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Habits in the Kitchen: On the Application of Recipes for the Good Life

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Abstract. *What does it mean to apply a recipe?* In this essay I examine how habit and improvisation contribute to the application of recipes. Application entails more than following technical instructions; it involves strategies for critically reading, understanding, and performing recipes in a manner that contributes to their transmission and transformation. Application draws upon our habits and prior knowledge to respond to the contingencies of new situations and highlights future possibilities that require adaptation and transformation. I thus argue that one should view recipes as ethical texts, which in this context of application means that they are something more than rigid technical guides for cooking, and more than mere recordings of cultural and historical knowledge to be reproduced: as an essential element of human gastronomy, the application of a recipe involves habit and improvisation working together in the pursuit of the good life.

Keywords. Habit, improvisation, application, recipe, Gadamer, hermeneutics.

1. *Introduction: how to read a recipe*

The origin and history of recipes is obscure and complex. It is difficult to imagine human existence without some form of recipe put into

daily practice or communicated to others. There are written and inscribed recipes from the ancient world – the oldest written recipe is supposedly one from China for carp salad – but also orally transmitted recipes, now lost to us, that predate and postdate these ancient culinary texts[1]. Recipes reach beyond their linguistic forms, encoding the cuisines of cultures from around the world and connecting generations through retelling, demonstration, and practice. Recipes document the day-to-day habits of food preparation, but they also prescribe the more careful preparations of food for festival meals and even ritual offerings of food to gods and to the dead.

Through their dissemination and repeated performances, recipes construct what a society knows, has, and desires. Recipes are not simply committed to memory or transferred to some other form of transmission; their performance and realization are also ingrained into the habitual practices we associate with muscle training. Any recipe embodies a set of skills and practices that are separate from but essential to the recipe: cutting and slicing, sautéing or braising, and even the careful selection of ingredients for the dish, knowing which herbs to pick in the garden, how to clean and prepare a fish, which cut of meat is right for the preparation. These are skills that in many ways form the condition of possibility for recipes, but they are ones that are rarely written down or stated specifically. More than a set of instructions, recipes are demonstrations that presuppose a litany of materials, skills, and processes already underway; the directions merely augment and flavour an ongoing history of knowledge transmission that reaches across time and space. In this way, recipes refer to a complex body of learned knowledge – good habits that are summoned and reactivated in the face of ever-changing social and material contexts.

Let's take as an example a recipe for Zabaglione[2] – a dessert whose history and origins are disputed and whose simple ingredients and preparation leave a good deal of room for experimentation and error. Without getting into debates over recipes and how they relate to dishes, it suffices to note that recipes for Zabaglione vary greatly: its liquid ingredient (wine) ranges from Marsala to Vin Santo to Moscato d'Asti to dry white wine and even (gasp!) limoncello; the proportions of the ingredients vary, even though the cooking techniques are generally equivalent; and the final presentation of the dish also supports a range of temperatures and accompaniments. For the sake of this exercise, I will use a version of the recipe from *The Silver Spoon* cookbook (*il Cucchiaio d'argento*), first published in 1950 and to many the bible of Italian cooking.

Zabaglione/Zabaione
Serves 4
4 egg yolks
4 tablespoons superfine sugar
½ cup Marsala, dry white wine or sparkling wine

> Beat the egg yolks with the sugar in a heatproof bowl until pale and fluffy, then stir in the Marsala or wine, a little at a time. Place the bowl over a pan of barely simmering water and cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture starts to rise. Remove from the heat and serve hot or cold in glasses. Alternatively, zabaglione may be used as a sauce on coffee or hazelnut ice cream. (Capatti [2011]: 1039)

Depending on the reader's prior understanding of Italian cuisine and cooking in general, the recipe speaks in different ways and activates various habits – ones related to how one reads and understands texts in general, but more specifically, how such texts indicate, directly or indirectly, the mental and bodily habits required to prepare such a dish. Those familiar with the dish might immediately compare this text to their mental repository of other recipes for Zabaglione or read through the text while recalling the bodily habits they used to prepare the dish in the past. Those unfamiliar with the dish or who have never tried the dish might use their imagination to construct a mental analogue of the tastes and textures of the dish, or even call upon their good habits of planning and goal realization to experiment with a new recipe. Others, not interested in the dish at all, might just skim the recipe, considering it non-essential to their evaluation of this essay's argument. And others, perhaps once sickened by alcohol or bad eggs or even this very dish, might involuntarily wretch at the thought of its consumption.

