Coquina. Images of Cooks in Contemporary Gastromania

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Abstract. Can we be sure that modern chefs are all the same, with the same qualities, skills, knowledge and values? Can we assume that chefs everywhere adhere to the same systems of meaning and cooking procedures? Can we affirm that the surprise effect, so often sought after and criticised, and perhaps peppered with stereotypical values (sustainability, care for the environment, fighting waste, farm to fork, respect for tradition, the search for the absolute flavour, vegetarianism...) is the only goal of the contemporary cook? Or are we perhaps faced with a conceptual fog involving aesthetics, ethics, politics, society, the economy and religion that should be articulated and redefined in order to be better understood? This paper aims to answer such questions.

1. The Ambivalences of Cooking

Countless are the cooks of the world. Across the history and geography of our planet, this anthropologically fundamental and socially necessary activity – cooking – has been entrusted to a variety of people, resulting in gender differences becoming intertwined with social hierarchies and the desire for distinction. More importantly, the separation between domestic and professional cooking, which is often exaggerated. For well-known religious and philosophical reasons, culinary activity was generally despised in the West and considered second-rate work. Consequently, the figure of the cook, however different the historical and political contexts in which it manifested itself, maintained a social stigma and was generally denigrated[1]. It is said that Lenin, in illustrating what communism was, would often remark that it was a political regime "where even my cook could rise to power", perhaps constructing a good image of real socialism, but certainly a very bad one of the cook[2]. Similarly, Proust explained the anti-social nature of Françoise, the servant of his upper-class family, by recounting how she was perfectly skilled at wringing the necks of chickens, and plucking them amid ghastly squawking, before turning them into delicious dishes for dinner. The violence embedded in cooking resonates with the presumed inferiority of those who carry it out, and vice versa. There are hundreds of such examples[3].

Yet cooking is not just any job: it is an action that transforms the ingredients and their sensory qualities so that we can both eat and enjoy them. Thanks to this process, nourishment and pleasure become one and the same entity. This is precisely why eating well has often been frowned upon and condemned by by body-denying religions (a theme to which we shall return). Moreover, cooking is both the foundation and the culmination of remaining part of the civilised world: it characterises the human species as such. Humans have many features that set them apart from other animals – language, the ability to make things, to produce tools and artefacts, to laugh, to prohibit incest – but, above all, the act of cooking. Humans are the only animals that cook – that alter substances before ingesting them, enhance their flavour to make them better, and endow them with meaning that exceeds the need for nourishment. More precisely, we turn nourishment into a form of signification – a language through which to speak of the world and its things, of society and the cosmos. Cooking transforms food into both a system of meaning and a process of communication. This may seem like a truism, but we rarely stop to consider the deeper reasons behind this species-specific necessity, or just how it rooted in the intellectual, spiritual

[1] See Korsmeyer (2000); Perullo (2013).
[2] See Gabutti (2011); Marrone (2023).
[3] On violence in cuisine see Ricci (1994); Marrone (2024a).

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and cultural (almost unnatural), along with all the consequences it has for the everyday life: the times of day for cooking and eating meals, the domestic or public spaces where this occurs, and the human and non-human actors who take part in the act – or are excluded from it[4].
Throughout history, this all-too-human prerogative has generated ambiguities and contradictions. On the one hand, there is someone in charge of the kitchen who, for this reason, is excluded from family and social life (the servant, the cook, the bourgeois woman, etc.), thus presenting himself as kind of victim. On the other hand, there is the power that knowing how to cook produces: the power of the cook who decides what is liked and disliked, who is favoured and who is not, and who has power over the bodies of family members or diners in general. The figure of the cook is highly ambiguous: servant and master, servant to the master, and yet his master over him.

2. Beyond the Gastromaniac Nebula

In the world of gastromania, things are different. Cooks, who were despised for millennia, now have a different image in the media and, consequently, a new social role. It is a respectable image, moreover, multiple mythologies have arisen. Here, we will focus on professional chefs, acknowledging the blurred line between them and home cooks. The former are chefs – heads of brigades – who are endowed with power as well as know-how. They are individuals who must exercise their trade with rigorous ruthlessness and calculated precision. The latter, as we shall see below, have clearly moved from servility to play, neutralising the opposition that kept them apart from the professional chefs[5]. This has given rise to the media figure of the chef, who preserves the traditional meaning of the term ("chef" as "boss"), with all the social and mythological implications. He rises to the heights of fame and becomes an icon of himself, a celebrity who proudly crosses the threshold of the kitchen, from which he had been confined for centuries. He struts his stuff first in the dining room, where his adoring diners applaud him, and then in television studios, where he proposes extraordinary recipes to inexperienced viewers. Eventually, he enters the public sphere at large, becoming an opinion leader who is asked to express his views on any subject, from sport and politics to economics and the arts[6].
Everything and more has been said about chefs. The cyclical parodies and variegated aversions far outweigh the epideictic discourses of admiration. Those who want to show that they know what they are talking about prefer not to use this term, which is considered too fashionable among provincial gastromaniacs.[7] Instead, they opt for the more neutral term "cook", which they load with additional meaning and value. Today, a real chef does not claim to be one, but instead uses the expression "simply a cook". Professional gastronomic critics do the same, and generalist journalists do so to a lesser extent. By entering into the perverse cycle of fashions and counter-fashions, it seems that the situation of the cook has paradoxically stabilised, slowly turning towards an inevitable decline. What more can be said? Instead, let us ask ourselves*: are we certain that the modern cook is a unitary, monolithic figure, always and everywhere endowed with the same prerogatives, qualities, abilities, skills, knowledge and, above all, values*? Can we assume that chefs everywhere follow the same ideal models, systems of meaning and procedures in the kitchen, giving their acclaimed dishes a consistent air of familiarity, if not identical taste? Can we be sure that the much-criticised and sought-after surprise effect (*wow!*) is perhaps spiced up with stereotypical values such as sustainability, care for the environment, combating waste, locally sourced food, respect for tradition, the quest for absolute flavor and vegetarianism? Is this truly the only goal of the contemporary cook, *or are we faced with a conceptual nebula (aesthetic, ethical, political, social, economic and religious) that should be articulated and redefined in order to be better understood?* If meaning is given by difference, from which categories might we trace internal diversity within the modern-day chef? This paper attempts to answer such questions. The search for a typology is a complex matter; the wider the field of observation, the more difficult it is to establish. The investigation that follows is therefore a starting point.

