

Eating with the Hands. Toward a Gastronomic Degree Zero?

Giorgia Costanzo

Abstract. A new expression of the burgeoning naturalist ideology, eating with the hands seems to embody a return to origins, to a direct and sensual contact with food. Yet, a closer look reveals it as a field of implicit and explicit rules that shift across time and space. From the medieval banquet to contemporary street food, the absence of cutlery does not eliminate mediation but rather transforms it: the introduction of hands at the table challenges established codes of good taste, proposing new forms of relation with food and with others. Far from being a mere act of transgression, eating with the hands opens up complex horizons of meaning, where hygiene, aesthetics, decorum and conviviality intersect. In this sense, eating with the hands is not a return to a gastronomic “degree zero”, but the opening to forms of life that continually reshape our understanding of taste, body, and society.

Quando uno mangia da solo si lascia andare a fare cose che mai s’azzarderebbe in compagnia. Qualcuno si mette a tavola in mutande, qualche altro sbafa corcato o assistimato davanti al televisore. Spisso e volentieri, il commissario mangiava con le mano. E accusi fece con il coniglio alla cacciatore. Doppo dovette stare mezzora con le mano sotto il cannolo nel tentativo di puliziarle dal grasso e dall’untume. Sonarono alla porta¹.

A. Camilleri, *Il giro di boa da Altri casi per il commissario Montalbano*, 2003.

1. Hands Off the Plate

Dipping the fingers into a box of popcorn, grabbing a hamburger or a juicy chicken leg, bringing a chocolate to the mouth, soaking up grandmother’s sauce with a piece of bread. And then finding our fingers covered in oil, salt, and sauce. As if that were not enough, this series of gestures – which lovers of etiquette would classify under the horror genre – may happily conclude with yet another aberration: licking our fingers to remove the traces of the misdeed. To erase them, or perhaps to enjoy them even more. A body that seems to suffice unto itself, that requires no other prostheses (plates, cutlery, napkins) in order to experience gastronomic satisfaction. And, at the same time, a genuine perversion – in the Latin sense of the term (indicating *upheaval* and *deviation*) – that distances us from the rules of proper conduct and immediately turns us into ill-mannered hedonists.

Upon closer inspection, however, eating with the hands is by now an institutionalized practice within the many possibilities of eating out, street food, and quick meals. A sandwich on the go, an *arancina* on the steps of a tourist monument, a slice of pizza on the beach. This is valid, of course, as long as it takes place away from the dining table.

¹ “When someone eats alone, they let themselves do things they would never dare to do in company. Some people sit down at the table in their underwear; others wolf down their food lying on the couch or slouched in front of the television. Very often, the Inspector ate with his hands. And that’s what he did with the rabbit *alla cacciatore*. Afterwards he had to spend half an hour with his hands under the tap trying to clean off the grease and the oily residue. Then the doorbell rang” (my translation).



Not everything, in fact, can be eaten with one's hands, nor in every place or context. It is one thing to pick up a potato chip during an aperitif; quite another to plunge both hands into a steaming plate of pasta. Certainly, the reasons also derive from a practical issue (it is better not to do so to avoid burns and grease up to one's elbows). Yet, even before that, the set of rules that determines what may or may not be done at the table (a certain *being-able-to-do* or *not-being-able-to-do*) is the result of the ongoing work of a system of meaning that shapes our ways of relating to food and that imposes an arbitrary association between the act of feeding ourselves with our hands (on the plane of expression) and a certain form of *indecorum* (on the plane of content).

Indeed, etiquette has mostly spoken of bringing food to the mouth directly with the hands in negative terms. And a judgment has emerged in a rather univocal way: it is improper, it is bad manners. Whether it stems from incompetence (*not-knowing-how-to-do*) or from stubborn rebellion (*not-wanting-to-do*), the rules of the table impose a strict prohibition – a *having-not-to-do* – presupposed, moreover, by the proliferation of table implements whose very existence constructs, by presupposition, the need for some form of mediation between our bodies and food: cutlery.

The organization of the table and the human – and above all non-human – actors that populate it have, from a certain point in history onward, become the litmus test of the new civilized society (Elias refers to them, together with the handkerchief, as “utensils of civilization” – 1969), marking first a difference from barbarian populations and later a distinction between wealth and poverty. We shall see this.

In fact, gastronomy is a world of objects, both in the kitchen and at the table. For this very reason, they cannot be ignored in a work that reflects on their absence. After all, if we think about it, however subversive eating with the hands may seem, the use of objects at the table is by no means self-evident: we already possess highly capable prehensile fingers – why should we use instruments to manage and mediate contact with food? To avoid contaminating it, for reasons of etiquette, to prevent burns... Certainly. Yet these objects do not have merely a functional role, just as they are not simply the result of practical necessities in the kitchen. Their existence and their design are not neutral, since they intervene in shaping specific gastronomic semiospheres (Mangano 2019).

