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HESTON BLUMENTHAL, COOKERY TV AND THE CULINARY FIELD

Number of children	Number of families
0	10
1	8
2	4
3	2
4	1
5	1

The British chef Heston Blumenthal is at the forefront of a well-publicized shift within high-end restaurant cuisine towards avant-garde innovation and experimentation. At the same time, Blumenthal has increasingly pursued a parallel career as a television chef. This article considers how Blumenthal's TV shows rework the conventions of British cookery television through their foregrounding of cooking as an intellectual and aesthetic practice. It argues that this marks a break with the dominant form of TV cookery in the UK, in which cuisine is an achievable lifestyle practice, offering the promise of self-transformation and improvement. Using the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Stephen Mennell, the article discusses the ways in which such a televised demonstration of artistic integrity and autonomy has been used as a means to brand the celebrity chef as "a culinary alchemist" and to convert the symbolic profits accruing from culinary distinction into economic profits.

Keywords: television cookery, TV chefs, culinary field, taste, Heston Blumenthal, food

Introduction

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Heston Blumenthal is often ranked among the top chefs in the world, and his restaurant, The Fat Duck at Bray, regularly features at the top end of lists of the world's finest restaurants. Although the UK has a wide array of celebrity chefs, commentators frequently position Blumenthal at the cutting edge of international gastronomy, characterized by apparently outlandish signature dishes such as snail porridge and egg and bacon ice cream. However, as a chef-proprietor in the economically-risky restaurant industry, Blumenthal has followed many of his British contemporaries in pursuing a higher media profile through television. Having first appeared on the Discovery Channel in 2005, his public profile was raised by two series for the BBC: *In Search of Perfection* (2006) and *Heston Blumenthal: Further Adventures in Search of Perfection* (2007). These programs focused on a series of kitchen experiments, in which Blumenthal attempted to "perfect" popular dishes. Two series for Channel 4 followed in 2009: a documentary following Blumenthal's attempts to reinvigorate an ailing brand of roadside diners in *Big Chef Takes on Little Chef*, and *Heston's Feasts*, in which the chef conjured up historically-inspired gastronomic extravaganzas for celebrity guests.

This article focuses on two interrelated themes: how Blumenthal has reworked the generic conventions of British cookery TV and how his TV shows act as a vehicle for consolidating the chef's brand. We identify how his shows increasingly mark a break with both the didactic approach to

culinary skills and the more recent preoccupation with lifestyle in TV cookery. We also draw on work on both the culinary and artistic fields to highlight how Blumenthal's shows privilege the aesthetic dimensions of the cooking process and the sensory elements of cuisine. We suggest that these features serve to accentuate the display of the chef's creative and aesthetic practices and tastes, helping to cement Blumenthal's image as an autonomous artist rather than a TV chef. While TV cookery is normally underpinned by the *promise* that culinary tastes and skills can be democratized, Blumenthal's shows mainly work to democratize knowledge about the chef's brand image.

Artistic and Culinary Fields

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In this section we discuss developments in top-end cuisine through Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "field" to contextualize our reading of Heston Blumenthal's brand-image and to understand his intervention into the rather different arena of TV cookery. Using Bourdieu and a range of other theorists, we explore the idea that the culinary field is periodically reshaped around ideas of a gastronomic avant-garde which brings together haute cuisine and the artistic avant-garde.

Bourdieu's work on the cultural field attempts to capture the play of structure and agency—or, as he puts it, "position" and "position-taking"—within any expressive practice. A creative field, he argues, is a "*field of forces* but also a *field of struggles* [which] transforms or conserves this field of forces" (Bourdieu 1993: 30). He observes that the field is subject to periodic processes of "deroutinization" in which particular agents attempt to make radical breaks with the established canons and orthodoxies of their field while remaining within the constraints of its internal dynamics. Within the artistic field, Bourdieu draws a strong distinction between two poles of artistic reward: on the one hand is "heteronomous" art which corresponds to "large-scale" production and whose reward takes the form of economic success, honors and a wider legitimacy.

