aesthetics of the spectator, that is, of an individual subject who seeks cultural pleasures: when taste becomes a cultural device, the dining experience falls within such pleasures. Without positive responses by the eaters, there is no possibility for the restaurant to exist. In the age of digital imagery, however, this fact has been taken to its extreme consequences: more than the positive feedback to the experience itself, it is how it is couched and the talk about it that count. ‘How can I get people to talk about me? How can I drive interest in what I do?’ are often the questions celebrity chefs, perhaps in spite of themselves, strive to answer. Where, herein, does the avant-garde lie? There is not one. Rather, there is an attempt to feed a niche market through a project that is not so much information as advertising. Press officers, PR representatives or influencers are not communicators: they promote and sell; they make recommendations. To confuse communication with information and promotion is a mistake that has major consequences for the fate of chefs and the scope of criticism. The point is: can one communicate the avant-garde through the same languages as the mass media? How can one think of being radical and cutting-edge by using Instagram stories or appearing on television? How may one reconcile aggressive advertising with (supposedly) sophisticated and elitist content? Of course, this is not a matter of blaming anyone: it is of course legitimate to try to hold on everything; there are also sincere attempts to combine culinary research, education for an attentive taste that perceives beyond the sensory profile of food, and mass information and communication circuits. However, these attempts continually come up against enormous difficulties; in any case, these ought to be the issues and themes underpinning gastronomic criticism. And above all: is it not at least a little bizarre that so many chefs and gastronomes who advocate limited, local, small-scale, and

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6 The most relevant official reason that led to the closure of El Bulli in 2011 is that this restaurant had explored all the creative possibilities within the limits of what a commercial establishment can do. Adrià has often stressed that in order to continue on the path of true ‘research and development,’ i.e., real avant-garde, it was necessary to end El Bulli business as a commercial activity. Hence, the decision to take the path of the research centre and cultural activities (such as the El Bulli 1846 Museum), which also heavily rely on patronage. For a reflection on the relationship between Adrià’s cuisine, art and media see Hamilton/Todoli 2009.

artisanal food production are at the same time entirely at the service of the meat grinder of media information? How strange that we do not perceive how, according to a basic principle of coherence, the two should not be bedfellows: supporting the locally made and the artisanal and, at the same time, propping up the most aggressive logics of late capitalism by foraging the global cultural info market. Again: this is not to propose simplistic ways out, but merely airing issues that are very often overlooked by the gastronomic establishment and by many famous reviewers. We shall now examine an emblematic case, that of the restaurant Noma in Copenhagen. According to gastronomic journalism, Noma is one of the world's apexes of fine-dining excellence that, however, does not market itself as an expression of comfortable, bourgeois good taste but rather as a quest for the avant-garde. Obviously, Noma is an amazing place and those who have the chance should not forego the opportunity to dine there.<sup>7</sup>

However, a number of issues deserve to be raised. First, Noma is one of those (few but very relevant) restaurants where it is very, very difficult to get a table, as availability is limited compared to the sky-high demand. Noma's reservation system is online, opening at midnight at the start of a certain day every three months, offering tables for the following season. System failure is usually to be reckoned with: at that moment, it inevitably crashes under the balk of thousands of people simultaneously logging on to try and make reservations. Now, this situation itself is already part of the appreciation game, creating a seemingly paradoxical effect: if one manages to find a table and make a reservation, the experience has partially been fulfilled *before* the actual dining. The very possibility to attend the event is perceived to be a form of success: the extreme consequences of ostentatious consumption in the age of food imagery, of food whittled down to imagery and news information, dictate that ostentation must take place *prior* to consumption. As observed earlier, this may no longer even require the act of consuming itself. Of course, this initial 'fulfillment' colors with emotionally positive expectations the time that separates from the actual consumption. Now, this will also involve an attitude toward the gustatory experience itself. Let us resume the proposed difference between optic taste and haptic taste. If optic taste aims to describe the value of food as an object, it is also linked to a precise design model: the underlying idea is that of knowledge acquired by information. Optic taste, in other words, starts from an expectation and tries to realize it, to reconceive whether the experience corresponds to it. Haptic taste, on the other hand, works on the value of processes. But processes, as such, are always in the process of being realized; therefore, haptic taste pays attention with an attitude

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7 While I was writing this text, the news agencies communicated that Noma, at least in its ordinary form as a restaurant, will close permanently in 2024. A parallel can be drawn here with the story of El Bulli.

