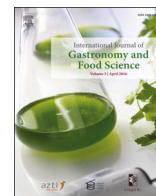




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Review article

High-status food is changing: New gastronomic perspectives

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A B S T R A C T

The intention of this research is to give a broad view of what high-status food is and how it has changed throughout the history of gastronomy. Luxury is changing material values to post-material values; in the same way cuisine is changing from product based cuisine to process based cuisine. In that process based cuisine, experience became an important topic where we talk about gastronomy and luxury. Restaurants and chefs are looking to improve the experience with new advances. One part of the experience is how to individualize it for guests; creativity has an important role in this. Furthermore, creativity intends to solve gastronomic problems and develop new culinary concepts. So creativity tends to be one of the new luxury values applied to food.

Introduction

High-status food, also known as luxury food, is a clearly identified topic that has been researched for a long time. Nowadays, luxury in gastronomy is one of the important added values in a dining experience. The intention of this paper is to give a broad perspective to chefs and researchers about what luxury in gastronomy is and its implications. Also, to open a much needed debate for a food and gastronomy industry based many times in this concept. Luxury is changing from material values to post-material values; in the same way cuisine is changing from product based cuisine to processes cuisine. How creativity shapes and adds value nowadays? There are a lot of different definitions about this term but one good definition might be: Luxury is everything beyond what is necessary. Normally, luxury was understood from an economic prism (Cristini et al., 2016) which showed us that certain products were considered better than others in the context of its price or shortage in supplies. Of course, there are also consumption and consumer considerations like the bandwagon and snob effects, which have been well studied (Leibenstein, 1950, Corneo and Jeanne, 1997, & Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012). Furthermore Van der Veen (2010) adds: “In terms of food, luxury usually denotes foods that are desirable or hard to obtain but not essential to human nutrition”. Some researchers, however, were more focused on defining high-status food from a hedonistic point of view such as Berry (1994) who defined luxury food as “those foods that are widely desired because they offer a refinement or qualitative improvement of a basic food and a means of distinction because they are not yet widely attained”. Finally, from a wider perspective, Smith (1987) defines non-utilitarian luxury items as sumptuary goods that are highly valued (in an economic, cultural and social sense) by a given social group.

Defining luxury foods

Economic value

As we have said before, there are a lot of economic factors that can influence our perception of high-status food. We use six different criteria that have been defined by Smith (1987) and developed by Curet and Pestle (2010), based on their archaeological studies. These criteria define luxury food within economical and structural parameters and can be extrapolated and then applied to the current day. Gastronomy as science is something relatively new, a meeting point between disciplines. In this space of synergies it is important to note that gastronomy becomes a common thread between disciplines. That is why, as a base we use an archaeological study.

Scarcity

Food is often seen as high status as soon as it is not available to all social groups. This consideration is recognized by experts (Berry, 1994, van der Veen, 2003) and contributes to the assessment of luxury foods in a wider social context of exclusivity. This scarcity may arise from the fact that food is not available in larger quantities or that its supply and circulation is controlled by human actors. Scarcity is related to the environment. If the environment is closed or limited, it is much more probable that luxury products are defined by their scarcity. In broader commercial environments, where there is an exchange of products between different societies, it is more complicated for luxury products to be defined by its scarcity (Boudan, 2008). We have some examples of this. After the 17th century, sumptuary laws were relaxed considerably allowing an increase of trade between countries and consequently enabling the population beneath the higher class to consume luxury foods (MacCants, 2007). During medieval times, spices were the most

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common luxury foods. However, boundaries between countries did not yet exist and the invention of the compass as well as improvements in modern sea navigation helped a new luxury market emerge. This all meant, when new trade routes were discovered in the sixteenth century, spices did not remain solely a luxury product but subsequently became more affordable due to their accessibility (Cowan, 2007).

Human actors may forbid different products in order to control societies and its rituals. Taboo food is usually linked to prohibitions set by elites in order to avoid food that is not economically viable. For example, *Sus scrofa* (common pig) is better suited to cold climates as well as deciduous forest environments. Breeding pigs in southern and warmer climates requires more effort because pigs need to consume food that can be consumed by humans. However, in herding cultures found in the North, pigs can be bred in semi-wild conditions. *Sus scrofa* is thus an important food that does not require any extra biological effort. It is a more profitable endeavour as it transforms easily the energy consumed in its meat. However, a pig prefers a cooler environment of between 15° and 20° celsius for ideal growth (Ruhston, 2009). Therefore, breeding pigs is less expensive in colder climates than in warmer ones, making it a taboo choice for some cultures.