"Autonomous" art, on the other hand, corresponds to "restricted" production, and its reward is "the degree of recognition accorded by those who recognize no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize" (Bourdieu 1993: 38). Within this notion of avant-garde production, any economic profits are deferred in favor of the respect of one's peers. Over time, however, such deferred rewards can be recouped as financial wealth. "The establishment of an autonomous sub-field," he suggests, "is opposed to the heteronomous sub-field as an anti-economic economy based on the refusal of commerce and 'the commercial.'" But while the autonomous artist renounces "short-term economic profits" in order to

concentrate on the acquisition of “symbolic, long-term profits,” Bourdieu makes it clear that these are “ultimately reconvertible into economic profits” (Bourdieu 1993: 54). While there are problems applying this to the culinary field as even the most autonomous chef still needs to be aware of economic profits in order to keep a restaurant open, we will go on to demonstrate how these tendencies towards “heteronomy” and “autonomy” are still very much at play within the culinary field. We are interested in the extent to which Heston Blumenthal is represented as an autonomous artist, but also how he negotiates a position for this form of aesthetic practice within the far less “pure” field of TV entertainment.

In some ways, fields are durable phenomena which create the conditions for, and limitations on, particular forms of action over generations. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (2001) argues that the culinary field was first established in France in the years following the 1789 Revolution. As aristocratic kitchens were closed, cooks sought work in the new space of the restaurant, an arena in which new food tastes could be publicized and legitimated, and which “marked all diners as members of the elite” (Ferguson 2001: 13). However, to redefine the prosaic activity of dining out as a phenomenon of a higher moral and intellectual order, Ferguson argues that it was essential for gastronomic writers to produce “culinary texts of indirection” which aestheticized the dining experience by transforming food into literature. At this stage, therefore, gastronomy emerged as part of the literary field. This literary heritage continues to have an impact on the culinary field. In our analysis of *Heston’s Feasts* we demonstrate how the series not only draws on the literary heritage of gastronomy, but also produces a televisual form of the gastronomic text of indirection.

Despite the continuities that can clearly be observed, however, fields are also subject to moments of deroutinization. Contemporary restaurant cooking is most clearly marked by the influence of *nouvelle cuisine*. Emerging in France from 1970, this movement reinflected the status of the skilled chef within the culinary field, transforming them from an artisan to an entrepreneur with an “artistic” vision. Whereas the chef in classical cuisine usually worked for a restaurant owner, *nouvelle cuisine* emphasized the economic and cultural “autonomy of the chef” (Rao *et al.* 2003: 798). This was manifested in the rise of “chef-proprietor” who employed a distinctive “signature” style to market their restaurants (Gillespie 1994). This idea of the chef as artist-entrepreneur was further enabled by changing discourses of creativity within the culinary field. *Nouvelle cuisine* has been described as “a conceptualist avant-garde” offering customers “the shock of the new” (Ferguson and Zukin 1998: 94), and as a reaction against the “ostentation and fakery” of classical cuisine “triggered” by wider artistic movements associated with May 1968 (Rao *et al.* 2003: 806). However, rather than being outsider artists, these new

chefs were frequently already established within the culinary field and kept faith with the techniques that were fundamental to classical cuisine. Nouvelle cuisine may have sought to break free from the constraints of classical cuisine, but it did so “using old cooking techniques with new ingredients, or using old cooking techniques with old ingredients in new ways” (Rao *et al.* 2003: 806). Following Bourdieu, then, the field was “conserved” as much as it was “transformed.”

As nouvelle cuisine calcified into a new orthodoxy, it began to lose its ascendancy. In the late 1990s, one challenge came from the growth of bistros and *cuisine rassurante*, or “comfort food” in France (Rao *et al.* 2003: 820), part of a wider shift towards “authenticity” echoed in the United States and the United Kingdom (Johnston and Bauman 2007). An alternative challenge to both French culinary hegemony and the fetishization of “authenticity” was posed by the Catalan chef Ferran Adrià. Not only is Adrià frequently identified as the pioneer of the new forms of gastronomic creativity associated with Blumenthal, both chefs have collaborated (with Harold McGee and Thomas Keller) on a “Statement on the ‘new cookery’” (Adrià *et al.* 2006). In order to contextualize Blumenthal, we briefly delineate some key features of Adrià’s reconceptualization of gastronomic creativity.

Adrià is a largely self-taught chef. Although he has frequently been associated with a science-led “molecular gastronomy,” he conceives of his own practice as a scientific, philosophical and artistic “quest for novel concepts and techniques,” necessitating “a commitment to creativity on a daily basis” (Svejenova *et al.* 2007: 544, 547). Whereas nouvelle cuisine largely accepted the technical legitimacy of classical cuisine, for Adrià, playing with technique is at the heart of creativity: for example, he uses foams and gels as gastronomic media through which he can play with taste, texture, temperature and shape. His culinary style is frequently described as “deconstruction,” as it takes apart traditional dishes and reconstructs them in unfamiliar ways. As Svejenova *et al.* (2007: 546) suggest “This allows Adrià to introduce humor and irony, playing with the culinary memory of the diners and surprising them.” This is reinforced in the “Statement,” where Adrià *et al.* (2006: 25) claim to “Respect our rich history and at the same time attempt to play a part in the history of tomorrow.” This emphasis on deconstruction, form, irony and memory are, as we go on to show, all elements of Blumenthal’s televisual “texts of indirection.”