[4] Marrone (2016, 2022). See also Montanari (2004); Montanari, Flandrin (1997).
[5] For a seminal articulation of the opposition between professional and home cooks see Giannitrapani (2021).
[6] Cf. Marrone (2014), which is the starting point for the reasoning in this article.
[7] Cf. Marrone (2017).

3. The Artist

Let us begin our exploration with Babette, one of the most relevant and discussed figures in gastromania. She is an exemplary icon of the cook-artist. She appears in Isak Dinesen's (Karen Blixen) 1958 book *Anecdotes of Destiny*, specifically in the short story "Babette's Feast", which inspired Gabriel Axel's 1987 film of the same title. This highly successful film has had a significant influence on contemporary gastronomic thinking. Pope Francis has often repeated it is his favourite film. Fittingly, Babette's story reaffirms the pleasures of the table in defiance of religious austerity ("praising God does not prevent good eating"), but it also highlights the misunderstandings that arise from the clash between the great French culinary tradition and local Danish food customs. It also addresses the idea of cooking as a feminine art.[8]
The story is well known: in a very sad Danish village (which is portrayed as Norwegian in the film), the lives of the inhabitants are dedicated to venerating the Lord. People pray, the Dean preaches and everyone sings praises to God. The community is shaken up by the sudden arrival of three people: a soldier (Loewenhielm), an opera singer (Papin) and an unknown woman (Babette). The Dean's daughters, Martina and Filippa, become infatuated with the soldier and the singer, respectively, but choose to obey the Church and renounce possible forever love. Babette arrives when the two women are elderly, and her presence ends up radically transforming the villagers. Anecdotes of destiny: Babette Hersant, who fled Paris due to fighting during the Commune uprising, works as a maid in the house of the two devout women for years. Thanks to an unexpected lottery win, she prepares a magnificent feast with exquisite dishes made with ingredients imported entirely from France. This delights the entire community, which rediscovers joy, a sense of belonging and the desire to be together without pretence or hypocrisy from that day onwards.
Throughout the entire event, Babette remains locked in the kitchen. No one knows about her existence, and those who do quickly forget. The delicious food seems to have prepared itself, as if by magic. Babette is not only a cook, but an entire restaurant. As a good chef should, she imports all the ingredients needed for the feast from France (quail, turtle, cheese, fruit, wine and even ice), as well as a curly-haired boy to help her in the kitchen and with serving. She also imports elegant tablecloths and napkins, silver cutlery, Bohemian bottles and glasses and precious candelabras. Everything needed for a beautiful, elegant French table is provided. Moreover, she reorganises the space in the house, creating a real dining room with suitable furniture. However, she is never seen by the diners. She never appears in the dining room; she always remains in the background, in the kitchen. Her strength lies precisely in her invisibility; her performance, as Goffman (1975) would say, is that of remaining in the background.
It is only when the two deeply touched women finally join her in the kitchen at the end of the feast to thank her that her true origin is revealed – and so comes the revelation: "I used to be a cook at the Café Anglais", she announces proudly. However, having lost her family, friends and wealthy clientele (including princes, princesses, generals and dukes), she sees no reason to return to Paris. This is why she spent all the money she won on that sumptuous feast, which was, to say the least, out of place ("a lunch for twelve at the Café Anglais would cost ten thousand francs"). "Dear Babette," Filippa retorts, "you shouldn't have given away everything you had for us". Thus comes the main scene:

> 'For your sake?' she replied. 'No. For my own.' She rose from the chopping block and stood up before the two sisters. 'I am a great artist!' she said.
> She waited a moment and then repeated: 'I am a great artist, Mesdames.' Again for a long time there was deep silence in the kitchen. Then Martine said: 'So you will be poor now all your life, Babette?' 'Poor?' said Babette. She smiled as if to herself. 'No, I shall never be poor. I told you that I am a great artist. A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing' (Blixen 1958, pp. 66-67).

This is a statement of poetics that is both emphatic and accurate, and it is repeated no less than four times in just a few lines. For Babette (and the narrator who introduces the idea), cooking is an art, and not just any art, but an activity with evident romantic overtones – or perhaps better, Romanticising ones.

[8] On Babette see Korsmeyer (1999); Appelbaum (2011); Mangiapane (2013); Marrone (2014, 2022).

Babette is a great artist and therefore a genius in the Romantic sense of the term: an artist who masters something that others neither understand nor even know exists[9]. This mystery gives rise to paintings, poems and, as our text loudly announces, gastronomic delicacies. Babette stands up to declare this, accompanied by a solemn, definitive silence. "A great artist is never poor," she says, challenging the humble lives of the pious women in that sad village and, with them, an entire culture that keeps gastronomic pleasure strictly separate from praise to the Lord, considering gluttony a capital vice.
But this is not the end of the story. The value of the cook-artist is not limited to the aesthetic sphere, or art for art's sake, since it also extends to ethics and politics. According to this account, cooking has a pragmatic dimension, one that involves effectiveness and the capacity for transformation and control. The two women seem to misunderstand the French cook's aesthetic statements: if Martina remains silent and insipid, Filippa is deeply troubled. The reader probably infers that her brief love affair with Papin transferred a love of the arts and, more prosaically, knowledge of the circles within them, to her heart. Philippa seems to know the names of the wealthy patrons of the Café Anglais – individuals who played a part in suppressing the Paris Commune with bloodshed. "The general you named," she blurts out at one point, "had your husband and son shot. How can you mourn him?".
Babette's response is blunt and encapsulates the ambivalence, contradictions and oddities of cooking, as well as its pragmatic force, which only great artists can harness. Fine dining turns out to be a political act. This is why, by justifying its elitism and luxury, starred cuisine can be socially accepted, acquiring an aura of preciousness, mystery and artistry that will soon be shared with the adoring masses, eager for gastronomic experiences. Babette inaugurates, precisely, *gastromania*:

> 'You see, Mesdames,' she said, at last, 'those people belonged to me, they were mine. They had been brought up and trained, with greater expense than you, my little ladies, could ever imagine or believe, to understand what a great artist I am. I could make them happy. When I did my very best I could make them perfectly happy' (Blixen 1958, p. 68).

The great snobbery is that cooking can enables you to dominate your tormentors and become the master of your master, however ruthless they may be. Through cooking, Babette not only dominates her tormentors, she also makes them happy, thereby dominating them. Putting aside all possible psychoanalytical interpretations, which are entirely pertinent to the truth, here is the iconic image of how every self-respecting bourgeoisie housewife knows to capture her husband and children by preparing them delicious dishes that cheer them up and end up dominating them[10].
It matters little whether this was the thought of the Danish writer or only that of her heroine. What does happen is that this romanticised idea of cuisine has entered public consciousness, opening up a sense of shared luxury and gastronomic pleasure, and turning the elitism of fine dining into a widespread desire. The media amplify this sentiment, giving rise to gastromania.