If someone with a good deal of cooking experience were to linger upon this recipe, they might conclude that many of the gastronomical habits associated with the recipe and its preparation remain concealed and unstated: the materials and implements required (beyond the ingredients) to cook this dish, along with the various skills and techniques that aid in its completion. For example, the recipe presupposes elements of modern cookery that one might be expected to have in a kitchen: a stovetop heat source that can be regulated; pots and bowls of appropriate materials, whisks or spoons, etc. More telling are the skills that form a background of assumed knowledge that are needed for the production and/or success of the dish: how to separate yolks from eggs; techniques for whisking; assembling and using a double-boiler or *bain-marie* effectively; familiarity with egg consistency; food safety and handling; cultural knowledge about when/where to serve the dish and with which accompaniments; and we might even consider possible substitutes due to aesthetic preference, availability, or ingredient prohibitions. All these elements are, broadly speaking, normative in the very basic sense that they reveal the accepted prescriptions, behaviours, and value judgments of a society – even though they are not always explicitly stated. Attempting to perform the recipe and produce the dish thus requires the cook to possess or have access to the prior knowledge and resources that are a generally accepted element of that recipe's cultural milieu.

My focus here is not the act of cooking guided by a recipe, but the form of understanding demanded by the recipe itself. Elsewhere I have discussed

cooking under the rubric of interpretation, and specifically, how cooking enacts three basic principles of hermeneutics (see Valgenti [2014]). In this essay I will delve more deeply into the structure of the hermeneutic circle to explore how «application», as outlined in Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960), reveals normative forces directed at the recipe's primary goal: not the production of a dish, but the transmission of the knowledge required to achieve the ends of gastronomy, and thus, the greater human good. This knowledge is not static, but through its transmission establishes and transforms learned behaviours through an openness to material and social contingencies. This process – the application of recipes – requires both habit and improvisation to realize the greater good of gastronomy.

2. *What is a recipe?*

Let us begin with a brief and basic definition of a recipe. A recipe is a 1) means of transmitting 2) knowledge about the preparation of a dish 3) for the ends of gastronomy.

Gastronomy, as Brillat-Savarin explains in *The Physiology of Taste*, «is a scientific definition of all that relates to man as a feeding animal. Its [goal] is to watch over the preservation of man by means of the best possible food» (Brillat-Savarin [1825]: 35). For Brillat-Savarin, the goal of gastronomy is not simply nutrition but the most complete form of human flourishing which entails, as a necessary condition, the scientific and cultural knowledge required to lead the good life. Gastronomy in this sense considers *how* we should eat to live well which, as a cultural and scientific practice, constitutes something more than a universal science or a body of knowledge that can simply be systematized and transmitted. It is practical knowledge that, beyond technical guidelines and practices, requires a means of recording and transmission that can adapt to diverse social and material conditions. The recipe, as a transmitter of such knowledge, is neither the representation of technical actions nor simply a linguistic account of a set of procedures that corresponds with the preparation of a dish; rather, the recipe transmits gastronomical knowledge across time and space with an eye towards difference and changing conditions. A recipe is written down, narrated, or performed to repeat a practice with the understanding that it will be *for others* (even if that other is the same person later in time) and *for other conditions*. There is an implicit understanding that the recipe alone will not be enough and may require the knowledge, habits, and interpretive behaviour of the individuals who transmit it successfully.

Recipes have existed for as long as humans have transmitted their knowledge of food preparation. However, the specific term «recipe» arises in medi-

cal writing and prescriptions in late sixteenth century Europe and only a century later denotes the set of directions used for the preparation of food (Waxman [2004]). While these etymological peculiarities do not fully represent the broader history of recipes (a task too expansive for these pages), they do indicate a certain confluence of ideas that I want to engage critically: the term «recipe» denotes a type of «practical knowledge to be reproduced by another doctor, a pharmacist, or cook» (Claflin [2013]: 110) to produce a good outcome, such as general health, recovery from an ailment, or simply the continuance of life. The imperative form of *ricipere*, «to take or receive», does not command the patient or the eater, but rather is a command that issues from the expert to the medical practitioner or cook, as in «take this and that» and «do this» to bring about a certain desired result[3]. Thus, the command is directed at the one who will *transmit* the knowledge: the messenger or delivery person who will follow the expert's directions and not the patient or recipient of said treatment.

To facilitate this aim, recipes take on forms that are recognizable and suited to the cultures and times in which they arise – whether organized as a list of ingredients and a schedule of procedures, told in a narrative, or even in its more contemporary manifestations represented through various visual media. These modes reflect the material and social conditions that shape the delivery of gastronomic knowledge. And yet, despite the variation in media, the recipe – as a human form or concept (or even a meme/cultural unit) remains constant. This persistent form – one tied to the ends of gastronomy and thus the highest good – is what interests me in this study: not to find an unchanging essence behind the multitude of recipes, but instead to consider how the recipe form operates, for lack of a better term, as a sort of transcendental whose presence is only ever confirmed through its changing manifestations and dynamic character. Transmission and transformation are, however paradoxically, built into the very form of the recipe.

