

The Mind's Eye and Palate

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

At the turn of the last century, Auguste Escoffier divided kitchen tasks into a brigade system and ever since cookery has been taught in a way that prioritizes replication. This model has swayed the balance and dominated the changing face of kitchen and shopping habits, with people delegating the refinement of taste to a projected greater “other”. The recipe must be repeated! This constraint has merit when you are called upon to serve a banquet to a precise and exacting rhyme. A chef expects his brigade to snap into action at his command, and perform a perfected trick. The professional kitchen is a vertical hierarchy; maintaining standards is imperative to survival. Obedience holds the group in formation. This is less essential at home. A school of replication – however faintly imposed – is diminishing for it curbs instinct by devaluing individuality and creativity.

I did not go to culinary school. Rather, I come from a long line of cooks and gardeners, and so was initiated at an early age, spending time with my family in both kitchen and garden, planting, harvesting, tasting and cooking. When I ascended to the world of the professional kitchen, I

became apprentice to a great chef and mentor whose refined ways of doing I was able to glean, and over time, adapt to my own rhythm. This afforded me the tools to communicate a vision I had sensed but not had the means to execute in childhood. By the time I had a kitchen under my own jurisdiction, my approach to cooking had metamorphosed into a rolling form of structured improvisation. The menu was ever evolving, to reflect the transiting seasons. Primed with an awareness of who is to be fed and an understanding of the ingredients at hand, the cook's objective is simply to resolve how to optimize the vitality and nutritional integrity of raw materials. Peremptory recipes in this context are a hindrance. They clutter and intellectualize what is essentially a sensorial journey.

Taste is experienced with the taste buds upon the tongue, whereas flavor, an altogether more ephemeral and volatile affair, is experienced by the olfactory glands and the nose. The aspiring cook should encourage taste to lie subtle and clean, and flavor to flower and gently stimulate the palate. For both cook and gourmand, sensory references to perfectly ripe produce act as guide and trigger to the imagination. These references serve to crystallize cookery into a sensory vision that operates in two realms simultaneously: the outer reality of the produce available, and the inner potential of your imagination to compose menus in harmony to your mind's eye and palate. The more connected you become to the inner realm, the more capable you become as a cook. You dare to improvise. The challenge is to maintain a minimum level of curiosity and to have fun whilst you are doing it.

A child's palate is a blank canvas and instinctively open to opportunity, eager to explore and curiously graze, all whilst curating a sensory flavor bank that, once acquired, serves as a companion for life. The quality of a sensorial reference is determined by a lottery of sorts – by birth, hemisphere, altitude, and the capacity of parents to cultivate their children's senses. Once savored, natural produce at the height of its season is ingrained as a sense memory upon the palate. Ripe fruit seduces the eye, then the nose, and tastes just as it smells. The equivalent seduction tactics court our senses across the comestible realms. Those who benefit from the archetypal assets of a given ingredient innately skip a step ahead. They are equipped to improvise and strategically adjust their cookery according to the quality of the ingredients before them. Those lacking precise sensory references must perpetually reinvent the wheel.

A cook needs to be both disciplined and free. There is no shortcut to mastering basic skills. Haste is not the answer; rather time. Cooks who dash about chasing the moment rather than owning it are prone to upsetting the rhythm of things. Better by far to learn to execute a task gently with care. In time it will become a reflex, a device at your disposal. Cooking should be like a dance. If you can be disciplined enough to cook to the potential of your skills, tools, and raw materials, there is very little that cannot be done. The broader your skill set, the freer and more confident you are to give sway to your imagination. In turn your cooking comes to be shaped and formed by your senses. The ideal is to visualize and savor

the potential of produce in your mind's eye, then to consolidate sensory marvel and nutritional sustenance. Cooking is shaped by vogues of humor, hunger, and inspiration. The ingredients and the method chosen with which to cook them are ever liable to change. A cook's every gesture has its own intrinsic sensory justification. Given the same ingredients, any two people will execute an individual sequence of controlled actions and deliver quite distinct results.