4. The Soldier

But gastromania takes many forms. For example, take *Kitchen Confidential. Gastronomic Adventures in New York*, published in 2000, a much more popular text than Karen Blixen's. It turned the author, Anthony Bourdain, into a famous media personality. It is no coincidence that the book gave rise to a TV series of the same name. Bourdain also became a TV hero thanks to his following book, *A Cook's Tour*. However, while the latter focuses on the experience of tasting ethnic cuisine, *Kitchen Confidential* centres on the culinary experience. This is what interests us here: by recounting the tale of a penniless man who works

[9] On the Romantic notion of genius see Russo (2024). Clearly, the figure of the artist evoked here is precisely the romantic one, and cannot be generalised. Thus Campanini (2021) describes the figure of the cook-artist in the Middle Ages in a very different way, as someone who, subject to the tastes of his lord, nevertheless tries to invent something new, using what Montanari (2004) calls synthetic cuisine.
[10] Cf. Douglas (1985), where similar behavior is found in working-class families in the mid-20th century.

in New York restaurants for lack of a better job until he gradually becomes a real chef, Bourdain provides a counterpoint to Babette. In fact, we could argue that he represents its systematic negation.
This book is difficult to define. In some ways, the protagonist, Tony, is a kind of Jack Kerouac who, having exhausted his adventures on the road, enters the kitchen. The atmosphere and characters are reminiscent of the Beat Generation: freaks who no longer hit the road, but continue to live meaningless lives. They unexpectedly find an environment that welcomes them in the restaurant kitchen. In other respects, it is a coming-of-age novel narrated in the first person by a kind of hippie, drug-using guy with no other job who decides to devote himself to cooking, gradually becoming an important chef in NYC. The book lacks the narrative of his transition to success: suddenly, Tony is already an established chef at a renowned French restaurant called Les Halles. *Kitchen Confidential* is also a participatory ethnography of what really happens in restaurant kitchens every day. In short, it is a disenchanting, demystifying and prosaic description of work in the kitchen and the daily anxiety of producing as many dishes as possible while dealing with the sometimes unreasonable requests of diners on the other side of the wall. The brigade of cooks must serve a throng of hungry, time-poor diners, providing a gastronomic experience worthy of the name, despite their own personal culinary preferences. In short, Babette is an *artistic chef* whilst Bourdain is a *soldier chef*. While Babette is the master of her domain, Bourdain is, with an obvious dialectical inversion, a servant under someone else's command.
Here is the page where Bourdain describes the first restaurant he worked in as a young dishwasher on Cape Cod:

> There was Bobby, the chef, a well-toasted, late-thirtyish ex-hippie who, like a lot of people in P-town, had come for vacation years back and stayed. He lived there year-round. […] There was Lydia, a half-mad., matronly Portuguese divorcee with a teenage daughter. Lydia made the clam chowder for which we were somewhat famous, and during service dished out the vegetables and side dishes. She drank a lot. There was Tommy, the fry cook, a perpetually moving surfer dude with electric blue eyes […] There was Mike, an ex-con and part-time methedrine dealer, who worked salad station. […]
> They had style and swagger, and they seemed afraid of nothing. They drank everything in sight, stole whatever wasn't nailed down, and screwed their way through floor staff […] They carried big, bad-ass knives, which they kept honed and sharpened to a razor's edge. They hurled dirty saute pans and pots across the kitchen and into my pot sink with casual accuracy. They spoke their own peculiar dialect. […] They looted the place for everything it was worth […].
> Highwaymen, rogues, buccaneers, cut-throats, they were like young princes to me, still only a lowly dishwasher. The life of the cook was a life of adventure, looting, pillaging and rock-and-rolling through life with a carefree disregard for all conventional morality. It looked pretty damn good to me on the other side of the line (Bourdain 2000, pp. 34-36).

The kitchen group (there is a chef, a soup cook, a rotisserie cook and a salad barman), is very different from the famous culinary organisation envisaged by Escoffier. While the latter organised a perfectly hierarchical brigade, Bourdain's is a disorganised army, or perhaps more accurately, a realistic army seen from within and from below, without pretence or superstructures, and understood in a prosaic way. Bourdain's approach is clear: to reveal the reality of working in a kitchen, more akin to that of a simple soldier than a brilliant artist, and to expose its truth. The kitchens are inhabited by an army of soldiers in the trenches who are in disarray. The concessive verbal structures (*but*, *nevertheless*, *although*, *notwithstanding*, etc.) are the secret weapon of Bourdain's argumentation.
Indeed, returning to the figure of the chef, the adjectives most frequently used to describe the various members of the kitchen brigade throughout the book are *bastard*, *junkie*, *thief*, *unreliable*, *sex addict*, *high on testosterone*, *lunatic*, *rabid*, *dirty*, *psychopath*, *marginal*, *borderline* and *scum of humanity*. And yet, at the same time, they are described as being *capable*, *efficient* and *tireless*, as well as being attentive to both the final taste and the efficiency of the restaurant. From their own point of view, these strange figures are exactly where they should and want to be: in a restaurant kitchen. Here, they are not the exception, but the norm. Despite any heavenly, hence mythological, vision of the chef, Bourdain highlights what he perceives as the true nature of life in any kitchen, regardless of its social or economic level.

Here is a description of the average chef: someone who, apart from the executive chef – the only person who puts their name to the dishes and is acclaimed for it – actually works holed up within the kitchen ranks.

> Who's cooking your food anyway? What strange beasts lurk behind the kitchen doors? […] Are they young, ambitious culinary school grads, putting in their time on the line until they get their shot at the Big Job? Probably not. […] The cooks are a dysfunctional, mercenary lot, fringedwellers motivated by money, the peculiar lifestyle of cooking and a grim pride. They're probably not even American (Bourdain 2000, p. 81).