A good deal of the extant literature on recipes supports the idea of a persistent form, but does so through structuralist and essentialist accounts that overlook or even reject recipes as an opportunity for invention and transformation[4]. I propose to begin with the more dynamic possibilities of the recipe and will highlight some of the approaches that delineate the horizon within which my argument unfolds. My approach to recipes is broadly constructivist in the manner proposed by Andrea Borghini (2015) and has strong affinities with Giulio Sciacca's (2020) particularist metaphysics, which considers the recipe to be an artifact or continuant[5]. My approach is also informed by positions, like Maya Hey's, that see recipes as a «medium for materially engaging with "ever more corporeal, ever more intimate" relations through food, and mediate time, place, ingredients, and people in ways that show "our relationality and our entangle-

ment" with nonhuman entities» (Hey [2021]: 79). This latter account – and others that stress the role of materiality – places recipes beyond exclusively human origins, citing the role that natural environment, material conditions, social customs, and available media play in the creative process. Recipes are thus more than simple acts of *fiat* (Borghini [2015]) and emerge out of rich contexts that require responsiveness and adaptation to conditions that resist and shape human decision. More than human tools, recipes are objects and artifacts that develop a life of their own through and beyond their human inception. While I would not go so far as to claim that the recipe is an object (in the sense of an autonomous and withdrawn object as proposed by Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology), I accept his general critique of theoretical approaches that tend either to «undermine» or «overmine» their subjects[6]. To properly understand the formal characteristics of a recipe, one must avoid any essentialist accounts that might grant to recipes an unchanging character, but also resist the varieties of relationism that would reduce recipes to the various forces that bring them into being.

A recipe is therefore not like a Harmanian object but instead a «form» that records and transmits knowledge about the preparation of a dish for the ends of gastronomy. I use the term «form» not to invoke the essentialist notion of form/idea/*eidos* inherited from the Platonic tradition, but to emphasize the broadly shared features of recipes that, despite their differences in media and content, retain a specific sort of relation to human ends (first and foremost, the gastronomic end). Instructive here is the concept of «*forma*» developed by Luigi Pareyson in his work *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* (1954). Pareyson's focus is the work of art, which is a paradigmatic example of human formativity precisely because the work of art is produced for no other end than for the sake of formativity itself. But human forms (and the acts of formativity that bring them into being) extend into all sectors of human action and can have a material or non-material result: a work of art, a law, an institution, a tool, and even a human life or society writ large. A form is thus «the result of attempts» in the act of creation or making, attempts that comprise the act of forming, which «on the one hand entails creating, that is, accomplishing, executing, producing, realizing, and on the other, entails finding the means of creating, that is, inventing, discovering, shaping, knowing-how» (Pareyson [1954]: 59-60). A form is thus always underway and responding to its situation; it is, like any other human creation, a record of its own development that arises out of particular circumstances and is produced for particular ends. Importantly, however, these human creations cannot be reduced to the effort and insight of their human creators – the creator is always a participant in something larger and creates only through a rich interaction with the social and material entities that shape and co-constitute the new form[7].

The form of a recipe is therefore more than just a linguistic or communicative structure that organizes instructions and procedures to achieve the ends of gastronomy, as it is constantly changing and interacting with human and non-human actors. As a means of transmitting a specific sort of knowledge, the diversity of its instantiations rests upon a perduring yet finite articulation that is tied to human endeavours but not completely attributable to them. Thus, even though the content, procedure, and style typical of particular recipes might vary, those instantiations reflect a form, or more precisely, a process of forming that records and transmits knowledge for the ends of gastronomy. The recipe realizes its specific purpose only through its various instantiations and media, such as individual or shared memory, the spoken word, writing, pictorial representations, moving images, and of course its most recognizable form as a written list of ingredients followed by a set of instructions.

These contingent ends, which even include the preparation of the dish, must be distinguished from its primary purpose as a transmitter and transformer of knowledge. At first this seems counter-intuitive; however, a recipe can be created and transmitted without a dish being produced. Moreover, the recording and transmission of a recipe could also *follow* the production of a dish and/or a period of experimentation, or even exist as a creative exercise or fictional moment that never had the intention of ever creating the dish. The form of the recipe and its success is therefore measured not by its fidelity to a particular dish, but through its faithful pursuit of the end of gastronomy – which requires not only transmission, but a transformation suited to the changing conditions in the pursuit of that goal. These changing conditions could be the materials at hand, the desires of a particular audience, the available means of transmission, or a host of other environmental factors.

When recipes codify and transmit the knowledge of what a society knows, possesses, and desires from a gastronomical perspective, they reflect a given culture's gastronomical *habits*. What the recipe transmits is not knowledge in a broad and universal sense – an *episteme* – but something more akin to a know-how directed towards the ends of gastronomy. This expansive goal (and not simply the list of ingredients and procedures) shapes the content of the recipe and comprises information that is present both explicitly and implicitly in the recipe. As with all habits, these finite and changeable behaviours are acquired over time but often treated (and more importantly, often feel) as if they are natural and unchanging features of human life – thus making them difficult to unlearn when the situation demands and imparting onto them a powerful normative force. These behaviours, while practically oriented towards the preparation of food, nonetheless carry with them implicit judgments about society's morals, identity, and notions of the good life. This is one indication of the recipe's ethical import as a transmitter of values and norms that reflect the broader society and its potential to flourish.