of open curiosity and exposition to what is going to be experienced, without predefined expectations. In this sense, information as such – that is, the objective content conveyed by the media, especially those that prevail in gastronomy today, i.e., audiovisual media – conditions the haptic approach much less. Haptic taste suggests opening up to the gustatory experience attempting to set previous knowledge. Anyway, while it is generally true that perception acts on the basis of memories, expectations, and contexts that precede and concurrently accompany the experience, nevertheless, in the age of capitalist consumerist aestheticization, this takes place in specific ways (Lipovetsky/Serroy 2013). As with other fetish products, we thus reach the point where a very expensive restaurant (a meal at Noma costs at least €600 per person) is thanked and hailed by those who pay for having been given the opportunity to be there. The dining experience thus becomes highly dematerialized; its characterization is structured almost like a daydream.

In the case of Noma, this emerges right from the very start of the journey that ensues after the long wait from afar. Another deferral then occurs: diners arrive at a kind of greenhouse that serves as a waiting room where they sit around, being plied with courtesy herbal tea or an alcoholic beverage, until an attendant leads them to the front door of the restaurant's interior. This greenhouse itself is a manifesto of the imagery promoted by Noma: Nordic rurality, wild herbs and plants displayed everywhere. But the first real 'shock to the system' is yet to come. Upon entering, like at one of those (fake) surprise birthday parties, we find the entire staff there to welcome us, dozens of people in front of the entrance greeting us with a fixed and carefully cultivated smiling 'hello!' This is repeated for each group of customers entering in regulated succession at various pre-arranged times. This pretense, evidently constructed to put one at ease through a token of informal friendliness, ends up creating the opposite effect, generating a kind of artificial, plasticized estrangement. On another level, having condescended to an interview to be carried out in his home, in a supposedly informal and natural setting, Jacques Derrida chose to introduce this seemingly spontaneous atmosphere with a statement of truth. He declared in front of the camera that everything you are about to see is fake – constructed and designed to induce an effect that is quite the opposite of what is actually happening (Kirby/Ziering Kofman 2002). The supposed spontaneity of that interview indeed corresponds to the supposed spontaneity of the restaurant.

Everything is fake insofar as everything is representation; but criticism should tear any veil of representation, letting its underlying processes and intentions be discerned; without getting caught up in the mangle, pandering to the narrative and perhaps exalting it as if it were the outcome of some act of spontaneity. Any genuine gastronomic criticism should help us understand the relationships between design, atmosphere, food, and cooking, proposing an approach to gustatory experience that is not reduced to superficially validating pre-acquired information and instead is oriented toward perceiving in a processual and ecological way. Instead, the review

merely 'assesses' gustatory pleasure according to canonized rules: the food on the plate, as if there were an absolute 'food on the plate,' without all that 'before,' and without context. Of course, there is *also* the cooking side to Noma; but a critic should avoid rushing immediately to the question that, like any *TripAdvisor* user, the journalist-reviewer deems to be the main one, namely, 'Yes, but what was the food like?'

## 7. Three Points for an Ecological and Haptic Gastronomic Criticism

The critic does not offer grades or suggestions, but *s/he also* reflects on the cooking. Here, then, are three further points of reflection on the matter.

1. What is meant today, in the age of food imagery, i.e., of food reduced to its journalistic-visual media representation, by the *perfection* of a dish? What is the mark of excellence accepted and recognized by the ranking system? Almost from its origin, the modern restaurant has been based on the assembly-line model and on the fragmentation and compartmentalization of labor (consider, for example, Escoffier). Like many other contemporary gastronomic restaurants, Noma, in this respect in perfect continuity with the Western modern restaurant, clearly shows that perfection is an idea at the service of which lie techniques and technologies. We are faced with an *industrial*-type creative perfection (an adjective I use here without any moral or negative connotation), far removed from any singular and specific artisanal intervention. This technological-industrial model flexes all its muscle: one can find very sophisticated and complex dishes that have been elaborated – or whose raw materials have been touched and processed – by a great number of people. This passage of many hands and many minds poses two issues. The first: how does such food 'reach' the end user, the final 'consumer'? Might this industrial, fragmented and serial conception of creativity, and notably, of culinary creativity – understood as rational design and predetermined planning – engender cold and pre-packed gustatory results? Might not, then, the stylistic cipher of this cuisine coincide with the kind of digital emotionality – according to some, definable as cold and abstractly cerebral – inherent to contemporary society? Is there a general misunderstanding of 'absolute' creative freedom, so that it is today mainly assumed as a *pure brand* in capitalistic aesthetics? With this, I mean that, in many different arts as well as in cuisine, we – in some ways paradoxically – witness the triumph of the author and the power of branding (the signature) as pure medial exposition. At the end of the day, this system aims at satisfying the 'aesthetic appreciation,' independently of any content. What I call optic taste – which assumes a distance, an objectification of experience that, thanks to contemporary audiovisual systems, can even come to dispense with the taste experience itself, or to experience it very superficially – is perfectly consistent with and functional to this state of affairs. A change of paradigm implies then a different approach. The second issue con-