An interesting argumentative shift: while cooks are often inexperienced Puerto Ricans or Mexicans, the cuisine that Bourdain thinks about and practises is still French. Almost all of the dishes mentioned in the book have French names. Learning the job of cook means memorising Julia Child's recipe book. The scene in which young Tony experiences a kind of enlightenment, when he realises the importance of taste, takes place in La Rochelle with oysters. As previously mentioned, Bourdain's restaurant is called Les Halles. In short, the idea of French cuisine as an international cuisine whose canons must be followed to learn the profession is present here too. However, while Babette imported Parisian cuisine to Denmark and imposed it as the gastronomic standard, Bourdain adapts it for NYC restaurants. In this respect, he is closer to Julia Child than to Babette: like Julia Child, he translates French cuisine to the US, often juxtaposing it with other cuisines rather than hybridising the dishes, in order to make them coexist. This is in keeping with the tradition of American multiculturalism.
As will already be clear, moreover, in *Kitchen Confidential* the idea of cooking as an art is missing, and certainly not as a revolutionary art – least of all a feminine one: the women in the book's kitchens are very masculine. For Bourdain, cooking is never the work of a single genius chef, but the work of many people: line cooks, night cleaners, dishwashers, waiters, sauce makers, rotisserie workers, restaurant owners, tools, spaces, suppliers and bills to pay. Bruno Latour (2021) would call this a *collective*. Line cooks, he writes, can be divided into three groups: artists ("a small, unpleasant and expensive minority"), exiles ("people who could not survive a nine-to-five job") and mercenaries ("people who work for money and do it well"). For him, a good cook is a craftsman rather than an artist.

> When I hear 'artist', I think of someone who doesn't think it necessary to show up at work on time. More often than not their efforts, convinced as they are of their own genius, are geared more to giving themselves a hard-on than satisfying the great majority of dinner customers. […] When a job applicant starts telling me how Pacific Rim-job cuisine turns him on and inspires him, I see trouble coming. Send me another Mexican dishwasher anytime. *I can teach him* to cook. *I can't* teach character. Show up at work on time six months in a row and we'll talk about red curry paste and lemon grass. Until then, I have four words for you: 'Shut the fuck up' (Bourdain 2000, p. 92).

The distance between Bourdain and Babette could not be greater. Whereas Babette took pleasure in her situation as a poor, familyless immigrant woman – *but* also as an artist – Bourdain sees cooking as hard daily work. Perhaps it is a craft, *but it is still* regulated by schedules, commitments and seriousness in preparation. This is why he concludes "I'll generally take a stand-up mercenary who takes pride in his professionalism over an artist any day" (Ibidem).
In short, perhaps Bourdain's cuisine touches on gastromania because he sees the disintegration of the aesthetic ideal in it: like art for Hegel, the cuisine of the lonely and misunderstood genius has no *raison d'être* and certainly no future. It is precisely this decadent stance, this *myth of undoing myths*, that has led to his success in the media, his transformation into a famous chef and television personality who explores various cuisines around the world, as well as writing detective novels and, of course, cookbooks. He moves from being a restaurateur to a taster, from the kitchen to the table, from the hand to the palate. And there, it becomes much less exciting.

5. The Amateur

To look for other contemporary cooks, we need to broaden our view. We should try to see if, in other discursive contexts and types of text, there are occurrences that further articulate the noted opposition between the artist cook and the soldier cook. In fact, we can assume that Babette and Bourdain are not unique cases, but rather exemplary icons of a much broader panorama. They are ideal types to put into play. Can we find others? Perhaps. So far, for demonstrative convenience, we have used examples from fictional literature (Babette) and media-relevant autobiographical novels (Bourdain).

An interesting case to include in our exploration comes from a journalistic essay with fewer explicit autobiographical implications. Michael Pollan's book *Cooked* (2013) recounts how he, a successful journalist and writer, learned to cook and makes an original proposal.

Pollan's argument begins with what is known as the "cooking paradox": the more the culinary arts are discussed in the media today, the less time people spend in the kitchen. People spend more time watching others cook on TV than they do cooking themselves. In the United States, they have calculated that the average person spends just 27 minutes a day preparing food: less than any self-styled gastronomic TV programme lasts, excluding commercials. Among other things, the concept of cooking itself is changing very rapidly, as are the actions one takes to prepare meals. Pollan continues that most people today call "cooking" things like taking a chicken cutlet out of the freezer and heating it in the microwave for thirty seconds, or spreading peanut butter on toast. However, even these actions could eventually be eliminated from our daily routine as they are unnecessary. For some time now, the food industry has not only been processing raw materials, providing us with pre-breaded fish sticks or ravioli stuffed with ricotta and spinach, but also aims to provide us with ready-made meals and packaged snacks. For example, the ham and mayonnaise sandwich with pickled gherkins comes with a can of soda and a muffin studded with "yummy" chocolate chips. In the past, as our Françoise used to do, preparing a chicken meant wringing its neck and plucking it.

In a world where the media talks endlessly about cooking and presents us with hordes of chef-artists as exemplary role models for our everyday lives, Pollan argues that the act of cooking has become totally superfluous in the sense that it is no longer indispensable for personal or family sustenance. The food industry's expertise has reached such a level that cooking has been completely erased from our daily duties. Someone far better and faster than us does it for us, leaving us with plenty of free time to do something else (which, excluding media consumption, means working more). Thus, not without a perversion of history, the well-known American fast food chain KFC stands up in defence of American housewives in its advertising campaigns, no longer forced to cook for the whole family thanks to its ready-made meals, in order to sell its tons of low-cost fried chicken to millions of globalised stomachs. We would not have expected a feminist fast food restaurant, but it is the perfectly legitimate child of economic liberalism.

"Cooking is no longer obligatory, and that marks a shift in human history, one whose full implications we're just beginning to reckon" (Pollan 2013). Pollan's reasoning is easy to follow: if cooking is no longer a daily duty and a domestic chore that has oppressed women for millennia, it becomes an occupation for festive amateurs. Disengaged from domestic duties, it is directed towards other intentions and values, such as socialisation, health, respect for the environment, the existential and ethical depth of one's own and others' time. Indeed, "even something as tedious as chopping onions gets, paradoxically, more interesting, and more problematic, as soon as doing it is no longer obligatory" (Pollan 2013). Thus, "the not-cook option – for which we have food manufacturers and fast-food restaurants to thank – means that people can also, for the first time, choose to cook purely for the pleasure of doing it" (Pollan 2013).

