

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S1878-450X(17)30129-4
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2018.01.001>
Reference: IJGFS90

To appear in: *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*

Received date: 15 October 2017
Accepted date: 15 January 2018

Cite this article as: Iñaki Martínez de Albeniz, Foundations for an Analysis of the Gastronomic Experience: from Product to Process, *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2018.01.001>

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Foundations for an Analysis of the Gastronomic Experience: from Product to Process.

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Abstract: In the professional field at least, cooking has shifted substantially. From being an activity that could only be framed in the service sector, considered in terms of mercantile competition and measured in terms of its product (GDP), it now constitutes an expert system open to intra- and interdisciplinary processes of innovation and the exchange of know-how. This new institutional configuration is a challenge to those who, in the belief that the *product* is the central dimension of high cuisine, continue to be comfortably installed in that common sense equation that states: “a chef provides food to a diner in a restaurant”. The challenge consists in being able to imagine contemporary high cuisine as a *process* that transgresses the physical and mental barriers of the restaurant, to cook something that is not immediately recognisable as “food” in the parameters of common sense, employing for that purpose disruptive codes and devices extraneous to the utensils of a kitchen and whose receiver is a diner who nourishes her/himself equally from both food and experiences. Gastronomic experience is the concept that articulates all these changes.

Key words: Gastronomy; social change; innovation; experience economy; techno-emotional cuisine.

1. Introduction

In a recent publication of the Basque Culinary Center commemorating forty years of so-called New Basque Cuisine, chef Hilario Arbelaitz, the owner of the Restaurante Zuberoa, recounts how one day his colleague Martín Berasategi came into his kitchen to say hello: “No one had ever shaken my hand in the kitchen” (BCC, 2016:85). This anecdote dating from the 1980s indicates that even until recently kitchens were impenetrable places, spaces where all exchange was prohibited. Professional kitchens were literally black boxes (Woolgar, 1993): what went in and what came out were known, but nobody knew what went on inside them.

Conversely, in a recent review of the three-star Azurmendi restaurant the food critic of the newspaper *El País*, Juan Carlos Capel, describes the gastronomic project headed by Eneko Atxa as follows: “a sum of gestures and attitudes that revolve around the kitchen (...) At the heart of this enclave there is an underlying framework formed of cooks, pastry chefs, producers, designers, anthropologists, scientists...”¹

A mere three decades separate these two realities. What has happened in the field of high cuisine for that restraint in matters of “gestures and attitudes” to have shifted to an awareness of their importance? For that *hermetically sealed kitchen*, closed even to professional colleagues, to have become a *framework open* to the concurrence of so many professionals and such diverse disciplines? How is it that something that was previously invisible is now understood in terms of making its processes visible?

My aim in this article is to answer these questions by discussing a fundamental change that has taken place in the field of gastronomy. For that purpose I make use of two contrasting terms that frequently appear in the controversies surrounding gastronomy in general and high cuisine in

¹ Capel, J.C. “Azurmendi, el universo verde de Eneko Atxa”, *El País*, Suplemento El Viajero, 5-5-2017.

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