When curiosity, preparation, and opportunity converge in the kitchen, the way forward is to improvise. To live by your senses, in the moment, all whilst focused upon converging food to table with the very minimum of transformation. The golden law of improvisation is to say "yes" and then "adjust". This becomes possible when awareness fuses with understanding to reveal a breadth of options that lead to your goal. In short to improvise is to maintain both a bird's eye view and a sharp and clear super objective, juggling as you go the duality of internal and external stimuli that define your approach.

Let the menu come to you; survey season and occasion for guidance. First consider who is to be fed: the young, the elderly, the hardworking, the idle, strangers, kin? The who, why, when, and where of it reveal pointers as to *what* to cook. Each atmosphere has its own quality of hunger and informs the choice of produce. At market, with your audience in mind, react to the produce before you. The seed of an idea will emerge, and slowly but surely a menu befitting the occasion suggests itself. When composing menus, I draw upon sensory references – garnered from a lifetime of grazing – that act as triggers to colors, flavors, textures, and tastes that stand timelessly fixed upon my palate. These sensorial references in turn unmask a host of natural synergies – simple associations of flavors that when eaten together transcend their individual qualities. Think: melon and cardamom, tomatoes and lovage, eggs and ginger, asparagus and tarragon, rabbit and sage, grappa and coffee, wild strawberries and flowering mint. It is the vitality an ingredient projects that guides and informs the cook how to best use it. When you apply method to ingredient, you are free. You discover the ingredient before you and you intuitively decide how best to proceed, even if that means to leave well alone and celebrate the ingredient raw, just as it is. The kitchen is a theater for instinct.

Ambitious restaurant cooks aspire to legitimacy. They are concerned with "a standard of gastronomy", often at the expense of pleasure. This quest for what has been by consensus deemed "perfection" is a reflex that requires individual skill, but it is hardly the way to cook at home. A grazing stroll through an orchard or an herb garden offers vitality and stimulation to rival a dozen courses of high gastronomy. Ideally, a meal should commence with the last breath of an ingredient soon to be over, consist in majority of ingredients at the height of their season, and conclude with early pickings of the next glut to come. In this way, the food shared at table becomes a celebration of a place and a moment in time.

The spike in public interest that food and cookery are enjoying has been deftly grasped upon by the industry; food preparation is the topic,

though its provenance rarely the focus. Dietary choices have increasingly become an outward manifestation of social aspiration. Eating organic is a badge worn, yet often inquiry is arrested in development. Organic yes, and produced where, by whom, and all importantly – how? Too few of the players teach us about soil and water and sustainable models of production. Between the World Wars, when soil degradation was taken seriously, there was a glimmer of hope; visionaries such as Rudolph Steiner with his concept of biodynamics strove to address farming practices that would restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony. As ever, a brave band of independent producers prevails, folk standing tall and farming by natural methods, fighting for a sustainable future – individuals who understand and respect Mother Nature’s delicate capacity for growth and renewal. As people find themselves increasingly disconnected from seasonal ingredients and the sources and methods of food production, the more dulled their senses become. Their knack for seeking out what the body needs is eroded.

The day the aspiring cook knows his seasons and has equipped his mind’s eye and palate with the sensory flavor bank that is nature’s larder, a spark is lit. He hones the basic skills of sourcing and caring for produce, and he begins to use his tools as extensions of the mind’s eye. Cookery then becomes a joyful journey of discovery. One becomes familiar on a seasonal, sensual and textured level with the wealth of natural synergies that occur between the disparate realms that make up nature’s bounty. Once you have mastered roasting, simmering, emulsifying, and are aptly extracting the vitality and essence from the ingredients at hand, then perhaps you are ready to cast aside the shackles of replication and improvise. Food should be fun. Cookery with a disciplined backbone becomes so. A window opens up to a land of instinctive improvisation where there are no rules – only what one aspires to taste.