3. *The normative force of recipes*

Is it possible that the recipe form itself contains and even generates its own normative force, one that shapes its transmission and transformation? In what follows, I will consider the origin of a recipe's normative force and the extent to which that origin is suited to the particular ends of gastronomy.

Two recent essays on recipes focus on their normative capacity. Patrick Engisch argues «that certain traditional recipes and their instances (dishes), along with their consumption, can be said to represent past living conditions» (Engisch [2021]: 117) and thus carry with them a normative or ethical force. This plays out as a hypothetical: if one wishes to reproduce a certain dish accurately to achieve a goal of authenticity or genuineness, then recipes, as social and cultural artifacts, contain «a certain normative force in terms of their having a guiding, and not mere causal, role in the realization of our goals and aims» (Ibid.: 118). Engisch refers to this as a deflationary sense of normativity, given that recipes are normative only to the extent that we have goals and aims as culinary agents, and that «recipes can, *ceteris paribus*, be conducive to their realization» (Ibid.). Recipes thus demand something of us – have a normative force – but do so in a manner that is *extrinsic* to the recipe itself and located in the aspirations and judgments of those who perform, experience, and judge the recipe and its outcomes. Such normativity might also be called *representational* insofar as its goal is to produce – via an external standard – an accurate or acceptable representation of an object or practice valued by a given society or group. I would add further that the orientation of the normativity is markedly historical, in that it seeks to reproduce what has already been accomplished rather than produce what might be best suited to the end of gastronomy within a particular social or material context. Even when a recipe is transformed to suit changing conditions through the intentions and experiences of those who create, use, and benefit from it, Engisch's account suggests that the imperative to do so is external to the form of the recipe.

Alessandro Bertinetto, drawing upon his vast work on performance and improvisation in the arts, provides an extended comparison between recipes and musical scores that further explores how norms form in conversation with changing conditions and contexts: «dishes and musical performances are interestingly analogous because they do not only respectively manifest musical works and recipes but can *transform* them to the extent that they can also bring about the invention of new musical works and recipes» (Bertinetto [2021]: 118). For Bertinetto, the application of norms in the performance of a musical score or the performance of a recipe «requires "creative" adaptation to the concrete specific situation» through «practical interactions that involve transformations of their own normative bases» (Ibid.: 111). These normative bases concern the choices of the artist or cook – often rooted in training and habit – along with the content of

the musical score or the recipe. The musician is not simply directed to play *these* notes in *this* particular way, nor is the chef simply to prepare *these* ingredients using *this* method – their performances understand those prescriptions within the context of the performance, often times transforming them through in their application to a unique situation. The norm is understood and guides the performer not for the sake of the rule itself, but in order to apply the rule in a meaningful way that can be understood and appreciated by its audience. These normative changes are not retroactive in a temporal sense, but recursive in that they modify the structure of the norms, thus allowing the same content to register differently in a new situation. Musical works and recipes are «ontologically flexible» in this way because they are «(trans)formed by the performances that adapt them» to specific physical and cultural situations; they are «changing cultural artifacts» (Ibid.: 128) that reflect the ongoing interpretations that recursively shape the work, the performer, and the broader context in which they exist.

To understand the score or the recipe entails more than simply transmitting these works and the knowledge they contain; through their transmission, they are also transformed. The transformation and the eventual judgment of a work (as authentic or successful) is measured not only against the performer's aims but also according to the audience's experience and judgment – that is, the broader cultural and social context into which it is delivered. Bertinetto identifies the score and the recipe, inclusive of their experiences and transformations, with the history of their effects or *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Ibid.: 126; see also Gadamer [1960]: 300). The effects are not simply produced by the new work but reflect the forces that contribute to its formation over time in various contexts.

Both Engisch and Bertinetto illustrate the extent to which recipes shape and are shaped by their contexts. Recipes are normative because their commands guide behaviour within an environment that is also shaped recursively by the recipe itself – a normativity that is extrinsic but also open to the transformative influence of the recipe. But is it possible that the recipe form also contains an *intrinsic* normativity – one generated by the very form of the recipe itself? By intrinsic normativity I do not intend those features internal to a specific form of transmission, such as the grammar or conventions of language, or the structural components of the recipes (the order of ingredients, or units of their measure, and so on). These internal features certainly exert a force and in the case of a traditional recipe do so in the form of an imperative; but these details, as the history of recipes demonstrates, are themselves the product of extrinsic influences – the social and material conditions of their time. An intrinsic norm would be one that remains consistent despite the recipe's changing instantiations, one tied to the very purpose of recipes in general, and thus, to the ends of gastronomy. If there is a norm that is intrinsic to the recipe form itself, it would be one that requires the transmission of gastronomical knowledge in a manner that remains open to con-

tingencies, encourages its transformation to suit ever-changing social and material conditions, and nonetheless remains committed to the ends of gastronomy.