Thus, if the food universe can be observed and analyzed in its linguistic and discursive functioning (Marrone 2016, 2022), the commutation test that replaces cutlery with fingers in table practices – and no longer only in the street, where their use is now accepted – makes it possible to understand whether such a modification is relevant in conveying certain value transformations within the food semiosphere in question, and what the scope of such transformations might be. What happens, then, when this mediation disappears? What differences does the displacement of technologies and agency introduce? How does it modify our relationship with food and with our own bodies? What effects of meaning does it produce?

Within a broader process of the informalization of the meal – working against the artificialization of cuisine – there may perhaps lie a certain form of inverted snobbery: the rhetoric of naturalness, of a return to origins, to a supposed *degree zero* of alimentation², to a direct, face-to-face encounter with nourishment, to immediate gestures – perceived precisely for this reason as more genuine – and which lead us to investigate them as genuine *forms of life*.

2. Parallelisms and Inversions

2.1 Once Upon a Time There Was the Fork: A Diachronic Perspective

With a small effort – and by stepping outside our behavioral comfort zone at the table – we can imagine ourselves sitting among a group of diners at a medieval banquet. The scene is roughly the following: one takes a seat, food is cut from a central dish with a two-pronged carving fork and a common knife, the

² This essay owes much to the reflections of Paolo Fabbri found in his archive in Palermo (Biblioteca “Paolo Fabbri”, Palazzo Tarallo) and presented in the talk “Senza posate” (“Without Cutlery”), delivered at the conference *Cucina senza*, organized by Casa Artusi in 2018. His ideas and notes were fundamental in developing the reflections on eating with one's hands as a *degree zero* of alimentation and on the disappearance of mediations at the table.



portion is placed on a wooden trencher – shared with the person sitting next to us (with whom we also drink from the same cup) – from which we feed ourselves by bringing the morsel to the mouth directly with our hands.

Such a scene is unthinkable for us today. Not only because of the unmediated approach to food at the table. But also because two different people place their fingers in the same dish – and their mouths on the same cup. As Montanari (2014) points out, this reflects a strongly collective conception of conviviality, typical of the Middle Ages and far removed from the contemporary individualistic conception that assigns each diner their own “personal” cutlery and tableware and favors service à la russe.

The only – and earliest – utensil commonly found on the table was the spoon, since liquid and hot foods such as soups were very common. Otherwise, using the hands as the instrument for eating was the norm: medieval etiquette manuals themselves stated this. One should not in fact think that table rules were born with cutlery: there was no chaotic and animalistic “before” followed by a regulated “after”. Medieval courtesy texts not only approved the use of hands at the table but also established deontic regimes by describing the proper ways to manipulate food. The aim was to distinguish oneself from the “rustics” – a fundamental alterity for constructing the identity of the well-mannered man – and it was therefore recommended to approach food using only three fingers, never the whole hand (ibid.).

Thus, the social distinction signified by the manner of eating (according to the semi-symbolism → three fingers : civilized :: whole hand : uncivilized) existed even before the differences produced by the introduction of the fork. Using the hands at the table was therefore far from the intuitive gesture we tend to imagine today.

Indeed, when forks first appeared in Europe from the Near East, they provoked a genuine scandal. In the eleventh century, a Byzantine princess who moved to Italy after marrying a Venetian doge was accused by the Catholic Church of “softness and diabolical perversion” precisely because she had brought her personal cutlery with her and was not afraid to use it at the table (Frugoni 2001; Montanari 2014).

Today, the use of cutlery lies somewhere between decorum and cleanliness, etiquette and hygienic purity. At the moment when this new custom was introduced, however, avoiding contact with food – seeking mediation between it and the body – was morally aberrant from a religious standpoint. In this sense, the same phenomenon on the plane of expression may signify completely different, or even opposite, things on the plane of content, depending on the semiosphere in which it circulates. The new forms of decorum at the table therefore produced a genuine inversion of religious meanings, while simultaneously separating discursive universes (on the one hand, the rules governing behavior at the table and the relationship with food; on the other, spirituality). From this perspective, clean and dirty can be considered as expressions whose content articulates the category decorous/indecorous. Yet there is never a total assimilation between the terms of the category, since they are historically and culturally situated concepts that may even undergo forms of inversion – as we have just seen with forks – where what was once indecorous becomes decorous (and vice versa).

Every innovation, as we know, brings disruption, and it was only at the end of the Middle Ages that cutlery became widely used at the table. For a long time their use remained an elite matter that required enormous educational effort, the construction of expertise – that is, a specific know-how. Mishaps were not uncommon: half the food would disastrously fall onto the table on its way from the fork to the mouth (Elias 1969).

The introduction of a new system of table organization – which went hand in hand with, and actively constructed, a new vision of the world, shifting from a strongly collective dimension to a more individual one – was nonetheless met with resistance: nostalgics and skeptics, regret for the good old days, and the wager that this was merely a passing fashion.