By conceiving of his culinary practice as an aesthetic practice of “deconstruction,” Adrià explicitly takes a position within the intellectual and artistic fields rather than simply relying upon food critics to legitimize and interpret his work. This position-taking is analogous to the creative “break” that Bourdieu (1993: 61) identifies in the work of conceptual artist

Marcel Duchamp in which the modern artist becomes self-creating and self-theorizing: while previous artists had to be “made by the field,” now “the production of the producer as artist is the precondition for the production of objects as works of art.” Accentuating this sense of creativity as rupture, Adrià has spoken of “The great revolution that happened in 1993 ... when we started to play out our very own language, *whether people liked it or not*” (Dougary 2009: 19; emphasis added). Likewise, the “Statement” suggests that the authors’ “expressive” practices could “be the most complex and comprehensive of the performing arts.” So while Adrià does not claim to be a *fine* artist, he situates his culinary practice within a conceptual framework drawn from modern art. Moreover Adrià also takes on the role of art historian, cataloguing his own work in a series of coffee-table books that chart the changing menu of El Bulli (Svejenova *et al.* 2007: 545). Of course, Adrià’s reputation has also been built by critics and guidebooks, but these typically reinforce the sense of his cuisine as a creative practice by, for example, drawing parallels with his fellow Catalan, Salvador Dali (Yek and Struwe 2008: 36). Moreover, Adrià has won recognition within the artistic field itself through his invitation to participate in the 2007 Dokumenta exhibition of avant-garde art in Kassel (Jones 2007: 6). This position-taking within the culinary field enables us to understand how a new vanguard culinary position has been established. It is the tendencies towards autonomous art production that mark out Adrià alongside a handful of his peers, prominent among whom has been Heston Blumenthal.

Therefore, Heston Blumenthal’s image as a culinary star is indebted to Adrià’s position-taking within the culinary field. Blumenthal also had little formal culinary training, but set about developing an independent restaurant in which he could develop an individual style. The Fat Duck was opened in Bray in 1995, close to Britain’s (then) only three-star Michelin restaurant, the Waterside Inn. Early menus featured classic and familiar French dishes such as haricot blanc soup and rump of lamb with ratatouille, but a hint of his future direction could be found in the jasmine tea and orange flower water brulée, “a move from the classic to the baroque” (Fort 1995: 47). Reviewers soon started to identify some of the key elements that would become integral to Blumenthal’s reputation and brand-image: his “fanatical” levels of care and precision in a “search for perfection” and “purity of essence” (Green 1995: 43; Bateman 1999: 26). Critics represented him as a singular artist, “a genuine original” (Macleod 1999: 42). This helped to cement his reputation as a “chef’s chef,” one offered recognition by those in a position to recognize.

The critical reception of Blumenthal also shifted as he gained increasing recognition for a “scientific” approach towards cooking, echoing Adrià’s experiments with technique and process. Press reports

recounted how Blumenthal, a scientific auto-didact, sought out scientific experts to help him master cooking processes. While his personal appearance resonated with stereotypes of the boffin (complete with safety-goggle styled spectacles and his lab-coat style chef's whites), Blumenthal used science to not only "perfect" culinary technique, but also to reflect on the nature of consciousness (Moore 2001: 6). His cuisine challenges diners to reflect on the seemingly obvious categories—for example, the distinction between sweet and savory, hot and cold, raw and cooked—that organize our normal culinary and cultural experience (Douglas, 1997). The Fat Duck's menu began to confuse different meal events by including breakfast goods such as (parsnip) cereal and (snail) porridge in a lunch or dinner menu. It also disrupted the expected sequence of a meal, from savory to sweet, in a dessert of bacon and egg ice cream. In all cases, the intended effect is not to overturn culinary categories but to make them visible, thus heightening the diner's experience of them. As Blumenthal comments, "I am interested in the brain-to-palate connection ... If you were told that you were about to eat frozen crab bisque, you know what to expect. But with the word ice cream in your head, then your brain starts preparing for something sweet" (cited in Derbyshire 2001: 16) Although science has become negatively associated with food as a source of risk (see, for example, Ashley *et al.* 2004; Bhattacharyya 1998; Caplan 2000; Lupton 1999), Blumenthal privileges risk as a source of pleasure and excitement.¹ In this way he challenges the privileging of authenticity within the contemporary culinary field by acting as a "culinary modernist" (Laudan 2001), using his embrace of science to demonstrate the artifice of culinary conventions.