Here, once again, Pareyson's notion of «form» is helpful: the characteristic feature of any act of formativity is that it is «a type of doing that, in the course of doing, invents its way of doing» (Pareyson [1954]: 18). This type of self-generated formation displaces the typical focus on the artist (or chef) as creator of a work and instead centres it upon the work as a site of continual transformation and development that is responsive to the varying forces around it – a successful work is one that, first and foremost, is guided by its responsiveness to changing conditions, and thus, to the very fact of it always being *conditioned*. There is no essence to be captured, and no artistic vision that measures its ultimate success or failure. Instead, the work is, in a sense, always underway and evolving. Here I would argue that the recipe's transformation is not caused by the performance or the dish, but that the performance and the dish are occasions for understanding through which the internal norm is realized because the work can only ever be realized through a particular instantiation guided by the ends of gastronomy: as a prescription oriented towards a goal of nourishment whose evaluation is open-ended, a recipe demands that its realization not only answer to specific demands shaped by one particular time and place, but more generally, that it be sensitive to the varying contexts from which it emerges and within which it will be realized. This demand – one tied to the transmission of the knowledge that serves the ends of gastronomy – is open-ended and always underway, subject to conditions on the ground. The transmission of a recipe under such conditions – which could entail cooking the dish articulated by the recipe, or simply reproducing the recipe in one form or another to further the ends of gastronomy – is what will here be referred to as the «application» of the recipe.

Recipes, in this sense, are a vital indicator of a given society's habits, indicating directly how a society pursues its gastronomical purpose; but also indirectly an indicator of a capacity for improvisation in the broader human and material horizons within which such goals are realized *differently* at different times and in different places through practices that are learned and unlearned[8]. What I hope to trace in the following is a deepening of this reflection to explore how the recipe form itself contributes to these normative prescriptions through the role of habit and improvisation in the application of a recipe.

4. *Recipes require application*

«Application» is not merely the performance of the recipe – the act of preparing and cooking according to the dictates of the recipe in order to produce a dish; more importantly, application precedes any such performance and marks

a broader engagement with a form of practical wisdom in the pursuit of gastronomic ends that is sensitive to the situation: it entails an *interpretation* of the already present historical and cultural context in which the recipe exists, and a fusion of horizons (the recipe, the cook, the audience) into a new *understanding* that reflects the particularities and challenges of the current situation. These certainly can and do involve acts of cooking a new recipe successfully, but also routine preparations, failed attempts, and all the other interactions with recipes that do not involve immediate performance in the kitchen but rely on a repository of cognitive and bodily habits – planning, editing, organizing and creatively using recipes in non-cooking performances. Making a grilled cheese sandwich or brewing a moka pot of coffee might not seem worthy of the phrase «event of understanding»; however, there is nonetheless (as Heidegger's analysis of everydayness suggests) an implicit and always-present horizon of understanding that informs, shapes, and allows even the most banal experiences to reveal their normative structures and the possibilities that surround their interpretation. This event of understanding is what Gadamer refers to as *Erfahrung* – a structure of experience constituted by an inner historicity, a contingency whose truth remains «valid so long as it is not contradicted by new experience» (Gadamer [1960]: 345). All experiences carry with them the structure of their potential revision and reformulation; the hallmark of understanding is not its stability as a truth but its precarity and transience as a form that requires constant (re) formulation.

For Gadamer, the term «application» plays a very specific (and undervalued) role in the event of understanding, as it represents a «recovery of the fundamental hermeneutical problem» (Ibid.: 307): the issue of how a historically effected consciousness can bring about a fusion of horizons in a regulated way – or in terms more suited to this discussion, how the understanding of a recipe could be guided by an internal norm that allows new conditions to transform understanding while also being transformed by it. Here, «regulated» suggests the presence of a guiding principle that works like a universal (in that it is always present and carries a certain force) but also responds to the social and material realities of any particular instance. Application thus entails more than simply following guidelines; it requires that we interpret them within a new context: «this implies that the text… if it is to be understood properly – i.e. according to the claim it makes – must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way» (Ibid.: 309). The application of a text requires that the interpretation of its particular norms and prescriptions occurs within a definite set of conditions, and that those conditions be likewise interpreted in light of prior habits and knowledge. Such an «interpretation is necessary where the meaning of a text cannot be immediately understood» (Ibid.: 332) because the conditions which gave rise to the text no longer exist, in the sense that the meaning of the text is understood only when it is applied within a different historical horizon.