What interests us here, however, is how easy it is to identify practices that today appear aberrant or, conversely, customs that were once widespread but have now completely fallen out of use – or are even considered improper. The diachronic perspective adopted in this brief excursus helps us in this regard. Table manners thus emerge as *ideological*. Their values and the transformations they undergo depend strongly on the historical and socio-cultural contexts in which specific imaginaries of the body (our own and others’, and their respective boundaries), visions of illness, worldviews, and conceptions of individuality and collectivity prevail – potentially very different from those of today. As Norbert Elias



(1969) observes, there is nothing immediately obvious or “natural” in table manners: they are not the result of an innate sense of decorum, nor were tools such as the spoon, fork, and napkin invented with a clear and predefined function. Rather, their meanings and uses took shape gradually over centuries through social relations and practices, while their forms likewise evolved and became consolidated.

On the other hand, if for us today not touching food and seeking mediation with it is, even before a matter of good manners, an issue of hygiene articulating categories such as *risk/safety* and *purity/contamination*, etiquette manuals suggest that their introduction and the competence required to use them were more a social matter of decorum and external gaze. The reasons for their appearance were not hygienic. First, because cutlery spread with the individualization of the meal, so that the problem of placing the hands in a shared dish no longer arose. Second, because it was only in the nineteenth century that modern hygienic knowledge – identifying viruses and bacteria as primary Anti-subjects – resemanticized certain practices. As Elias again observes, “‘rational knowledge’ is not the driving force of ‘civilization’ with regard to eating or other areas of behavior” (1969, p. 237): all forms of care (from table manners to clothing, from washing to conversation) belonged to the domain of courtesy. Arriving at the table clean and remaining so had nothing to do with fear of contamination. Rather, it concerned the worry of *appearing* courteous, decent, civilized³.

In this sense, know-how at the table produces a specific know-how-to-be with entirely social consequences. In Turnaturi’s words, “from the way one behaves at the table one can deduce social position, wealth and the date of its acquisition, degree of sensuality, sexual attitudes, and finally capacity for self-control, a distinctive sign of distinction” (2011, p. 176, my translation). Etiquette manuals thus construct forms of sociality by regulating the relationships between the actors involved (Giannitrapani 2025).

The problem of how to appear on the *front stage* emerges – using Goffman’s terminology (1956) – so as to construct a socially convincing image of oneself, relegating to the *backstage* everything that would not be equally acceptable. This translates into the opposition between public and private, exterior and intimate, where the categories are overdetermined by the veridictory category (with the effect that behavior in public becomes a mask, concealing the subject’s true disposition, who would act differently if not observed).

Without even resorting to historical customs and Renaissance etiquette, the same dynamic appears in the story told by Camilleri when – as mentioned in the epigraph to this essay – he explains that one of the forms of intimacy practiced by Montalbano, far from the judging eyes of others, is dipping his hands into rabbit *alla cacciatora* without fear of getting them dirty.

Thus, “indecorum and impropriety are dysphoric marks of an excess that has already crossed the line” (Bassano 2024, p. 186, my translation) and, in eating with the hands, often also relate to the erotic and sexual isotopy that the gesture activates (already inherent in the act of tasting and amplified by the intervention of touch). The problem, in this case, is that

showing another person pleasure, enjoyment, satisfaction or disgust – almost uncontrollably emerging from the eyes, the face, the gestures while eating – negates the very presuppositions of social relations [...] In the act of eating too much intimate information comes to the surface [...] If eating means speaking about oneself, showing oneself, revealing oneself, then one must quickly learn to draw veils, to wear masks, to conceal oneself (Turnaturi 2011, p. 77, my translation).

³ The relationship between hygiene and decorum also appears particularly intriguing in the period from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, since no clear distinction existed between the two dimensions. Practices that we would typically consider hygienic (such as washing the body and clothes) served less to preserve health than to appear well-mannered. The French term *impropre*, moreover, referred simultaneously to dirtiness and to “improper” behaviors – actions considered morally inappropriate. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between cleanliness and decorum, see Costanzo (2024).



2.2 When to Use the Hands: A Synchronic Perspective

These parallelisms and inversions emerge not only when the issue is observed from a diachronic perspective but also from a synchronic one, by comparing different cultures as well as by examining what occurs within the same culture.

A paradigmatic example in this latter case is street food. It is “a way of experiencing taste, of conceiving the gastronomic experience” (Ventura Bordenca 2021, p. 126, my translation), whose emergence has made it possible to articulate the moment of the meal along semantic categories such as *formal/informal* and *ordinary/extraordinary*, separating the quick snack from the dish served at the table, and the meanings associated with each. Street food – in contemporary Western contexts – emerges as a form of rupture with the rules of the table, producing precisely for this reason a certain *effect of informality*, reinforced by the use of hands. We enjoy it so much precisely because of its sporadic nature: it becomes the manifestation of the sense of exception, of a small subversive pleasure.