In this section we have identified how the culinary field has been unsettled by culinary modernizers who identify themselves as an aesthetic avant-garde.² Blumenthal and Adrià have explicitly challenged contemporary orthodoxies around "authenticity" through their culinary playfulness and use of scientific techniques. By playing with the formal techniques of cuisine, they position themselves as chefs who identify with "a process of purification," engaged in an "analysis of essence" (Bourdieu 1993: 264). The reputation of these chefs has been built through self-theorization (typically through high-end culinary "art books") and recognition from reviewers. However, what concerns us here is what happens when an avant-garde practice consumed by an elite dining public is mediated through the far more popular—and populist—terrain of television.

As we have seen, by the early 2000s Blumenthal had confirmed his reputation as an innovator and artist within the culinary field, earning his third Michelin star and *Restaurant* magazine's award for “Second Best Restaurant in the World” in 2004. However, it was not immediately apparent how entry into the world of television would impact on his reputation, given the threat posed to “autonomy” by the more “heteronomous” activity of being a “TV chef.” For Blumenthal to maintain the “purity” of his brand image, it is unsurprising that his early forays into TV cookery—BBC2's *In Search of Perfection* and *Further Adventures in Search of Perfection*—took a primarily “Cook-Ed” format, foregrounding the chef and his skills (Strange 1998). This format enabled Blumenthal to showcase elements of his existing brand image (perfection, science, obsession, deconstruction) while also pushing the conventions of the didactic cookery show.

In many ways, the program remained true to the public service ethos that has characterized much of the BBC's cookery output. Although Blumenthal's own voiceover repeatedly reminds us that he is the chef at one of the world's top restaurants, the two series were ostensibly directed at the domestic cook seeking to acquire new skills in order to join him in “the pursuit of perfection.” To achieve this, the conventions of the didactic cookery show were married with those of popular science programs of the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Tomorrow's World* and *How!*, both in the spirit of experimentation and in the use of legitimate scientists as on-screen experts. As such, the series marked a partial departure from the trajectory of the BBC's cookery programming by turning away from the lifestyle preoccupations of shows such as *The Naked Chef* and appearing to return to an older tradition of skills acquisition (see Brunsdon 2004).³ For example, the episode “Chicken Tikka Masala” shows Blumenthal building his own tandoor and explaining its physics, while “Fish Pie” demonstrates fish being smoked in a hay-stuffed squirrel trap cooked over a barbeque.

As these examples show, what at first appear to be achievable skills are in fact obsessive refinements, requiring time and equipment which is unlikely to be available to even the most enthusiastic domestic cook. Despite offering the viewer “elements you can—and should—try at home,” the emphasis is less on teaching the audience to make the complete recipe and more on making cutting-edge techniques comprehensible and (sometimes) accessible. Indeed, despite devoting entire thirty-minute episodes to a single dish such as “Bangers and Mash” and “Spaghetti Bolognese,” the viewer still needs to visit the BBC website for instructions on how to complete some elements of the dish. Therefore, while Blumenthal demystifies processes, he marks his distinction from the domestic cook and from those TV chefs who

promise professional results in the domestic kitchen. Rather than diluting his standards to meet the demands of television, the generic conventions of the cookery show are stretched to meet the demands of Blumenthal's obsessiveness.

As the sleeve notes for the show explain, each program is built around the perfection of Britain's "most well-known and abused dishes ... which represent the essence of our culinary heritage." Some episodes are dedicated to domestic family favorites, such as treacle tart and ice cream and roast chicken and roast potatoes, while others are take-out favorites such as fish and chips or pizza, or commercially-produced confections such as the Black Forest gâteau. Offering the TV viewer insights into the culinary technique of deconstruction, Blumenthal takes apart a familiar dish in order to reconstruct its most "perfect" version. In this way, the show moves beyond a didactic approach to foreground the chef's signature style and vanguard culinary technique.