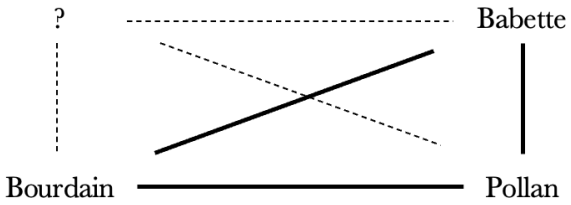
The amateur delights, but when he cooks, he does so by enacting one of the richest anthropological gestures of the human species: the transition from nature to culture. In doing so, he not only enjoys himself, but also gives pleasure to others, who are almost always the people he loves[11]. Cooking is a transitive and transformative act that modifies raw materials, resets social relations and improves the lives of those involved. It is also a political stance of rebellion: "in a world where so few of us are obliged

[11] On the figure of the amateur see Marrone (2015, 2024b).

to cook at all anymore, to choose to do so is to lodge a protest against specialization – against the total rationalization of life, against the infiltration of commercial interests into every last cranny of our lives.". (Pollan 2013). Dabbling in the kitchen, as Pollan declares he has learned to do with great satisfaction, is not a frivolous pastime for idle women, but an energetic gesture of someone who intends to reclaim the taste and responsibility of nourishing themselves and others, turning necessity into a virtue.

6. The Commander

The three cases examined are related to each other according to a precise logic. If Bourdain (soldier cook) is the negation of Babette (artist cook), then Pollan (amateur cook) is complementary to Babette while also being contrary to Bourdain. This allows us to place the three types of cook in a semiotic square, which graphically represents the logical relations between them:



In order to find a cook to fill the vacant position in our scheme, we must transition from our current empirical knowledge of food and wine to the activation of the heuristic potentialities present in our model. [First, however, a clarification is needed: calling these three terms (as well as those that will come later) by their proper names, whether the entities are real or fictitious, does not mean limiting ourselves to the individuals in the field (Babette, Bourdain and Pollan), focusing on their idiosyncratic particularities and historical and cultural significance. Rather, it means using them as exemplary cases of much broader and more concrete typologies. Like all scientifically posed models, our model is formal and abstract, and can therefore be used for a multitude of cases, each of which can be linked back to one of the entities we have articulated in relation to one another. From this point of view, Babette is no longer Blixen's literary character, but rather an ideal simulacrum that encompasses many possible cases – the *type* from which many *tokens* derive. Similarly, Bourdain and Pollan are no longer authors of texts, but rather exemplary cases. Talking about *images of cooks* means this.

We must then go in search of a cook who is complementary to the soldier, opposed to the artist and of whom the amateur is the negation. This is not difficult. After a long detour, we arrive back at our implicit starting point: the head chef. To be a head chef, one must have subordinates – soldiers. Therefore, the head chef is complementary to the soldier chef: one cannot exist without the other. On the other hand, however, he is diametrically opposed to the cook-artist, with whom he has conflicting prerogatives, and is negated by the cook-amateur, who is, by definition, devoid of organisational principles.

The chef par excellence can therefore be identified as the person who was considered not only the consolidator, but also possibly the inventor, of the kitchen brigade with its various sections, each headed by a sous-chef. This can only be Auguste Escoffier. Having moved from Monte Carlo to London at the insistence of César Ritz, he had to reorganise kitchen work from the ground up, essentially rationalising it along Taylorist lines. The maître de cuisine is thus equipped with his own *sous-chef*, who replaces him when necessary and coordinates the work of the various kitchen *brigades*, each specialising in the preparation of sauces, roasts, pastries, and so on. Each of these *brigades* is inhabited by various *commis* and directed by a specific chef: the chef *pâtissier*, the chef *rotisseur*, the chef *saucier*, the chef *entremetier*, the chef *garde-manger*, the chef *poissonnier* and the *chef de nuit*. This creates a horizontal organisation based on specialisation and a vertical organisation based on hierarchy. Responsibilities are also distributed both ways[12].

Clearly, the composition of the brigade will change to adapt to the varying needs of the different restaurants over time. What remains constant is the presence of a commander-in-chief and a certain

[12] Among the studies on Escoffier, see the biography by James (2002) and the historical overview by Rambourg (2010).

number of subordinates arranged in a hierarchical structure. Rather than Taylor's factory, from which it also takes its cue, the brigade is perhaps reminiscent of the Napoleonic army and, more generally, of a military structure and mentality. This extends from Escoffier to television programmes such as MasterChef, which are its involuntary caricature[13]. For this reason, the reference to Escoffier is not, as might be thought, a departure from the proposed area of investigation of gastromania. Indeed, it confirms it, given that the mythologised, and sometimes ridiculous, figure of the chef is what primarily constitutes this area.

7. The Scientist

Having filled the place that had been left empty in our scheme, the exploration can nevertheless continue, using the intermediate spaces between the four simulacra we have brought into play, i.e. what are technically called second-generation terms. These entities are placed among those already identified. This serves not only to multiply the figures of the cook to be taken into consideration and articulated between them within the semantic field we are outlining, but also to indicate some intermediate ways between these figures to make the transition between them less discontinuous. However, we do not renounce the principle that the meaning of things is only given in their difference, starting from the same principle of relevance.

Can we envisage a cook who embodies both the commander, who is typically at the head of a hierarchical organisation, and the artist, who acts autonomously, if not in isolation, like Babette in the story? How can we imagine a cook who is both an absolute leader and artistically inspired? One exemplary case could be that of Antoine Carême, who has often been called a "scientist-chef" (here, it is not so much the historical Carême, but rather the figure of him as mythologised in gastromania – a version inspired by the historical Carême. The stereotypical image of the scientist, somewhere between the commander-in-chief and the genius artist, may be appropriate here. Mythologically, he possesses the qualities of both: rigour and precision, as well as ingenuity and a desire for creative innovation.

Carême had all the makings of a legend right from the start. Despite his humble origins, he worked his way up through the ranks (not a military term by chance) to become the cook to kings and, as the cliché goes, king of cooks. His activities and cooking even attracted the rising bourgeois class[14].

A specialist in pastry, he wrote some of the most important texts in the history of French cuisine. He cooked for Talleyrand, who took him with him to the Congress of Vienna, for Tsar Alexander I. He also cooked for the Prince of Wales, for the British ambassador, Lord Stewart, and for Baron Rothschild, among others. He became a close friend of the notorious gourmand, Gioacchino Rossini.

His first creations were confectionery architectures, with which he brought the iconography of the beaux arts into pastry making. The care he put into his work and the grandeur of his creations, such as a dinner for 1,200 people in the Cour de France, gradually led him to adopt a rigorous approach to culinary work, drawing on the research of the chemist Thénard. This led to the notion of "osmazome", which was adopted by Brillat-Savarin, among others. This concept attempts to explain the science behind the taste of meat, and it is this that earned him the title of "scientist chef". For him, art and science are not antitheses, but rather complement each other: decorative and rigorous cooking are two sides of the same coin.