Yet transgressing a code inevitably produces another code. From the rupture of one system, another system is constructed with equally specific rules, in which eating with the hands becomes the rule in turn. Moreover, despite the rhetoric of simplicity and the quick meal, there is in fact no real return to essentiality. Street food, like finger food, involves an entire series of devices: straws, trays, small bowls, boxes, disposable cutlery, and so on. The same complexity can be found in cultures where eating with the hands is customary (which hand to use, how to do it, how to clean oneself, when it is appropriate, etc.). As Wilson (2012) points out, these cultures are by no means devoid of etiquette; on the contrary, they possess precise norms both regarding the relationship with food and the interaction with the hands of other diners. Even the way in which a bite is assembled and the gestures required to prepare it belong to a genuine cultural system centered on the use of hands.

3. Rethinking the Body: Hybrids Without Cutlery

Another category at stake when it comes to eating with the hands is that of *nature/culture*. The proliferation of technologies at the table that mediate our relationship with food leads us to imagine the return to hands as a sort of somatic *émbrayage* that, by reducing the distance we place between ourselves and what we eat, purifies our relationship with it, making it more primordial, wild, instinctive – in other words, natural. Such purity, if we understand it as a substance of content, then arises from the avoidance of hybridization and mediation (producing a paradox: we are purer precisely by getting dirty).

This is the reason why, for instance, within the gastronomic semiosphere of baby food the dominant educational practice requires that children learn from an early stage to use cutlery: the acquisition of fork and spoon marks the transition from an immediate relationship with food to a culturally mediated one, which entails the acquisition of knowledge that is both pragmatic and somatic (Ventura Bordenca 2020). Conversely, in opposition to this system, the practice of baby-led weaning has spread, encouraging children to become familiar with “adult” food while sitting at the table and freely grasping it with their hands, tasting without filters and getting messy. The idea is that disorder and sensory manipulation are not only tolerated but actively encouraged, in the name of a supposed naturalness (according to the widespread rhetoric of the “without”, which also includes without cutlery) that rejects industrial baby food. Yet even this alleged return to spontaneity is not devoid of codes: there are precise rules (the child must be able to sit upright, must have overcome the extrusion reflex, etc.), forms imposed upon behavior that reveal how “naturalness” is always constructed within cultural and normative frameworks (on the concept of “Nature” in semiotics and its discursive constructions, see among others Marrone 2011).

This supposed naturalness reappears – albeit with very different discursive postures – among adults as well. There are indeed those who make the abandonment of cutlery an explicit philosophy, such as the gastronome Allan Bay who, in his *Elogio del mangiare con le mani (In Praise of Eating with The Hands, 2024)*, proposes what he calls “conlemanism”. This is a valorization of fingers as the privileged gastronomic instrument. Here, touch is no longer an ancillary sense but stands alongside taste, expanding and reinforcing it. The practice of biting without mediation is celebrated, while hygienist



obsessions are ridiculed in the name of a more intimate and direct pleasure. This position calls for a return to origins, in which cutlery is accused of introducing an unacceptable and dysfunctional distance between body and food.

Let us now consider the act of eating from a semiotic perspective. Introducing food into the body is a narrative program based on a generic dynamic of conjunction (a body that, by eating, incorporates food). Yet it is a controlled and regulated conjunction. What becomes particularly interesting are the ways of eating – the manners in which food hybridizes with the body. Eating thus relies on a specific *knowing-how* (how-to-eat, that is, the Subject's competence) overdetermined by certain *having-to-do* and *having-not-to-do*'s, that is, deontic systems of destination that orient the Subject's pragmatic activity (in the form of family practices, rules of good conduct, etiquette manuals, and so on).

The act of eating therefore presupposes a mixture of Subject and Object. However, within this will to conjunction there exist specific normative regimes that establish what may and may not come into contact (for instance food and table linen, food and body parts other than the mouth, etc.), how such contact may occur, and through which *mediations*.

One such normative system may be hygienic in nature (which can be understood as a normative subsystem within the broader system of etiquette, in which cleanliness often semantically connotes moral and ethical values more than strictly health-related ones). From this perspective, mediation between body and food does not hinder their conjunction but regulates their relationship and facilitates it within specific systems of value. Yet the value of this mediation is not always the same, nor is it always euphoric. In the narrative program that leads the Subject to become a proper diner according to etiquette, fork and knife function as *Helpers* within the narrative program – or sometimes as genuine *Senders* guiding the Subject's action – as suggested by the agency of objects theorized by Bruno Latour (2005), which is primarily factitive. If, instead, the Subject operates within the value system imposed by “conlemanism”, then these same instruments become *Opponents* – or worse, *Anti-subjects* (as clearly emerges from Allan Bay's words when he writes: “The enemy of us hand-eaters is the fork” 2024, p. 31, my translation).

Thus, by using Latour's epistemological category mediator/intermediary, we might say that cutlery does not function merely as an *intermediary* conveying the meanings of civilized society and the well-mannered individual, reflecting social and cultural differences. Beyond mere functionalism, it should instead be considered a true *mediator* that plays an active role in constructing those meanings and in constituting new subjectivities through an ongoing process of translation.