At the same time, the series deploys a more emotional and sensory response to food. In each episode, a vox-pop sequence shows Blumenthal interrogating people about their understanding of the essentials of the dish in question. Their responses frequently invoke childhood pleasures in eating—unsurprisingly, as the dishes were selected to "tap into a deep well of nostalgia and memory" (Blumenthal 2006: 186). As Blumenthal explains:

Most of them were comfort foods, the food of childhood, and everyone's view of them was overlaid by a sense of personal history ... I needed ... to capture that nostalgia, to bring to each dish the kind of trigger that would transport people back to their cherished memories of that food. (Blumenthal 2006: 186)

Like Adrià, Blumenthal plays with culinary memories and such nostalgia is not limited to the sense of taste. This can be clearly seen in "Fish Pie" where Blumenthal reconstructs not only the culinary ingredients of the pie but also the "sensory elements" of memory, sound and seascape which he sees as integral to the dish. This is evoked in various ways. The taste and texture of a breadcrumb, anchovy and seaweed "sand" and accompanying "foaming waves" are complemented by the aural dimension of a seaside soundscape. This not only cements Blumenthal's culinary style as one preoccupied with the sensory elements of dining but also continually refers the viewer back to the "original" experience which can be gained in his restaurant, in the dish "The Sounds of the Sea."

Such nostalgia has a complex relationship with notions of culinary authenticity and heritage. As noted earlier, Blumenthal's initial reputation was made on his obsessive attention to French traditions. This is referenced in the series through travel sequences involving a pilgrimage to a particular

foodstuff's place of origin—for example, the countryside around Lyon for the *poulet de Bresse* and the United States for the burger. These sections fit with a longer tradition of public service cookery programming in which the viewer is informed about the origins of foodstuffs and the culinary culture of other people (Strange 1998). But while Blumenthal respects artisanal traditions—and observes limits to how much dishes can be tinkered with (he frets, for example, about “de-burgering the burger”)—the series does not attempt to establish a clear continuity between these sequences and his own practice. As the book of the series notes, the depth of other food cultures can act as a brake on artistic creativity. “It seems to me,” he writes “that, in some ways, it is easier to explore culinary innovation in Britain precisely because we have no strong food tradition to enchain us” (Blumenthal 2006: 182). While this may be open to question, such refusal of gastronomic tradition fits comfortably with Blumenthal's image as an innovator and modernist. Furthermore, whereas many contemporary cookery shows use travel segments to search out “authentic” traditions “as a kind of antidote to contemporary food culture marked by a scientization and rationalization of food production” (Lewis 2008: 59), what distinguishes Blumenthal from many of his peers is his willingness to play with these categories of “authentic” and “inauthentic” cuisine. While “authentic” artisanal food traditions offer “security and comfort” (Lewis 2008), Blumenthal's cuisine invites the television viewer to reflect on such seemingly obvious and natural categories.

As we have seen, Blumenthal and Adrià privilege “deconstruction” in the kitchen as a means of distilling memory and using scientific creativity to initiate a form of culinary progress that is critically engaged with tradition. We suggest that *In Search of Perfection* takes a similarly experimental approach to the tradition of the TV cookery program. The traditional ingredients of cookery TV which focus on travel, technique and produce (Strange 1998) are not used to offer guidance on making something to eat or making over one's life, but are reassembled to focus on Blumenthal's cooking practice as an intellectual and experimental activity. This play with generic expectations would strongly mark his next foray into avant-garde TV cookery.⁴

Heston's Feasts: A Culinary (Televisual) Text of Indirection

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Heston Blumenthal's Perfect Christmas (2007) was the chef's last program for the BBC. The show breaks with the didactic recipe format, focusing on the production and consumption of a spectacular meal event attended by an eclectic bunch of celebrities. However, some educational elements remain: alongside sequences that educate the viewer about Blumenthal's

technical-creative processes, cooking and dining sequences are also interspersed with travel sequences to Oman and Siberia to source myrrh and reindeer milk. Likewise, a trip to a perfume laboratory teaches viewers about the sensory dimensions of a memorable meal. However, while broadcast within the *Perfection* series, this Christmas special also marked a significant departure from its format. First, the Cook-Ed function of the show is no longer tied to the recipe but to an education in the appreciation of the sensual, creative and aesthetic processes involved in Blumenthal's cuisine. Second, the celebrity diners provide a means of recognition for Blumenthal's culinary achievement and add to a process of reputation-building. For example, actor Richard E. Grant describes Blumenthal as "completely insanelly, bonkersly, Englishly fantastic. You can't make it at home, so you know there's one person on the planet who's making it, this mad inventor." Third, the program intensifies and foregrounds the importance of memory to the dining experience, not only by playing with food memories but also by producing an unforgettable and unique meal event that would live on in diners' memories. This impermanence and unreproducibility marked the event as an auratic experience where the affect produced by the meal is analogous to the experience of the work of art intensified by the physical presence of the artist. In this way, the show departs from much TV cookery by featuring an "original" and unique food occasion which is very clearly a product of Blumenthal's creative and culinary labor (Hansen 2008: 57).