cerns the already mentioned relationship between research and business. As is well known, many of these award-winning and widely hailed media restaurants are often, *per se*, economically unsustainable: another apparent paradox. They need a supply chain, and here too is where the media aspect and marketing support come into play. Moreover, any serious criticism should go back to ponder the expense of the meals in such venues. These exorbitant prices are mainly due to the very high costs incurred by the high number of employees involved, the settings, and the technologies deployed. Once again, however, the point is to reason about the value of such processes. The gourmet restaurant came into being to express the taste of a new bourgeoisie; the high price was due to the luxurious staging of the furnishings, the tableware, the glasses, the large number of waiting and kitchen staff as well as, of course, the price of raw materials. The equation between the gourmet restaurant and expensive foodstuffs was obvious until recently. Should the contemporary trend of shifting the economic value of the meal from the bare cost of the ingredients and foods to a type of effort that amplifies the fragmentation of work taken for granted? For example, does it make sense to give surplus value to a salad constructed by choosing every single leaf to be arranged on a plate by four or six different staff members? A critic should ask these questions, rather than waxing lyrical exclusively on the taste of the salad itself.

2. According to the haptic taste approach, there is the possibility to perceive quality, then value, differently from the above. As we have made clear, the Noma experience is the result of upstream thinking as the outcome of strict design: there is no room for improvisation (see Perullo 2022). Creativity lies not in the event itself but in its planning. The event is a stage play, the faithful recital of a script. What we witness is a performance where almost nothing may deviate from the script, barring the entirely unexpected. The chef is the director, the presenter of a palimpsest in which every other actor plays a role, often a minor one. This state of affairs is of course legitimate and justifiable, but it opens up a number of questions that a critic should take into account, especially in reference to the representation, the imagery promoted by these experiences that by no means corresponds to their actual reality. My impression is that such a model of industrial seriality, not popular but very exclusive and elitist, linked to a notion of gastronomic quality built on impressions, shocks, and originality, is perfectly aligned with the rules of the visual market of emotional immediacy, the likes of which may be found on social networks such as Instagram. These rules are based on the need for continuous 'novelties' and experiments to fuel the information feed: that's entertainment, folks!

3. Noma is the epitome of gastronomic neo-naturalism. Here the whole focus of representation – not only of the dish, but of the overall setting (tables, lighting, design, etc.) – revolves around the idea of nature and the seasons. The narrative of natural and seasonal, however, calls for a pact of complete trust with the customer. Following a haptic approach, thus taking less interest in sensory qualities and more

in overall ecological perception, a critic should ponder this relationship: are we sure that the audience really cares whether a duck was caught in the Scandinavian woods? Or is this just a game, a theatrical space in which more than factual truth we are interested in the spectacle, the theater of taste to which such a narrative contributes? Or might it be the creation of an atmosphere, the evocation of an emotion through key expressions, words and terms? It should be noted that paying a high amount of money, together with the brand, helps to create a sense of trust and confidence. Otherwise, one would have to admit to being easily deceived.

The three points above should contribute to develop a critical sense of media representation and, by this, to help forming a haptic approach. Without bringing up misplaced moralisms, it is a matter of understanding whether, behind the curtains, there are noteworthy cultural and artistic – as well as sustainable and lasting – consistencies or not. The impression experienced at Noma was, for me, akin to a good rollercoaster ride at the funfair: efficiency, speed, technological precision dominate the atmosphere (two evening service shifts, no time to think, no empty space to pause). You feel like you are in the right place, a smart atmosphere, an expression of the spirit of your gastronomic times and the social elitism of free Western democracies. It is not avant-garde, however, but comfortable luxury for an elite that is nonetheless mainstream. Don't get me wrong: many things at Noma are perfect. The experience really is amazing, but it is largely entertainment. And the gustatory experience that corresponds to the appreciation, immediate and emotional, of this spectacle and entertainment is optic perception: based on objects and elements taken in isolation (scents, flavors, foods, wow factors) that succeed one another without being brought back to a background, a context, a more comprehensive sense.