The hybrid that emerges – the fork-man, who not only holds the fork but knows how to use it – is a different subject who both corresponds to and produces the image of the proper diner (on hybrids, see Latour 1991, 2005). But what happens when cutlery disappears? This operation – which Fabbri would help us read as a play between somatic *émbrayage* and *débrayage* – does not eliminate mediation: it repositions it. Hands themselves become prostheses, no less cultural than cutlery.

Similarly to what Marrone (2024) observes in the analysis of a detail in Zapatta's painting *Assistenza ai malati nell'ospedale sant'Andrea di Cuzco*, which stages the confrontation between two systems of values (that of religion and that of science), embodied in the figures of the doctor and the monk who heal, each in their own way (in terms of systems of belief and competence) and with their own instruments (the doctor with a scalpel, the monk – without mediation – with hands and tongue), the body of the sick person becomes the site of competing mediations.

There is not, on the one hand, an immediate contact between bodies and, on the other, a calculated distance made possible by specific technologies; in both cases there is a relationship between bodies mediated by competent objects [...]: at this level, the scalpel is like the tongue, the eye is like the hand. [...] They are all factishes. What changes, rather, is the value that the two subjects involved inscribe in these kinds of magical helpers: if for the doctor the hand and the tongue are indices of the usual superstition, for the monk they are fully effective instruments; conversely, if for the doctor the eye and the scalpel are instruments of dubious efficacy, for the monk they are clear signs of a new superstition. Their momentary success and their unstable truth will depend on the meaning that the culture of reference assigns to these different values and on the social valence they may assume (Marrone 2024, p. 114, my translation).



In the same way, hand and fork are not so different. There is therefore no “degree zero” of eating: every alimentary gesture is a hybrid that articulates subject and object through material and symbolic mediations. Eating with the hands is thus not a return to a lost origin but a different way of constructing the human – food hybrid, an alternative regime of mediation carrying with it its own values, prohibitions, and aesthetics.

After all, the person who uses a fork and the person who uses their hands to bring food to the mouth are different subjects. This is because the *agency* of the two different prostheses changes and, consequently, opens the way to alternative narrative programs, value systems, and pathemic investments that constitute the very *humus* of specific gastrospheres.

4. Forks, Chopsticks, Fingers: A Comparison

Let us proceed, in the manner of Floch (1995), by comparing, for instance, forks, chopsticks, and fingers. The fork we find today on our tables can be decomposed into its components by observing the part that functions as an interface toward non-humans, namely the prongs (today generally four) that penetrate the food, and the part that functions as an interface toward the human, which allows it to be held. As for materials, Mangano (2019) observes that forks are now commonly made of metal or plastic – sometimes wood – and the material from which these tools are constructed also contributes to shaping the gastronomic experience.

Chopsticks, by contrast, consist of two separate bodies in the form of thin sticks which, once held, allow the diner to interact with food through a single basic function: grasping the morsel between their two extremities. In this sense, the diner who prepares food directly with their fingers (with thumb and index finger) is more similar to a sushi eater who picks up a bite with chopsticks, using them like tongs (not by chance, sushi etiquette allows the use of fingers as an alternative to chopsticks).

As we recall from Barthes’s study (1970), chopsticks – like fingers, we might add – transfer the morsel from plate to mouth, cradling it along the way without wounding it in any manner. Thus, in contrast to the violence of fork and knife, which transform the table into a bellicose scenario – translating the division of portions according to the diner’s will into an act of predation that tears and cuts – chopsticks do not pierce, cut, or mutilate food, suggesting a different relationship with it, in some sense, as Barthes again suggests, a maternal one (a maternity that Tournier, 1995, instead associated with the roundness of the spoon).

Now, if chopsticks produce a plastic rhyme with the line of the fingers that grasp and transport the morsel, the prongs of forks, for their part, resemble small hands seen frontally. Yet the use of hands at the table goes beyond the pragmatic possibilities offered by the fork because, more similarly to chopsticks, they have a collecting rather than a piercing function. Indeed, while hands and forks surround the morsel, forks also pass through it.

Hands at the table, however, also allow us to break (as we do with bread), gather (as when we pick up a bite from the plate), and grip (as with a succulent shank). What we can and cannot do with our hands (for instance, we cannot drink with them, nor handle liquid foods) also produces a transformation in food taxonomies, where fried foods move to the center while liquid or very hot foods such as soups become problematic (some reviewers of ethnic restaurants on TripAdvisor, for instance, complain about the difficulty of handling very soft food consistencies using only their hands⁴).

The entire gastronomic experience must therefore be rethought – not only at the table but also in the kitchen. Food must arrive at the table already portioned into bites, so cutting and selection become tasks entirely relocated to the kitchen. Conversely, some activities normally relegated to the kitchen move to the table, such as when rice must be mixed with meat and vegetables to form a bite (Fig. 1).