Abundance

Although it seems contradictory, luxury products can, in some cases, be related to abundance (Goody, 1982). If a product is abundant there may be two options for that product to stratify social groups. In the first option, food is divided by its density; the upper classes receive a higher quantity while the lower classes receive less. The second case is related to the distribution of different parts of food. In certain products, such as large animals, parts which are considered more exclusive due to their organoleptic characteristics are demanded by the top of society. However other parts of the same product are evenly distributed among to all social classes. For example, the *tournedo*, the largest part of the psoas major muscle in the *Bos taurus*, was used several times as a luxury meal in 18th century recipe books.

Foods used in feasting are often the same foods which are used on a normal basis; therefore luxury is focused more on quantity rather than quality. Feasting, of course, was the first ritual to involve luxury foods and to bring communion to societies, but it was also one of the first rituals that stratified people.

Diversity

Food consumption variety and the consumption of non-staple food items may be an indicator of high-status food habits. Diversity is not related to a quantitative variable like scarcity or abundance; rather it is linked to quality. Social elites are able to eat a greater diversity of food more frequently with a higher quality (Garnsey, 1999).

Local environments are important in diversity. In an environment where there is a full range of products, there is access to a greater number of items and it is possible to achieve diversity. In addition, in full range environments, there is an increased number of luxury goods proportional to a large number of staple foods. This allows a greater "trickle-down" effect; the more products that exist in an environment, the more easily it will change the status of luxury goods to basic products and vice versa. The trickle-down effect has been researched and has been defined as a "tendency of luxury goods to change status over time, from being desired by many but possessed by few, to becoming widely available and, ultimately, to being deemed social necessities" (van der Veen, 2003).

On the other hand, in a society with a low range of food products, it is usually the same food but in larger quantities. Quantity over quality, as discussed in areas in Africa (van der Veen, 2003) and as we previously explained in the abundance section on this paper.

Labor investment

Time and effort involved in acquisition and elaboration need to be taken into consideration. Acquisition and elaboration are possibly the

most influential variables in gastronomy nowadays. The consumer's perception of luxury food is usually associated with how a product is elaborated and how hard is obtain (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Due to the importance of the issue, we are going to discuss each element separately.

Acquisition investment work is directly related to the ecology of the species, and to its particular distribution in ecosystems and how it is procured and transported. An explanation of the sub-factors associated with this variable is offered below.

- a) Resource Distance: Products take more time and effort to acquire because they are far away. The further the distance travelled to acquire the final product, the more likely it is to end up as luxury product. An example of this is how expensive was sugar at first due the distance and difficult trade routes from Europe to Asia (Mintz, 1985). This should not be confused with an exotic attribute, which is more related to the place of origin of the product, and even to certain cultural nuances (Curet and Pestle, 2010). In addition, the draw of exoticism has declined due to cultural globalisation. However, exotic values are still used as a marketing tool but luxury is not necessarily inherent, with some exception of typical cuisines.
- b) Geographical aggregation: The product is not scarce in the environment but it is distributed in small areas and is difficult to harvest. It is normal that wild animals such as *Scolopax rusticola* (wood-cook) present hunting difficulties because they tend to live in smaller groups in very disperse areas (Duriez et al., 2005).
- a) Seasonal consistency: This is related to products with short seasons and their production is very limited in time and quantity.
- b) Ease and certainty of capture: Where there is not always a certainty of capture and many key resources are required for collection of these food. One perfect example is the species from *Tuber* spp., even though an expert harvester and truffle pig are required to find these fungi, there is no guarantee of finding enough or finding them at all (Parladé et al., 2016).
- a) Transport: The costs of food transportation. This not only involve the distance, but also the logistics associated with transportation. One clear example of this is refrigerated transport that has been around since the Romans brought oysters from Brittany (Toussaint-Samat, 1992).

Within labor investment, there is a factor that is work preparation. Work preparation is needed to develop any type of food, but especially dishes in gastronomic restoration. Work in the preservation, processing and cooking adds value to these dishes to increase the final cost. Moreover, a specialist is required with certain skills, which will vary depending on the type of food in question. Chefs, in their role as artisans, turn a given food into a luxury (Helms, 1993). A summary of these sub-factors associated with preparation work are listed below. The final price of the menu is often dictated by these variables.

- a) Craftsmanship by experts: A certain level of knowledge is required to prepare all cuisines. Possibly someone who prepares fast food can work in a kitchen with a minimum of training, but when chefs are working in other level restaurants need to train more years to master it. Younger chefs start as kitchen assistant and need several years to become head chef on a restaurant.
- b) Time required for preparation: One consideration about cooking in restaurants is the time which is needed for making final elaborations. In some cases, for example dehydration, the process can takes several hours to be done. While popular cooking can be simpler, as we approach high-end kitchens with details and elaborations, economic value grows due the time needed.
- c) Efficiency: In restaurants, there are dishes with lower profitability; this is because in the elaboration of the dish the product has been

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