This format was the basis for Channel 4's *Heston's Feasts* (2009). In each of the four episodes, Blumenthal creates for celebrity diners a memorable and magical feast evoking a particular historical era: the Victorians, the Middle Ages, the Tudors and the Romans. The series underscores Blumenthal's respect for tradition as well as his pursuit of novel processes. The viewer witnesses him scouring antique cookbooks in search of inspiration and, at the outset of each episode, Blumenthal states "the future of cooking lies in the secrets of the past. I'm on a mission to use myth, science and history to create the greatest feasts ever seen." These features give the programs a scholarly feel that is accentuated by literary references: for example, the Victorian feast is inspired by the spirit of the age mediated through Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. In this indebtedness to literature, Blumenthal plays with the connections between the gastronomic and literary fields identified by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson and Stephen Mennell.

For Mennell, recipe books are a primarily feminine form of cultural production, while "gastronomic literature" is the provenance of male authors. He identifies four characteristics of this style of writing, two of which concern us here. First, gastronomic literature aims to provide "a brew of history, myth and history serving of myth," and second, it is a nostalgic

“evocation of memorable meals” (Mennell 1996: 271). Blumenthal’s characterization of his own practice as using “myth, science and history” corresponds with Mennell’s first definition, while his emphasis on the meal as the source of memory corresponds with the second. In this way, *Feasts* draws on the conventions of gastronomic literature to reconceptualize cookery TV. Like Mennell’s gastronomes, Blumenthal’s role is to transform the creation of food into an activity of a higher order. For example, while volunteers on the street largely enjoy his experiments with a Victorian recipe for mock turtle soup, Blumenthal concludes that this incarnation of the soup lacks the element of the sublime he demands from his creations. To perfect his take on mock turtle soup, Blumenthal subjects it to further processes of refinement:

All I’ve done is made consommé, froze it, ice-filtered it over night ... then I just froze it again, put it in a centrifuge... spun all of the clear broth from the ice, and then I froze it again in a minus 80 freezer and all I needed to do after that was pop it in the freeze-dryer and then simply add gelatine and Madeira.

However, even this does not exhaust the process: Blumenthal makes a soup cube from this using a “Mad Hatter” fob-watch shaped mold before wrapping it in gold-leaf to form the basis of *his* mock turtle soup. The ingot is placed in a tea-pot, and the resultant brew is poured over a turnip and swede gel “mock turtle egg” adorned with enoki mushrooms, a terrine of cured pork fat and braised ox tongue served with “lightly-pickled” turnip, cubes of black truffle gel, a scattering of mustard seeds and a few micro-leaves.

Many top chefs seek inspiration from the recipes of the past. However, what distinguishes Blumenthal’s use of the antiquarian recipe for mock turtle soup is that it is merely a stimulus for the chef-artist’s creativity. Furthermore, it is not the sole inspiration as his culinary process is also infused with literary sources, scientific experimentation and historical research. Across the series, historical recipes serve as stimuli in terms of what they signify (theatre, fun, experimentation, naughtiness) as much as their actual ingredient and techniques. Indeed, the recipes usually go through a series of versions and refinements as Blumenthal and various guinea pigs reject the “authentic” recipe in favor of a series of “improvements.” While *Feasts* seems to be an exercise in grounding his practice in tradition, the series is a demonstration of the ways in which tradition can be “invented” by the chef-artist. Indeed, it is the production of the chef as artist and theoretician that is “the precondition for the production of these objects [meals] as works of art” (Bourdieu 1993: 61). The TV series acts as a “culinary text of indirection,” enabling Blumenthal to aestheticize and theorize his own work. While the celebrity diners act as a

chorus who affirm Blumenthal's achievement, it is his own commentary that legitimates his practice as "art."