⁴ An example is the experience of a customer at the Ethiopian restaurant “Warsà” in Milan:

“In my opinion, eating with your hands is the least pleasant aspect of the restaurant. I’m not squeamish, but this kind of food doesn’t lend itself to being eaten with your hands. These aren’t solid foods but things with the consistency of purée, so it ends up feeling like you’re washing your hands in the sauces. I left happy about how good the food was, but my only regret was precisely that I couldn’t enjoy it with cutlery”.



Fig. 1 – Sequences for eating Indian *bhorta* (from the Instagram profile @foodclick).

Yet the meaning of the hand and the alimentary act it constructs changes depending on which parts of the hand are valorized and thus made relevant. The hand becomes a kind of Swiss Army knife whose functional potentialities are actualized or virtualized differently depending on the cultural semiosphere in which we find ourselves.

Consider, for instance, the palm. It is almost never considered within our own possibilities. In contrast, in African gastronomic culture the palm plays a fundamental role in eating *foufou*, a sticky purée served boiling hot. Small pieces are taken, quickly kneaded between fingers and palm in order to cool them and shape them into small balls, which are then used to *scoop up* the central dish of meat and vegetables (Fig. 2).

The thumb, which for us is activated primarily in its grasping function, does not exist in Indian gastronomy solely in a syntagmatic relation with the index finger. Many rice-based dishes, for example, are eaten after gathering the bite with four fingers of the hand (thumb, index, middle, and ring finger). Once brought to the mouth, the thumb *pushes* the grains inward, effectively functioning as a spoon (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

At the same time, we must remember that there are two hands. If, for us, choosing which one to use to grab a chip is practically irrelevant, in the cultures just mentioned the right hand must be used, since the left is considered impure (because associated with personal hygiene) and must never come into contact with food.

Rules proliferate in this respect: not touching other people's food, taking small bites, using a food item with which to collect other food – as in the case of pita bread or the aforementioned *foufou*, which functions simultaneously as food and instrument. From an anthropological perspective, therefore, even



within cultures that eat with their hands there exist more or less polite forms of behavior, and not all forms of eating with the hands are the same.

5. Touching Food: A Question of Intermateriality

One of the issues raised by touching food concerns the implicit intermateriality that the unmediated relationship between body and food entails. Clearly, the tactile dimension is already involved in taste, since savoring something also means experiencing its material characteristics, linked not only to flavor and smell but also to texture, consistency, and temperature (what Marrone, 2022, calls the *savory*, that is, the plastic language of food).

In this sense, the material dimension of gastronomic experience may emerge and be considered by the semiotician as a substance of expression when not only the expressive traits of the food itself (texture, consistency, etc.) become relevant, but especially when these sensible qualities encounter those of other material bodies (Costanzo 2023). It is thus a matter of relations between different materials, which interests us here primarily in their syntagmatic functioning – namely when bodies and objects, with their respective materialities, come into contact in use and mutual interaction, as occurs in the contact between body-cutlery-food or body-food.

The intervention of the cutlery's materiality, which introduces a distance between body and food at the table and postpones their contact to the moment of tasting, is far from neutral. Indeed, "giving form to a plate or to a piece of cutlery does not merely mean constructing a container suitable for the characteristics of the food, nor developing a tool that allows it to be brought easily to the mouth, but defining and articulating the relationship that a consumer has with gastronomic matter" (Mangano 2019, p. 51, my translation).

The gastronomic experience is sensorially complex. The act of eating never truly begins with the conjunction between morsel and mouth. It begins much earlier, with the smells coming from the kitchen or rising from the plate (Kant, along with Brillat-Savarin, considered smell a sort of preliminary taste) and with the sight of what we are about to savor. A synesthetic play inherent in the language of food is activated: looking at something we enjoy makes our mouths water, a visual conjunction that is already gustatory (Marrone 2022).

It is also true, however, that there is a general predominance of the visual in the culinary field. In Artusi (1891) expressions such as "fine appearance", "elegance of form", and "to display beautifully" abound; and then there are common expressions such as "eating with the eyes", food design, and plate composition.

It was precisely against this rule of the system that Futurist cuisine proposed its focus on the skin, understood as an organ of thought that "reads the weave, weight, density, and temperature of matter". Futurist tactile experimentation in cuisine thus proposed "the abolition of fork and knife for plastic complexes capable of giving a pre-labial tactile pleasure" (Marinetti 1930, p. 99).

The *aerovivanda* created by Marinetti and the painter Fillia was a dish composed of vegetables and fruit to be eaten with the right hand, while the left hand caressed a tablecloth made of velvet, silk, and sandpaper. All this took place to the frenetic sound of noisy jazz while diners were intoxicated by a cloud of clove essences.

What emerges is an expansion of the tasting body: the act of eating anticipates itself through the sensation of the hand, in a synesthetic experience in which all the senses are involved and translate into one another.