Application is therefore not simply a formulaic process, but an act that addresses the possibilities laid bare and made present when one interpretative horizon confronts another. The norms that structure each horizon stand forth as ways of doing or criteria for judgment – standards that now appear as possibilities and opportunities rather than as inflexible demands on the interpreter. The normative force of the recipe form can be found here: not in its imperative grammar or its discreet lists, measurements, and procedures, but rather in its confrontation with the unique social and material realities of a particular instance of performance. In the application of a recipe, the cook mediates and interprets the competing horizons of the recipe to achieve its goal of transmission in a manner that will best serve the ends of gastronomy.

Gadamer's insights on application now shed valuable light on Pareyson's notion of form and its relevance to the normative structure of recipes. There is no absolute form of the recipe – only a «forming form» (Pareyson [1954]: 75) realized through its interpretation in a new context; and application, in the case of the recipe, is not simply cooking the dish prescribed by the recipe but understanding what the recipe demands of us in this moment – a demand that is oriented, on the one hand, toward an interpretation of its past and its history of effects, and on the other hand, toward the future and its possible realisations and transformations. Only in this register can we fully appreciate the ramifications of Gadamer's claim that «Understanding…, is a special case of applying something universal» – the form of the recipe – «to a particular situation» (Gadamer [1960]: 312). It is not universal in that its dictates require one way of acting in every situation, but rather universal in that it requires from us, in every instance, an application sensitive to the possibilities opened up by the fusion of different horizons of understanding. The type of knowledge that guides human practice within changing contexts and situations is therefore not a universal in the sense of an *episteme* that can be applied to any situation; rather, it is universal in its demand to be applied, that is, in the requirement for a new understanding in a new situation.

Application reveals the recipe's intrinsic normative force as a means of transmitting the knowledge for the ends of gastronomy: while the goal does not change, we understand the recipe (and thus the task) differently and thus transform it based on the conditions or horizon in which it unfolds. So on the one hand, we find that the application of a recipe requires a certain habit – not only the habits required to perform the tasks explicitly stated or indirectly inferred by the recipe, but more importantly, a good habit of understanding in which prior knowledge is oriented toward the future and thus its constant questioning and reformulation. More than a repetition of behaviours, this habit requires us to read and perform in a manner that is sensitive to the situation and open to modification. On the other hand, application also requires a degree of improvisation

– not only a sensitivity to future contingencies, but an improvisational skill to address what is unforeseen but certainly not unforeseeable. More than an exercise in freedom, improvisation relies upon behaviours and habits already learned to recognize and address the variable conditions in which the recipe might be applied. In what follows, I will examine how the application of a recipe achieves this orientation towards its own past and its future possibilities, in the service of gastronomy, through practices of habit and improvisation.

5. *Habits in the kitchen*

In order to keep this discussion focused, I will consider the type of application most commonly associated with recipes[9] – the use of a recipe to guide a cook in the preparation of a dish. To say that habit plays a role in this application of recipes would be neither surprising nor controversial: these could include good habits cultivated over time such as the careful reading of a recipe's text, the use of safe and effective cooking techniques, a familiarity with types of recipes, dishes and cuisines, knowledge about ingredient substitutions, and the ritual of *mis en place*; but there are also bad habits, such as an inattentiveness to detail, sloppy measurement, indifference to safe and hygienic practices, not tasting through the process of cooking, and so on. There is, of course, a degree of relativity in these distinctions that depends on the type of cooking and the venue in which it takes place, along with the subjectivity of the individual cook. Whether that individual is a professional chef or a novice in the kitchen, habits emerge through one's understanding and application of the recipe: through one's familiarity with the kitchen and its instruments, with time management and the various physical and mental practices that accompany the activity of cooking a dish, an awareness of those who will be eating the dish, and so on. These habits enable certain operations and actions, but they also inhibit certain behaviours and at times run counter to the literal indication of the recipe's text or the actions needed to execute it. There are certainly cases where the individual simply lacks the required knowledge or skill to apply a recipe and produce the dish; however, even those cases are framed within habits (of reading, exploring, and learning) that encourage or inhibit the acquisition of the requisite knowledge and skills. Habits are therefore the learned behaviours that mediate and activate differences between the horizon of the recipe and the horizon of the context in which the recipe will be applied.

These habits are relevant to Gadamer's understanding of application in two ways: the first concerns my definition of recipes as transmitters of knowledge in the service of gastronomy, which as noted, aims towards the overall health and flourishing of humanity (broadly, the ethical good); the second, which is of central importance to Gadamer, regards the way that the development and learning

of moral knowledge participates in the structure of the hermeneutic circle: in the context of this analysis, how the mere repetition of good habits in the kitchen – the faithful reproduction of a recipe according to its explicit prescriptions and its implied behaviours/requirements – does not live up to the demand of application. To understand a recipe fully (to *apply* it in Gadamer's sense) requires that one expose its possibilities within a new context and thus acknowledge that its prescriptions are contingent upon an application suited to the moment. This does not mean that one always has to break away from the literal prescriptions of a recipe; rather, what is brought to the fore is the recipe's active interpretation and thus the awareness that even when codified into a recipe, the document is a record of prior decisions to pursue the ends of gastronomy in a particular way. Recipes are a record not of an outcome, but of a process to be transmitted forward.