This helps to explain why he is considered a contemporary myth, influencing the somewhat kitsch decorative style of middle-class cuisine as mediated by women's magazines,[15] as well as the scientism of certain gastronomic criticism, which has also been greatly revived by the media.

[13] On MasterChef see Marrone (2016).
[14] On Carême see Rambourg (2005, 2010); Ferri (2013).
[15] See Barthes (1957).

8. The Alchemist

On the other hand, what should be the figure between the artist-genius represented by Babette and the amateur cook invoked by Pollan? Should it be someone who uses creativity and inventiveness not to glorify themselves or become master of their peers, as Babette does, but for pure enjoyment and to stimulate both mind and body through emotion? This would have to be an artist without the poses and mythologies that accompany the term, taking responsibility for playful invention and in-depth knowledge of the materials they work with. In other words, they would be a kind of *alchemist* who, unlike a chemist, is more interested in the outcomes produced by unusual combinations of substances and their transformation than in the elementary constituents of matter. As has been said by Barthes, Greimas, Fabbri and Bastide, cooking is the sister of alchemy in that it is the practice that involves the transformative treatment of materials regardless of their chemical composition. However, it is also true that the majority of contemporary chefs do not take this on board, preferring to work in close and constant confrontation with the canons of cooking, whether traditional or artistic.

A cook who could represent the figure of the alchemist is probably the famous Ferran Adrià. Of course, he is often associated with so-called "molecular" cuisine, tending to bring him close to chemistry (he has even been awarded an honorary degree in the subject). Alternatively, he is often seen as embodying the idea of cuisine as pure creativity and artistic expression, which presupposes values such as originality and innovation, and a detachment from predecessors. "Creativity means not copying" seems to be Adrià's answer to those who have asked him about his work in the kitchen (whether he coined the phrase or not is irrelevant here). This has led to a variety of other definitions, such as deconstructive, techno-emotional, modernist and technical-conceptual cuisine. Indeed, his work has always involved the systematic deconstruction of gastronomic canons – from dish structure and meal order to contrasts like sweet/salty and hot/cold – with the aim of constructing new culinary codes and forms of food. These are linked to respect for the products of the earth and to health. For example, in his well-known *Synthesis of elBulli Cuisine* of 2006, Adrià set out his gastronomic manifesto in 16 points, destined to educate a whole new generation of chefs around the world and generate many imitations[16].

However, it is precisely his relationship with matter that allows us to consider him as an exemplary figure of the alchemist cook. As has been noted, his work is very close to the idea of craftsmanship proposed by the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013). According to Ingold, what matters in *making* is striking the right balance between paying attention to the environment, manual labour, and practical skills in managing the process of manufacture. "The cook," argues Perullo (2013) echoing Ingold, "does not work *on* the material, but *with* the material, verifying its holding points, its articulations and its possibilities according to the desired result, which is often modified during the process." In this sense, "the cook is an alchemist: [...] what matters most is the outcome, which is determined by how the material reacts when mixed with other materials". Perullo adds that Adrià's art is alchemic in this sense, given his interest in the outcomes of the transformations the ingredients undergo rather than the ingredients themselves. Rather than breaking down the cook's work, Adrià reinvents it, showing that it must always confront and deeply understand the behaviour of substances in order to give them taste and personal, collective, social and historical value.

In short, Adrià's media image, between an artist and an amateur, fits well into our scheme. This is reinforced by the thousands of caricatures he has been subjected to (think of the 2012 film *Comme un chef*, directed by Daniel Cohen), as well as by the recurrent naive, pop-culture criticism he continues to receive ("What kind of cuisine is this so-called molecular cuisine?"). His combination of extreme technological expertise and a search for pure, ineffable emotion makes him a unique yet typical figure in the contemporary world of chefs. Unlike the military brigade, Adrià did not work in a hierarchically organised team, but rather with a group of specialists – a cohesive team of equals, each with their own area of expertise, trained to overcome the challenges set by their alchemist guru. He synthesises the figures of the artist and the amateur, forging his own autonomous culinary practice.

[16] See Perullo (2013) for an in-depth discussion about this point.

9. The Innkeeper

Who contrasts with him, on the opposite side of the diagram, halfway between the commander and the soldier? Which figure is both master and servant to himself, a chef without employees and a soldier without a commander? The image best suited to occupy this place in our scheme is that of the *innkeeper*. This is a very traditional and ancient figure which has enriched all kinds of narratives and imaginations, from travel tales to the great novels of the Western canon. Above all, it is a figure that, in the search for alternative catering forms to the modern restaurant, has been widely recuperated and consequently mythologised in the contemporary world, thanks in part to the cancellation of semantic and historical differences between Italian *trattoria*, tavern and inn. We are talking about the everyday *trattoria* cook, widely portrayed in a tourist context amidst checked tablecloths, with a slightly floppy toque, a greasy jacket, a blackened apron, baggy scalloped trousers and sandals[17].

The Slow Food movement, led by Carlo Petrini, took the first steps towards the revival of historic inns ("osteria", in Italian). These were reimagined as economical and shrewd establishments that would preserve the oldest food and wine traditions. As early as 1990, the movement launched a guide (*Guida alle Osterie d'Italia*), which also had an educational and informative role. The founders intended this to be a strategic alternative to Michelin and fine dining[18]. "The movement's focus," writes Petrini (2001, p. 51), "is on the culture of the osteria, promoting local identities, the proper use of ingredients, and reviving convivial values and simple, seasonal tastes". The osteria thus becomes "the symbol of traditional cuisine, family management, simple service, hospitality, quality wine and reasonable prices". The brigade and the team are thus joined by a new collective subject: the family. The family-run restaurant is hospitable towards customers, is presumed to be the guardian of typical dishes and local ingredients ignored by haute cuisine, and therefore is in danger of extinction. "Family management, with knowledge transmitted from mother to daughter or grandmother to granddaughter, or an association of talents in the kitchen, cellar and dining room with moderately conservative ideas, is perceived as the antidote to the extinction of certain dishes. Wine culture has done the rest, especially among innkeepers of the new generation" (Petrini 2001).