## 8. Haptic Taste as an Engagement for a Diet-Ethics of Visual Food Forms

The web and the digital age have produced a mirroring model of cooking and reviewing; several media and communication scholars have been working on it for a number of years, particularly on the meaning of sharing photographs and videos (see Rousseau 2012; Vagni 2017; La Rocca 2018). My thesis is that the gastronomic field, here exemplified with the cases of the *Michelin Guide*, *TripAdvisor* and *The World's 50 Best Restaurants* on the one hand, and Noma restaurant on the other, is in perfect continuity and consistent with the modern paradigm of optic taste. A gustatory perception that is based on the idea of the distance between subject and object and of the objective evaluation of the sensory qualities of a food.

Haptic taste, on the other hand, does not invoke any nostalgic feelings for a predigital era. Instead, the issue being to overcome food perception as optic – that is, static, at distance and passive –, the haptic perception proposes to awaken an

active, involved and processual engagement. Via the haptic, it is possible to rethink the relationship between gastronomic criticism and technologies, reflecting on the rhetorical and ideological nature of any immediate review in order to go beyond it. Food imagery today usually corresponds to photographs on the plate prior to its consumption, i.e. with full reports on the meal accompanied by a caption. While the visual image provides support, it also fuels a reductive approach and a number of misunderstandings. The first: confusing the reality of food with its visible presence and, therefore, the act of consumption with its disappearance (Perullo 2018a). In other words, food tends to achieve its function and purpose in the destruction of the visual image of it, the appreciation of it indeed arising from this very process. Clearly, this concept prevents the emergence of any critical canon, for it works only on the immediacy of gustatory perception, neglecting the effects and presuppositions, the memory and the actuality of the existent, which cannot be seen.

The second misunderstanding is about immediacy. As I have already observed, the dominance of the optic paradigm in gastronomy – a domain that was not born with the digital age, but which the latter has certainly further enhanced – provides the idea of a style, and that we may thus discuss a restaurant's offerings without even experiencing them directly. Very often, reviewers and journalists are enthralled by it, as if suddenly turned to stone by Medusa's gaze. Here, we find again the perfect solidarity between this medial model and the corresponding perceptual model of optic perception, understood in its two-dimensional immediacy, originating an optic taste, which purports to be distancing and thus objectifying, and thereby capable of judging and evaluating the dish in 'objective' terms.

What is lost, in this immediate approach, is not only the multidimensionality of food, its capability to express, communicate and symbolize in a broader way than sensory qualities alone say. What is also lost is the possibility to construct an engaged, communal, socially shared taste. The optic model of the immediate judgmental review avoids the dimension of slow metabolization. Such slowness calls for a notion of time understood not as the instantaneity of emotional reactions, but as duration and memory. Working through the orthogonal depth of food, perceiving it as an overall, relational experience, haptic taste tries to root the correspondence between the food (a dish, a meal, an 'experience') and its perception into an ecology.

Treating food haptically also means developing a *diet-ethics* of visual food forms. Again, this does not mean dabbling in unlikely nostalgic or iconoclastic conceptions, but rather considering the relationship between visual and gustatory perception in terms of their ongoing *correspondence*. Appreciating food visually is certainly legitimate, but as part of a more overall perceptual experience. Not only in a multisensory sense, but also in a haptic sense. Multisensorial modality of gustatory experience is of course an essential indication, but by itself, it is not sufficient, because the difference between optic and haptic perception covers all the senses. Notably, the haptic

approach concerns the wholeness of sensing, rather than specific sensory channels. Thus, a correspondence is haptically activated between the visual and the gustation. Visual images suggest and question; *gusto* responds by giving rise to other questions, which, in turn, image will answer. Aware of the power and usefulness of images, a critic should be educated to perceive them accordingly, not for their immediate consumption. Very often, the work of the food reviewer is instead totally absorbed in visual and gustatory immediacy. Ratings often express prêt-à-porter criteria. Haptic taste can contribute to the creation of a contemporary gastronomic critique that, consciously reaping the increasing power visual images have in the digital age, deconstructs them by arranging them along planes in which they are experienced and questioned. To this end, gastronomic criticism must begin to ask questions such as those suggested in this text.

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