This process enacts a particular type of practical knowledge that is neither technical knowledge (*techne* – a fixed set of rules enacted to achieve a certain end) nor a universally valid scientific knowledge (*episteme*). This knowledge is oriented towards the future and towards the development of habits that enable the realization of a perceived good. Gadamer, reading Aristotle, clarifies that «the basis of moral knowledge in man is *orexis,* striving, and its development into a fixed demeanour (*hexis*)» or habit (Gadamer [1960]: 312). This process is guided by situational knowledge that reflects an insight into the demands of a particular set of circumstances. Aristotle identifies this type of knowing as *phronesis*, which is central to the pursuit of the good and its development into good habits. This is not scientific knowledge against which one stands as an indifferent observer, but rather «something that [the human] has to do» (Ibid.: 314) – a process of formation that develops and transforms in the structure of a circle: it is recursive and cannot *not*, in its outcomes, also actively engage in the continual process of habit formation and refinement.

The cultivation of good habit in the kitchen thus includes the broader habit of remaining open to unforeseen contingencies and new situations. This type of practical knowing or *phronesis* serves as a model for a unique type of flexible norm that can be realized only through its ongoing transmission and transformation of the recipe. Unlike a technical text, the desire motivating a recipe's application is not universal applicability, but an application that can only be realized through the particulars of a recipe, its material resources, the cultural and social context, and even the individual tastes of those who prepare and experience it. So while technical knowledge and moral knowledge both «include the same task of application» (Ibid.: 315), this practical knowledge is distinct in that we do not simply possess this sort of knowledge like a tool that can be put to work to achieve a specific end in a blindly habitual manner: acquiring and cultivating this type of knowledge requires a very specific orientation towards the future best described as improvisation.

6. *Improvising recipes*

The good habit of remaining open to gastronomic possibilities that arise under variable conditions ensures that the more specific habits associated with the ends of gastronomy support rather than undermine their realization. The application of recipes therefore also demands a measure of improvisation – at times dramatically, but perhaps more commonly in implicit and understated ways that build upon the habitual experiences of a cook. This is already well-documented in Bertinetto's treatment of recipes and builds upon his rich work on the aesthetics of improvisation where he defines improvisation as «the expression of humanity acting in the face of contingency: an acting that is not guaranteed, is fragile, and exposed to the risk of failure, but also capable of creatively realizing its freedom» (Bertinetto [2022]: 31). To improvise is to grapple with a possible future in relation to an actual past, to diverge from that past rather than to believe we can construct something *ex nihilo* that was truly unforeseeable. The application of a text requires *understanding* it within a particular historical situation or context, such that its original conditions and intentions demand *interpretation* to be understood in the here and now. Application thus relies on a formative relation between habit and improvisation: «improvisation requires a capacity to act in the face of the unforeseen, such that new "behavioural patterns are made routine"» by developing a capacity to «*unlearn*» what one has learned. «The incorporated *know how* of habit makes the fluid acting of improvisation possible» (Ibid.: 21-23). The form of the recipe is one that remains open to variable conditions that challenge a strict reading of the recipe text – not only in the preparation of a dish, but in the *way* that humans pursue the gastronomic, and thus human, good.

As we just saw above, habit is oriented towards the future as the development of a practical moral knowledge which remains open to contingencies; but the application of recipes is also oriented toward the past through practices of improvisation which, paradoxically, entail the interpretation of the recipe and its historical and material conditions. The recipe demands that we understand it as a «history of effects» before we interpret it and potentially transform it through its application. We must respond to the history of the recipe to transform it and continue its history within a new context. The recipe, if understood only as a technical plan for success, would prioritize stability and reproducibility over contextual sensitivity and improvisation. Good habits in the kitchen would then become meaningless in the ethical sense: as the mere following of directions, they would aspire only to technical or immediate goods and would only contribute to the pursuit of the highest good incidentally.

Nonetheless, the technical measures employed to ensure a recipe's success (one often judged according to standards of repetition and consistency, or according to the already accepted – i.e. normative – tastes and expectations of a

given time and place) reveal how deeply improvisation relies upon «the history of effects» codified into the recipe's norms and enacted through the good habits that support their realization. The clearly stated directions and procedures of the recipe assume (and often obscure) the hours of training and history of experiences that make the recipe's directions appropriate for the preparation of a dish under particular material and social conditions: knife skills, multi-tasking, the organization of preliminary ingredients; the haptic and visual cues associated with readiness, the dexterity required to knead or form or fold, etc. These rigid dictates of the recipe do not limit the cook but provide a necessary starting point for exploration and discovery. The attentive cook, confronted with the changing conditions in which recipes appear, understands deeply that those instructions could have been written otherwise and is able to leverage her skills to cultivate its unexpected opportunities for improvisation. While this might occur due to a certain indifference by the cook in the face of the recipe's prescriptions, or due to a happy accident that befalls someone less experienced, an experienced cook who possesses good habits might read the rigid guidelines of the recipe as possibilities for learning – and even unlearning – what the recipe prescribes in new material and social conditions.