Yet beyond such attempts at aestheticizing conviviality, eating with the hands produces an aesthetic (and aesthetic) experience that is not always euphoric but can generate both attraction and repulsion. Touching food is, in a sense, becoming mixed with it.

Consider certain substances, such as the honey coating on a delicious pastry. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), cited by Douglas (1966), Sartre uses the example of honey to discuss how the experience of viscosity may be read as a reflection on the relationship between subject and world and on the



boundaries between them. Positioned between solid and liquid, honey is an ambiguous substance: soft yet not slippery, clinging to surfaces.

Plunging into water gives a different impression. I remain a solid, but to touch stickiness is to risk diluting myself into viscosity. Stickiness is clinging, like a too-possessive dog or mistress. In this way the first contact with stickiness enriches a child's experience. He has learnt something about himself and the properties of matter and the interrelation between self and other things (Douglas 1966, p. 47).

Viscosity, then, does not have an absolute connection with particular passions (such as disgust). The effect that the viscous may produce on us may depend less on intrinsic connotations than on a problem of abomination – that is, on the fact that it is a hybrid material, halfway between two worlds, neither liquid nor solid, an intermediate entity that challenges the cultural system of classification through which we organize the world.

In Bastide's terms (1987), elaborated in his essay on the treatment of matter, the body may find itself in a state of compactness with the food when, after picking up a pastry, its sticky glaze refuses to leave our fingers. We then try everything: licking our fingers, wiping them on a napkin, or finally going to wash our hands.

A series of transformations follows. The food on the plate and its residues on the hands are evidently not the same thing. It becomes something *out of place* (Douglas 1966). From food, the same expressive substance begins to signify something entirely different: it becomes dirt to be removed in order to continue the meal. To avoid contamination and hybridization – not only with the body but also with other foods, which should preferably not be touched with fingers soiled by the previous bite.

Although every anomaly, in order to be rendered conforming, may stimulate the creation of new classifications capable of integrating it into the system's logic (as occurs in street food), in gastrospheres where food is eaten with the hands cleanliness is not ignored but rather rearticulated.

6. Getting Dirty at the Table

If eating with the hands is generally perceived as a purer, more genuine, and more natural practice, it is also true that, as already noted, it tends to make us extremely messy. Thus, in order to cultivate the purity of taste, one must practice the impurity of the gesture that makes it possible.

One of the major issues associated with the etiquette of eating with the hands is the inevitability of getting dirty – the greasy commingling between ourselves and what we eat. The question, however, concerns not only the fear of getting dirty but also the state of cleanliness with which we approach the meal.

Indeed, in thirteenth-century German courtesy manuals, before regulating the ways fingers should be used during the meal, it was first made clear that one should not sit at the table with dirty hands (Montanari 2014). This rule has strong ritual and symbolic resonances. In many cultures – from Judaism to Islam, and in all the cases previously mentioned – washing before sitting down to eat and again afterward serves not only as an enunciative boundary that opens and closes the meal but also as part of a purification process that spiritually elevates the moment of the meal and prepares the diner to sit at the table.

Once this hygienic and even spiritual competence has been acquired, it must also be carefully maintained throughout the meal. In this regard, Norbert Elias (1969), drawing on Antoine de Courtin's 1672 treatise on manners, highlights how soiling the hands with food was considered deeply improper, particularly in the presence of others. Handling greasy foods, sauces, or syrups, for instance, was seen as problematic not only in itself but also because it inevitably led to further indecorous actions: repeatedly wiping the hands on the napkin until it became as dirty as a kitchen rag, thereby causing discomfort to those who would later see it brought to the mouth; alternatively, cleaning the fingers with bread, which was likewise regarded as inappropriate; or, worst of all, licking them – an act that Courtin presents as the height of impropriety.

As we have already observed, the problem is more social than hygienic. While today abstaining from eating with the hands is easily attributed to hygienic concerns, behind the fear of viruses and bacteria

lies the anxiety about how one appears in the eyes of others and the shame that may result. In street food contexts, getting dirty is often part of the gastronomic experience (Ventura Bordenca 2021), but in other meaning contexts this is not the case.

At the same time, getting dirty may function as a semantic activator of intimacy which, when shared, can generate a strong sense of community. The Filipino *kamayan* is an example. It is a custom involving a banquet of meats, vegetables, and rice placed on a table covered with banana leaves and eaten exclusively with the hands (Fig. 4). A form of commensality based on the pragmatic and aesthetic regime made possible by the use of hands and the shared table space (Giannitrapani 2024, p. 174, my translation). Such a meal represents community and cultural pride and may be organized to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays and festivals⁵.



Fig. 4 – Filipino *kamayan* (© Darry Lalu/BBC).

7. Conclusions: The Form Behind the Rupture

Anyone who believes that eating with the hands frees us from overly rigid rules and normative systems is, in fact, greatly mistaken. Despite the apologetic discourses that celebrate the naturalness of this practice, the use of fingers at the table reveals itself to be a deeply cultural universe, internally articulated and structured.