For Mennell (1996: 266), the original writers and readers of gastronomic literature were members of an elite. However, over time "whether they intended to or not," these texts "performed a democratizing function" by disseminating knowledge "of elite standards beyond the elite." Likewise, while *Feasts* draws unashamedly on aristocratic traditions in its conception, ingredients and service, it might be thought to perform a democratizing function by disseminating knowledge of the practices and techniques of high-end cuisine to a wider audience, using some of the conventions of popular science, history and arts programming. The presence of celebrity diners drawn from popular entertainment—for example *Blind Date*'s Cilla Black and Atomic Kitten's Liz McClarnon—could also be seen to make Blumenthal and his creations more accessible. However, as David Bell argues, TV chefs—like gourmands in general—inhabit the paradoxical position of "marking distinction while democratizing tastes" (Bell 2002). Indeed, *Feasts*—in which the audience is witness to a one-off spectacular event rather than encouraged to "try this at home"—makes very little attempt to democratize anything but Blumenthal's brand image. So while much TV cookery might seem as both a televisual equivalent of the cookery book and also an extended advert for the book of the series, *Feasts* transforms the relationship between television and written texts. With no book of the series to date, the show can be seen to perform two functions. First, the only product being publicized is Blumenthal and The Fat Duck experience. Second, by breaking the relationship between the TV cookery program and the written recipe book, the series gestures towards television as a proper medium for producing "culinary texts of indirection" in which the activity of dining out is redefined as an phenomenon of a higher intellectual and artistic order.

While the preceding discussion may suggest that *Feasts* is freighted with the heaviness of high-brow cultural forms, there are also more popular traditions at play which tie into Blumenthal's brand image as a playful and "wacky" cultural omnivore. Animated sequences draw on the visual style employed by Terry Gilliam in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Each episode includes a sequence which shows a childish delight in "naughtiness": for example, a "Victorian" dessert of absinthe jelly is wobbled by vibrators sourced from a sex shop and an ejaculating "Roman" cake is fashioned from white chocolate mousse and the children's confection, Space Dust. Taken together, these sequences suggest another version of nostalgia, this time Blumenthal's own pleasure in the memories of his 1970s childhood. As Leon Hunt (1998: 4) has noted, such resurrections of "the decade that taste forgot" offer a "distinctive set of pleasures"—not just a yearning for an unchallenged form of heterosexual masculinity (though there are

certainly elements of this in the series)—but also for a time “before the designer decade ... before style bibles and Armani pundits” (Hunt 1998: 17) and therefore before lifestyle TV’s particular notion of cultural legitimacy.

Finally, it is important to highlight the role of spectacle in *Feasts*. Some critics claim that TV cookery programs are a form of gastro-porn in which the viewers’ primary relationship to food is through the visual, with the accompanying cookbooks further depicting finished dishes of unattainable perfection (see, for example, Probyn 2000; Ray 2007). *Feasts* also places strong emphasis on the visual pleasures of cuisine, though the pleasures tend to be those of illusion and theatricality rather than the naturalistic depictions of gastro-porn. For example, Blumenthal painstakingly constructs a cockatrice (a mythical creature created from the body parts of other animals), releases four-and-twenty “blackbirds” from a pie, and fashions an edible dinner service. While Barry Smart argues that gastro-porn creates a spectacle based purely on visual pleasure where “the promised “*plaisirs de la table*” are never quite realized” (Smart 1994: 171), in *Feasts*, the role of the celebrity guests is to mediate the pleasure of eating Blumenthal’s food. In this way, rather than simply being tied to the visual, the celebrity guests affirm the multi-sensory experience of Blumenthal’s cuisine, responding with awe and wonder. This works to reaffirm the Blumenthal’s artistry in producing a singular meal event, popularizing his reputation as a chef without threatening the basis of his brand.

Conclusion: “The Willy Wonka of Modern British Cooking”

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In this article, we have demonstrated how Heston Blumenthal’s shows attempt to display avant-garde taste within a popular medium. In this way, these programs distinguish themselves from lifestyle TV’s commitments to the cultivation of legitimate dispositions and the importance of improving the self. Likewise, we have noted how Blumenthal’s series have shifted from the didactic cookery program’s emphasis on demystifying and (possibly) democratizing the chef’s skills, towards an increasing emphasis on the spectacle of Blumenthal himself.

One of the founding moments within the construction of the gastronomic field was the production of “culinary texts of indirection,” which transformed bodily pleasures into aesthetic and intellectual experiences. We have shown how *Feasts* produced a televisual form of textual indirection, which represented cooking as an intellectual and aesthetic practice. In this way, the show drew on existing associations between TV cookery and the visual aesthetics of food, but reworked generic conventions by incorporating the intellectual discourse of gastronomic

writing with its “brew of history and myth,” and its invocation of memory. While the dominant aesthetic of TV cookery has been overwhelmingly realist, *Feasts* explicitly references avant-garde artistic traditions. This cultural heritage is apparent in plans for a second series where the feasts are rumored to be inspired by fairy tales.