The encoded habits of the recipe's author, along with the learned habits of the cook, encounter resistance in the differences that challenge any presumed universality of the recipe's text: the fusion of horizons needs regulation (as Gadamer suggests) to overcome a mere clash of habits and norms. What is required in this moment is not simply a habit (*hexis*) for reasoning or compromise (there is no *third* that could offer reasonable terms of negotiation between the two horizons) but a good habit of engaging contingencies and cultivating difference – a good habit of improvisation. Such a habit embodies the continual striving for the good required by the ends of gastronomy and thus inevitably creates moments that demand improvisation. Improvisation in such cases can be minor, such as adjusting the recipe to compensate for ingredients that are not their usual quality or that cannot be used for health or religious reasons; but they can also quite radical when prior knowledge and current circumstances birth an entirely new dish and recipe. Transformation in such cases is not merely an aesthetic choice but reveals the *ontological flexibility* inherent to the recipe form, wherein the being of the recipe is subordinate to its broader ethical imperative.

7. *Conclusion*

The case of the recipe is in this way exemplary. As a unique cultural form, a recipe seems, in every instance, to be potentially contradicted by the very act of is application. Cooking with a recipe requires its always precarious negotiation

with the social and material conditions of the present. One cannot simply rely on past experiences to understand a recipe; nor can recipes simply be dismissed in the pursuit of the ends of gastronomy. To negotiate between the universal and the immediate, the past and the future, recipes require application. This seems true for the home cook and the gastronome, where ethical considerations are, for the most part, local concerns. However, more broadly, this reflection concerns a more general habit that reveals many of the failings of our current gastronomical practices. While the reading of a recipe might appear today as an obsession with cultural authenticity or a commitment to industrial replication, its most insidious form manifests symptomatically as denial – an unwillingness to accept the realities of a natural world in peril, an unsustainable food system, and the very precarity of our gastronomical pursuits. Recipes do more than codify a society's culinary practices: they represent our *ethos* and gastronomical health, and perhaps, as a prescription to remedy what ails us, place the demand of interpretation squarely on those who carry this knowledge forward.

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Notes

1 While a good deal of this essay focuses on the written form of the recipe, I intend the term "text" in the broadest sense, understanding that recipes can be transmitted through written text, oral speech, symbols and gestures, video demonstrations, and a host of other media.

2 I have chosen this recipe and dish for two reasons: the first is personal, as this recipe is one that I have often used in lectures, teaching demonstrations, and in my own personal cooking; the second is methodological, because it serves to illustrate some of the features common to many recipes – a basic structure (list of ingredients followed by instructions), a somewhat contested history, a culturally specific cuisine, an assumed set of techniques and practices that are not universal, and enough ambiguity to allow for variations and accidents.

3 The popularization of these scripts – such as Hieronymous Brunschwig's *Liber pestilentialis* (1500), which attempted to render the technical language of medicinal plague cures into the German vernacular – suggests that the emergence of the modern recipe addresses an epistemological problem in medical and culinary knowledge: how to disseminate such knowledge to those who are in the best position to deliver it.

4 Structuralist analyses often point to its uniqueness as a *technical text* that provides «instances of everyday operational definitions» (Norrick [1983]: 173). See also de Certeau, Giard, Mayol (1998): 215-216; Cotter (1997): 54-57; Görlach (2004). Comparative studies of recipes in particular identify the essential features of a recipe that persist despite changes in time, place, technology, and culture (see Arendholz, Biblitz, Kirner, Zimmermann [2013]: 119-137; Tomlinson [1986]: 201-216).

5 Sciacca considers the recipe a «continuant made up of the proper stages recorded in, for example, cookbooks, grandmothers' minds, on scraps of paper and so forth» (Sciacca [2020]:

237-238); however, on the subject of a recipe's transformation over time and the criteria by which such changes are distinguished, I resist his rather doctrinaire distinction between biological phenomena and social phenomena.

6 According to Harman (2014), objects are «a unified reality – physical or otherwise – that cannot be reduced either downwards to their pieces or upwards to their effects»; or, in other terms, «any entity that cannot be paraphrased in terms of either its components or its effects» (Harman [2016]: 3).

7 For more on the role of physical material in the process of formation and artistic improvisation, I point the reader to Valgenti (2021).

8 On this idea of unlearning that is central to acts of improvisation, see Bertinetto (2022): 7-12.

9 Other instances of a recipe's application could include the preparation of a cookbook, the use of recipes for teaching others how to cook, recipes as narrative or memoir, and as is common across social media today, the application of recipes as a form of entertainment or commentary. In all these instances, I maintain that the function of the recipe as a transmitter of gastronomic knowledge remains central.