How should we define the role of this new generation of hosts? "The real risk today," argued Paola Gho, editor of the guide, fifteen years after the first edition (Petrini and Padovani 2005, p. 106), "is the trivialisation of the model, of a phenomenon such as the cuisine of the territory, which has become fashionable precisely thanks to Osterie d'Italia". A recent book by the Italian chef and writer Tommaso Melilli in 2020 portrays and narrates this contemporary figure of the innkeeper very well (the Italian title is *I conti con l'oste. Ritorno al paese delle tovaglia a quadretti*, that can be translated as "Dealing with the Innkeeper. Return to the land of checked tablecloths"). Like Bourdain, the book aims to unveil the hidden world of kitchens and recount the daily work that takes place there. To achieve this, Melilli immerses himself in the kitchens, creating a kind of participatory, conscious and critical ethnography. However, he starts from an idiosyncratic perspective: that of a young cook who grew up in an area "halfway between Cremona and Mantua", who started cooking in Paris by chance, as often happens, only to return to Italy and gradually become a successful chef. During his time in Parisian bistros, he built up a fairly stereotypical image of himself as an expatriate Italian chef, and it was with this image that he returned home:

> I feel like a cook, or rather, an innkeeper – he writes just as he decides to leave the *ville lumière*, – I sell that gruff, generous, everyday image, and my customers occasionally buy it. But that image, that character that I play when I work, is all constructed. I built it on a handful of more or less distant memories, and above all a good dose of clichés that I endured for a while and then rode on. [...] I play host every day, I draw myself like this, but I have never worked a single day in an osteria or trattoria in Italy (Melilli 2020, p. 13).

[17] See Capatti (2000); Capatti, Montanari (1999).
[18] See Andrews (2008); Petrini (2001); Petrini, Padovani (2005).

When he arrived in Italy, he found that *osteria* were very different from what the French imagine to be typical of Italy: traditional, undoubtedly, but nonetheless in a state of great ferment and with a strong desire for transformation. They wanted to rethink tradition in a more contemporary way, not by destroying it, but by continuing it. Franco, the third-generation owner of a provincial family osteria, says: "We have always done territorial cooking. At first, it just seemed normal and right, and everyone was doing it – although no one called it that. In fact, no one called it anything" (Melilli 2020, p. 42). However, Franco continues, gradually everyone started making something else ("the same thing all over Italy"), and the traditional *bollito* was replaced by scallops, *tagliata* and salmon. Rather, it was enough to rethink the *bollito* itself and cook it, for example, well before Bottura, sous-vide. Nevertheless, "now they have changed their minds, and everyone wants to do territorial and traditional cooking, and everyone talks about "territory" all the time" (Melilli 2020, p. 43). The lesson is clear: if tradition means a desire to stand still and be lazy, that is uninteresting. However, if tradition involves looking to the past to modernise, that's another matter: "One can try to discover new and distant things that few have ever tasted, and one can do so by looking to the past because ancient cuisine is a closed box that none of us can open, but only shake" (Melilli 2020, p. 44).

Linked to the theme of tradition is the ambivalent theme of the family. If the *trattoria* is "a restaurant that feels like home", Melilli argues that it is not governed by a serene freedom – a hard-to-die myth – but by precise hierarchical constraints. When seen by someone who has acquired expertise in another country and therefore has a more disenchanted view of gastronomy, family management is by no means the solution, but another kind of problem. If the progenitor disappears, the children must take their place, even if they are unwilling or unable to do so. In other words, family management "sounds a bit like a curse" (Melilli 2020, p. 48).

This leads to a questioning of the fundamental difference between home and professional cooking. While the traditions of restaurant and home cooking differ profoundly in many countries, Melilli argues that this is not the case in Italy. (He makes this argument in a chapter entitled "Carbonara Confidential": the spectre of Bourdain strikes again). In Italy, there is no gastronomic restaurant canon, only a domestic one. This means that the role of the cook, or rather the trattoria host, is to adapt the domestic tradition for the restaurant setting, while managing the relationship between mise en place (done comfortably in the kitchen before the diners arrive) and service (done at the last moment). When preparing a *spaghetti carbonara* dish, for example, what is done beforehand and what at the last moment? The skill of the cook and, by extension, the quality of the restaurant will lie in calibrating the pre-cooking of the pasta, the stirred yolks and egg whites, and the frying of the *guanciale* with what only needs to be done at the moment of service. This will result in what Melilli calls the "big surprise": the magic of the cream binding everything together without resorting to common tricks such as adding cream and water. "Italian cuisine is, in many cases, anthropologically unsuited to being made in a restaurant. It is a unique process that starts with the raw ingredients and ends with the finished dish, and any interruption or unplanned pause could ruin everything. Consider *polenta* or *risotto*" (Melilli 2020, p. 71). Breaking this continuity up between mise en place and service is the art of the Italian innkeeper, who is not divided between the different brigades of a military brigade, but *serves as a bridge between domestic and restaurant cooking.*

10. The Engineer

Thus, we arrive at the last place in our scheme that is yet to be filled. In some ways, it seems destined to remain empty: a negation of all the other terms brought into play and articulated among themselves in the other places of the scheme. It is neither commander nor artist, nor scientist, alchemist or innkeeper. However, by posing as a negative synthesis of soldier and amateur, it seems to be able to acquire some physiognomy. This is provided that we move away from an implicit epistemology that reductively sees cooks purely as human subjects in their own right, and instead consider them as constitutively hybrid actors made up of bodies and things, and of human and non-human traits[19].

[19] See Latour (2021).

After all, just as a cook needs his or her own set of knives, he or she also needs stoves, pots and pans, grills, fridges and blast chillers. The cook is a *collective entity* and a *composite subject*: a mixture of human prerogatives (passions and motives) and technical skills (speed of execution and precision). Many of the actions that occur in the kitchen are performed by more or less complex technological apparatuses (pans, ovens, fridges, etc.), but they always start with forms of delegation and translation from humans to non-humans. The more important the delegation, the freer the human subject is from duties, fatigue and various stresses. However, there is a risk of finding oneself with nothing to do but serve those who are there to serve him. This is the age-old story of man being commanded by the machine. We cannot revisit its many variations here.