The language of the hands as a table instrument that we have investigated here allows us to see how “every gesture acquires meaning and value within the more complex system of behavior in which it is embedded (syntagm), but also within the framework of actions that could potentially substitute it (paradigm)” (Giannitrapani 2025, p. 171, my translation). Likewise, the discourses surrounding this practice are what define, each time in different ways, the meanings it may assume. We have seen this both diachronically and synchronically.

The value of eating with the hands therefore depends on the semiosphere in which it operates, on the ways in which it is talked about, and on the narrative dynamics that animate it. The way of eating at the table can be understood as a means that serves a specific purpose: this is the case of Indian cuisine, whose rules and rationales are grounded in Ayurvedic medicine and which considers eating with the hands a direct activator of digestion. The same can be said of the previously mentioned Filipino *kamayan*, in which the shared meal itself constructs a sense of community.

⁵ This aspect becomes particularly interesting if we consider that the Philippines is the only area of Asia where cutlery is commonly used. Fork and spoon (the latter often also performing the function of a knife) are used daily to consume meals. Using one’s hands, as in *kamayan*, is instead reserved for “important” meals such as ceremonies and birthdays, in order to reinforce the sense of community that these events embody. In this respect, the situation is exactly the opposite of what happens in the West.

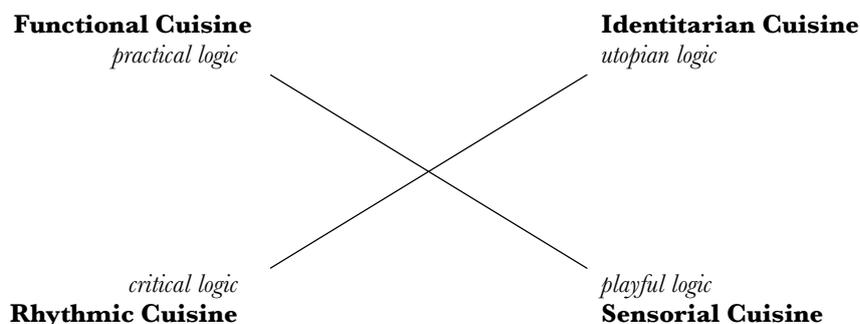


Alternatively, eating with the hands may be animated by an existential value in itself, as often happens in African cuisines and in medieval-themed restaurants (which, through a spatial *débrayage* in the first case and a temporal one in the second, transport us to other historical moments and cultural spaces), or in the case of certain Italian dishes and customs that must be eaten with the hands in order not to betray the identity of the dish itself (think of pizza, or the practice of the *scarpetta*).

The use of the hands may also be conceived as a choice that rationalizes the moment of the meal and organizes its timing in a functional way, as happens with quick meals eaten on the go (a sandwich!) or in certain restaurants that adopt this approach in order to speed up consumption and make service quicker and more rhythmic, as in the case of the Spanish Michelin-starred restaurant Mugaritz.

Finally, there are cases in which the act of eating becomes a genuine aesthetic act – that is, the attempt to exalt the senses through the intervention of the hands at the table, restructuring the meal so as to privilege its purely esthetic dimension. This is the case with Allan Bay’s *conlemanism*, as well as with Futurist tactileism, adopted by many chefs as a culinary philosophy for their bistros and fully aligned with broader attempts to aestheticize everyday life.

In this last case, perhaps more than in the others, using the hands at the table can be understood as a true form of life, in which the meaning of the gesture does not extend beyond the aesthetic value of the gesture itself. The semiotic square helps us summarize these possible positions.



As is evident, this investigation makes it possible to explore the shaping of specific ideas of commensality, conviviality, and interobjective and intersubjective relationships with food, objects, people, and the world through the modification of our behaviors at the table. In this sense, “*politesse* [and also its opposite] becomes deep culture, a system of (good) manners that, grafted onto a system of shared values, brings together ethics and aesthetics through the narrow gate of social etiquette, through the semiotic thickness intrinsic to every art of living” (Marrone 2022, p. 288, my translation).

More than anything else, observing this practice – often perceived as a gesture of rupture with the rules of *knowing-how-to-do* and *knowing-how-to-be* at the table – reveals a paradox. Abandoning one codified system almost always means entering another, equally complex and articulated one.

Eating with the hands, then, is far from the free-for-all we often imagine. It is nothing spontaneous: from street food to ethnic cuisines, using fingers as table utensils confronts us with the projection of specific forms, each characterized by its own proxemics, value systems, and aesthetics that produce ethics.

From this perspective, recalling Lotman (1985), we should remember that the *periphery* – or even more so the *outside* – of one gastronomic semiosphere may in fact be the center of another. What changes is the observer’s point of view; what remains certain is that rules proliferate even where they would seem to be absent. All that remains, then, is to translate. If we wish to behave badly, we should at least learn how to do it well.



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