The series has also worked to brand Blumenthal in terms of his place within the restaurant industry, his position as a TV chef and as one of Channel 4's stable of cultural intermediaries. A remarkably consistent feature of Blumenthal's brand image has been his positioning as a “culinary alchemist” rather than just a food scientist. To be identified too strongly with science would risk its associations with pedantry, predictability and seriousness. The culinary alchemist, or “Willy Wonka” (Moore 2001) figure, by contrast blends science with magic, art and childlike wonder to produce one-off meal events that cannot be reproduced through the application of formulae. In this way, Blumenthal's entreaty, “Please don't try this at home,” marks his distance from the TV chef who offers practical advice to the domestic cook. Instead, the Blumenthal “magic” can only be fully experienced in all its sensory complexity by visiting The Fat Duck.

This branding represents a position-taking in relation to the conventions of the culinary field and, in particular, the convention of TV cookery. While there have been numerous attempts to innovate within cookery TV formats, those that focus on specific chefs have either settled into a new orthodoxy around lifestyle (for example, *Jamie at Home* and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *River Cottage* series) or offered behind-the-scenes insights into the chef and his world (for example, Gordon Ramsay's *The F-Word* and John Burton-Race's *The Return of the Chef*). This means that the representation of these chefs tends to meet the demands of generic convention rather than highlighting the skills and creativity upon which their culinary legitimacy was originally based. As a result, TV cookery offers chefs financial reward but at the potential expense of the undermining of their original brand image and reputation within the culinary field. We have demonstrated how Blumenthal has gained wider recognition for his brand by using new cookery formats to intensify his image and privilege the representation of his culinary skill. However, while this could be seen as a refusal to play the game, the emphasis on the “integrity” of his brand increases Blumenthal's opportunities for other kinds of profit. As Bourdieu argues:

Producers and vendors of cultural goods who “go commercial” condemn themselves, and not only from an ethical or aesthetic point of view, because they deprive themselves of the opportunities open to those ... who, by concealing from themselves and others the interests that are at stake in their practice, obtain the means of deriving profits from disinterestedness. (Bourdieu 1993: 75)

Therefore, like the autonomous artist, while in the first instance Blumenthal seeks the recognition of “those able to recognize,” in the long term the symbolic profits that accrue from culinary distinction “are ultimately reconvertable into economic profits” (Bourdieu 1993: 54). Indeed, as we finish this article, it was announced that Blumenthal plans to open a restaurant in London’s Knightsbridge. If this makes the potential gains of avant-garde disinterestedness clear, the new restaurant also demonstrates the potential of cookery TV in branding: according to *Decanter*, the venue “will take its inspiration from Blumenthal’s passion for the history of British gastronomy ... explored in his recent Channel 4 series, *Heston’s Feasts*” (Hughes 2009).

Notes

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- 1 However, these two conceptions of risk were conflated in well-publicized coverage of the temporary closure of The Fat Duck in 2009 after a suspected outbreak of food poisoning which was later revealed to be nothing more than seasonal norovirus.
- 2 There are a further series of chefs in the UK who are frequently associated with the use of science in the creative process and who are associated with the culinary experimentation of Blumenthal and/or Adrià. Examples include Sat Bains, Anthony Flinn, Simon Rogan and Paul Kitching.
- 3 Our focus here is primarily on British television. It is worth noting that science has featured in other cookery shows, notably *Ever Wondered About Food?* co-produced by the BBC and the Open University. We are grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for referring us to comparable US television programs. In particular, Alton Brown’s *Good Eats* on the Food Network predates Blumenthal’s TV experimentation.
- 4 *Big Chef Takes on Little Chef* (2009) was Blumenthal’s first series for Channel 4, and was released as part of a “Great British Food Fight” series, which also included contributions from Jamie Oliver, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Gordon Ramsay. The documentary focused on the reconstruction of a failing chain of British roadside diners and was in some ways distinct from Blumenthal’s other TV ventures as it featured very little of the avant-garde culinary experimentation for which he is celebrated. However, the series also deployed some important continuities with his other television work: people’s nostalgic memories of favorite meals were invoked in relation to Blumenthal’s attempts to re-enchant the Little Chef brand; notions of “authenticity,” seasonality and localness were eschewed in favor of industrialized techniques honed in The Fat Duck and a coterie of celebrities (most prominently a group of food writers) acted as a chorus to celebrate the cook and his achievement on behalf of the viewer.

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