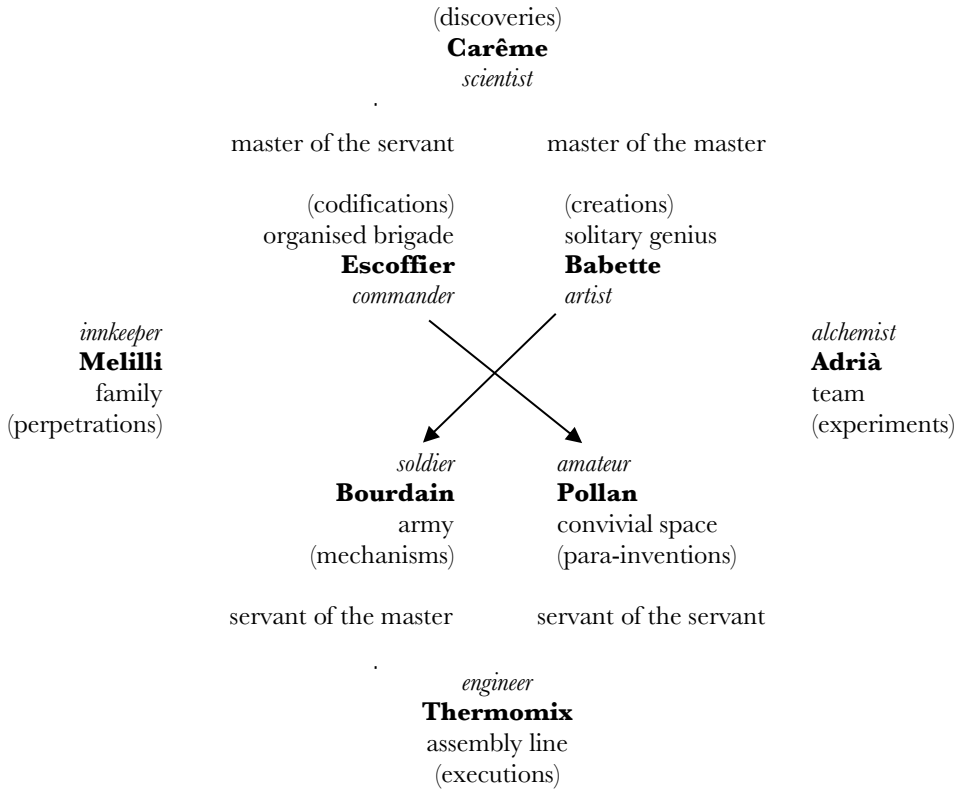
To fill the final position in our scheme, we must seek out a hybrid subject: part machine, part human, more machine than human. A good example is the cooking robot. It replaces the human operator – the cook – by taking over most of their actions and objectives. In reality, it is a complex device rather than a highly skilled helper. It is not just some of the actions carried out in the kitchen that are delegated to it, but almost the entire culinary process: from the initial conception of the dish – and the taste it presupposes – to the final realisation that corresponds exactly to the foreseen taste. In short, it is a cook in its own right. It is the realm of what an anthropologist such as Lévi-Strauss (1964) would call an *engineer*: an exemplary figure who, given anticipated measurements of substances and ingredients as well as algorithmically organised operations, always achieves a result.

In the hands of any aspiring cook, Vorwerk's Thermomix turns them into a skilled but unwitting cook and turns itself into a robot that can automatically replicate any recipe. Born as a blender that heats the contents of its bowl, it has progressively become an all-rounder by implementing the most diverse operational capabilities. Thus, it is less and less a tool and more and more a *factotum*, making its user a silent and inert helper of the machine. The Thermomix is not a machine, but rather a varied and organised device containing a fundamental recipe book and a series of additional components (basket, spatulas, measuring spoon, spice guard, etc.). This book is an integral part of the device as it indicates the steps that the user must follow. The user is neither the creator nor the person responsible for the actions that go into constructing the dish. The Thermomix does everything on its own, sometimes requiring very specific and targeted interventions from the human assistant, who has no idea what they are doing or why (unless they reinterpret its uses, as is also possible). As Mangano (2013, pp. 62-68) has said, this gives it a magical and mysterious character, making it impossible to see what is happening inside and why. The problem is that the outcomes it produces, as well as the processes involved, are highly standardised. Like the Lévi-Straussian engineer, once all the necessary materials are in place, the result is assured. The results are successful, but always the same in terms of taste and appearance.

The passionate dimension of cooking comes into play: specifically, the elimination of anxiety about the success of dishes and the patience required to produce them. In this sense, the Thermomix is a highly sophisticated technological device with a strongly emotional side. By absorbing all the emotions linked to cooking, it brings the act back to its purest form, and paradoxically re-proposes its essential features. "Everything comes together in the few components that characterise this blender, and the fewer there are, the more effective they are. The Thermomix elevates cooking, making it a rapid and anxiety-free practice. And it does so by keeping up appearances" (Mangano 2013, p. 67). Thus, tracing the path that has brought us to this point, we find in this food processor, or rather in the hybrid device constituted with its user, the main traits of another chef figure. If, on the one hand, the hybrid is a soldier who obeys as a machine, on the other hand, it is a commander who organises the collective work of the kitchen. It transforms materials thoroughly without knowing their internal components, like an alchemist. It resembles a scientist who combines instances of military organisation with artistic genius, more than a technician. Fundamentally, though, it is like an innkeeper who methodically prepares each day's lunch. It does this as an amateur, without predetermined programmes or a reflective conscience. The destiny of the neutral term is to incorporate everything it absent-mindedly opposes.

11. Summary Scheme

Having come this far, it is time to redraw our entire scheme, indicating the positions of the various actors involved. In other words, we must make explicit the general semantic area from which this scheme has been developed. It will have been noted that, while the first three positions were evoked inductively on the basis of direct observation of gastromaniac culture (and thus on the basis of previous work), a common logical articulation was perceived underneath them that holds them together – composed of contrariety, contradiction, and complementarity, in the Greimasian sense. The subsequent positions were then deduced from this articulation in a mediated manner, drawing the logical consequences of the semiotic square scheme. It is the inner workings of the square that have, so to speak, summoned the other images of cooks. Let's look at the current version of the square:



We know that this semantic category is by no means self-evident, given its breadth. In some ways, it coincides with culture as a whole: the creations of art, the codifications of the commander, the rudimentary mechanisms of the private soldier and the para-inventions of the amateur, and again, on another level, the discoveries of the scientist, the executions of the engineer, the familiar perceptions, and the experiments of the alchemist – all brought into relation with one another. However, we can understand culture as a whole if we rethink it: (1) within the context of media discourse, which reshapes and sustains it; (2) from the perspective of food and wine discourse, as a privileged site of expression; and (3) through the lens of today's gastromania – a cultural phenomenon that combines media visibility, culinary practice, and symbolic value. In this way, the great dimensions of aesthetics, ethics, politics, sociality, science, technology and, *not least*, war are given new light and meaning in this interactive framework. This is a network that is underpinned by the anthropological imaginary, where bodies become social and inter-subjectivity is understood as intercorporeality. This challenges the view of cooking and eating as secondary, subordinate, repetitive and poor activities.

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