



Scientific Paper

Discourse as driver of innovation in contemporary haute cuisine: The case of elBulli restaurant

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Abstract

This paper examines the case of elBulli restaurant, an organization central to the avant-garde movement that has revolutionized haute cuisine, to analyze an organization's ability to innovate and to enact changes within its field. The paper draws on ethnographic data to describe the role of one key driver of innovation: the systematic documentation and publishing of a discourse, prior to the mass use of social media. Three functions of a discourse that lead to the diffusion and institutionalization of innovations in the case under study are identified: (i) conceptualization, (ii) socialization and (iii) control. The analysis points to the potential contribution of discourse as a driver in other industries following creative paths. © 2013 AZTI-Tecnalia. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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Cuisine is a language that everyone speaks and understands. (Ferran Adrià, elBulli restaurant chef and co-owner, talks at Google company headquarters, USA, 2011).

Introduction

One of the most radical revolutions in the culinary industry has occurred in the last two decades. The knowledge and practices promoted by the avant-garde movement – commonly called “progressive cuisine”, “techno–emotional cuisine”, “molecular cuisine” or even “Modernist” cuisine – have led

to a profound questioning of what a restaurant is, what cooking is, and what it means to be a cook. This enterprise has resulted in the emergence of radical innovations that challenge the very foundations of knowledge that have long supported high-end cuisine. The impact of this effort is such that it has transcended the boundaries of the gastronomic field, stimulating interrogations in other forms of organizations, professions and industries.

This paper examines the case of an organization of central importance in the gastronomic avant-garde: elBulli restaurant. Drawing on ethnographic data, I describe how discourse – understood as written texts and documentations – was developed and managed by this iconic organization to disseminate its innovations way beyond the restaurant's local environment and, in so doing, enact changes in the gastronomic field at large.

elBulli is best known as a three-star *Michelin* restaurant² located in the province of Girona, Catalonia, Spain, which first opened in 1963. For an unprecedented five times *Restaurant Magazine* declared elBulli the “best restaurant in the world.”³

²The Michelin guide is the most renowned and influential guide in the European restaurant industry. This guide rates restaurants according to their culinary achievements. Three stars is the highest award that a restaurant can receive. Only a few restaurants in the world receive this award.

³In the years 2002, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009. In 2010 elBulli was nominated as the world's 2nd best restaurant in the San Pellegrino list. This

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So strong was its presence that several distinguished chefs now in the top of culinary rankings have worked in elBulli's kitchen.⁴ From 2008 until it closed on July 30th, 2011, elBulli restaurant received some 2 million requests for reservations and only 8000 diners sampled the 35-course prix fixe meal offered at the restaurant (Adrià et al., 2008). Working at elBulli was even more difficult than dining there: every season, of 3000 highly-trained cooks from all over the world who applied to get a slot as a “stagiaire” (apprentice/intern), elBulli accepted 32 (Abend, 2011, 13). The short schedule of elBulli exacerbated these difficulties of access. The restaurant was open only half the year so as to dedicate half the year to experimentation and creativity. Access is now cut off entirely. In 2011, Ferran Adrià, the restaurant's chef and co-owner, announced the closing of elBulli restaurant for a period of 2 years, to reopen as a nonprofit research center of creativity under the name of “elBulli Foundation”. Adrià's quest for a creative culinary style and the main processes and triggering mechanisms that led to elBulli restaurant's development has been carefully examined by Svejnova et al. (2010).

Using the case of elBulli restaurant, I turn our attention to a driver of innovation that remains underexplored in contemporary studies of haute cuisine: the formalization and diffusion of a discourse. I argue that the transformations that have occurred in the high-end restaurant industry in the last decade can not only illuminate our knowledge of new foods or preparations of foods but also, and still more significantly, deepen our understanding of how innovation can be mobilized within an institutional context. My empirical case centers on innovation as conceived and executed by elBulli restaurant, which especially sheds light on the role that a discourse plays in encouraging transformations in haute cuisine, at a time when social media and Smartphones were not yet prevalent in the gastronomic landscape.

Theoretical framework

Many definitions of the term innovation have been proposed in academic literature. Most useful for the purposes of this analysis is a definition offered by the organizational scholar Andrew H. Van de Ven who describes innovation as: “the development and implementation of new ideas by people who over time engage in transactions with others within an institutional context” (Van de Ven, 1986, p. 591). I suggest that this conceptualization is important, as it emphasizes two aspects that are critical for understanding culinary innovations: first,

innovation is regarded as a process that is produced in practice by participants of a given field; and second, innovation is defined as contextually situated, that is, as novel ideas that are enacted within a particular domain. This limitation is enlightening for the case under study since it implies that the innovations – and their impact – encouraged by elBulli restaurant must be interpreted and assessed within the relevant context of high-end cuisine. I will elaborate by drawing on the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. When talking about the cultural production of artistic work, Bourdieu (1983) pointed out that works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are accessible and recognized by a given audience. Building on this line of argumentation, I propose that similarly to a work of art, culinary innovations exist only if other participants in the gastronomic field can recognize them as such.

But what are the mediating factors that encourage the diffusion, recognition and institutionalization of culinary innovations? Sociological studies have highlighted the role of different factors involved in the “construction of taste” in the gastronomic field. Taken to the realm of innovation research, we can say that these factors that mediate taste also drive innovation in haute cuisine. At a macro-level, sociologists have pointed out the effects of social and cultural forces in shaping judgments of tastes and food (Mennell, 1985). Recent studies also stress the significance of political tensions in determining the salience of particular foods and industries at a national level (De Soucey, 2010). Another line of analysis highlights the role of institutions – in particular of gastronomic guides – in delineating the high-end restaurant segment (Warde, 2009; Lane, 2010, 2011). Analyses conducted on a meso-level, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of collective practices and reflexive capacities of actors in understanding processes of taste-making (Hennion, 2004, 2007).

In her book *Accounting for Taste*, the sociologist Priscilla Ferguson (1998) proposes a new mediator in the social construction of taste, one that remains underexplored in contemporary analysis of haute cuisine: the development and dissemination of culinary discourses. Her studies of gastronomy in 19th century France find that culinary discourses that proliferated during this period – which include the voluminous treatises of Carême and later Escoffier, the gastronomic journalism of Grimod de la Reynière, the proto-sociological essays of Brillat-Savarin, the novels of Balzac – played a key role in the construction of a gastronomic field with a particular French character. In her account, Ferguson argues that the formalization of a discourse into written texts made it possible to turn *culinary products* (such as food or taste, which are material and ephemeral in nature) into *intellectual products* that could be removed from their immediate context of use and are durable in time. In this sense, culinary texts were critical in the consolidation of a modern gastronomic field as they allow locating culinary products within a network of stable intellectual discourse from which new and second-order interpretations could arise (Ferguson, 1998, 2004).

Another study that points at the significance of gastronomic texts in shaping haute cuisine is Rao et al.'s (2003) analysis of

(footnote continued)

coveted list is organized by *Restaurant Magazine* and ranks restaurants around the world based on the judgment of 800 international leaders in the culinary industry. Nominations are made for restaurants and not for restaurateurs or chefs. Source: <http://www.theworlds50best.com/>.

⁴Examples of renowned chefs who have been apprentices at elBulli or members of elBulli's brigade are: Joan Roca (restaurant “Celler de Can Roca” in Girona, Spain), René Redzepi (“Noma” in Copenhagen, Denmark), Andoni Luis Aduriz (“Mugaritz” in Guipúzcoa, Spain), Grant Achatz (“Alinea” in Chicago, USA) and Máximo Bottura (“Osteria Francescana” in Modena, Italy), among others.

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