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Cooking as Performance: Negotiating Art and Authenticity in *Ratatouille*

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Abstract

Be it quotidian or haute cuisine, 'Caviar' or 'Quesadillas', cooking has always been a performance, in its experimentation to create an "appetite appeal" (Carafoli 146). This paper, through an analysis of Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava's directed, Disney animation *Ratatouille*, explores the engaging analogies and correlations between the processes in cooking and performance. The stage is being replaced by a single performative site – the kitchen, which becomes the theatre of action, producing the ultimate 'orgy of olfaction' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 7). A direct communication is shown to be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator is invited to share the secret of the kitchen, and ultimately, is, not only affected by the sight, feel, taste, or smell of the final performative outcome – the food, but also impacted upon by the identity of the performer – Remy, the 'tiny chef' – nothing but a provincial rat.

[**Keywords:** Cooking, food, performance, art, authenticity]

The proliferation of television cookery shows, food advertisements, food photography and other popular representations of food, has made food assume a multiplicity of meanings with 'enormous expressive potential', and content value, from being a necessary commodity for consumption and sustenance to an object of *fetish* because food as an object of performance recognizes the heterogeneity and diversity in its target consumers. Today, food media caters to everyone from complete beginners in the kitchen to celebrity chefs; from *foodies* to those who find pleasure in watching embarrassments and victories in cooking contests; from food activists to those who delight in defying the so-called *food police*.

More importantly food that is consumed and the way it is consumed and the cooking that goes into preparing it, not only determine cultural practices, but also contribute to our "personal identities, in our rhetorical performances of social styles, because it is a commodity that involves aspects of performance, creates a language or discourse, and involves aesthetics" (Greene 34). Food, as one of the markers of *social style* "employ[s] a system of signs as a means of creating who we are, who we are becoming, and who we want to be in terms of our identities. It also is a way that we both communicate who we are to others and is a means by which we identify people." (Greene 32). Cooking, as a social style has four dimensions: performance (cooking), use of language (*sazon*), commodities (ingredients, spices, and raw materials) and aesthetics (garnishing and presentation of cooked food).

Food and/or Cooking as a performance, quite conveniently binds multiplicity, and uniqueness and projects a 'dual ontology'. Cooking, like Music, Dance and Drama is a *multiple art-form* as an event that can be repeated in time and space; whereas presentation of prepared food like any enduring physical, aesthetic object makes it a singular, *non-performance art form* like Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, thereby ensuring the possibility to appreciate its formal qualities and contemplate its aesthetic design, through sight, smell, and taste. Paradoxically, such an appreciation results from consumption and in its consumption lies its death, disappearance. But despite its transience, "It manifests itself as physical entity and as abstract performance" (Arouh 57).

Since the physicality of the food is at stake to elicit an aesthetic response, the food needs to be reproduced, and any act of reproduction whether in "art, rituals, or ordinary life – are made of 'twice-behaved behaviours,' or 'restored behaviors,' i.e., performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse" (Schechner 22). Practice is shaped through 'habitus' (Bourdieu) forming a social pattern of behaviour, reproducing structures of domination. Cooking becomes one of the many ways of learning to inhabit and reproduce a complex network of 'habitus' through practical means.

Through an analysis of Jan Pinkava and Brad Bird's directed Disney animation *Ratatouille* (2007), this paper tries to show how an exclusive performative status can be ascribed to cooking. Comparable to any *Künstlerroman*, the movie plots out the growth of an artist-chef (ironically a provincial rat) from the gutters to the gourmet kitchen of a reputed Parisian restaurant, where it/he finally exhibits exceptionality in the preparation and presentation of dishes appealing to the tastes of food-connoisseurs. Remy, the rat in assuming the chef's position, and climactically offering a peasant dish (*ratatouille*) to the most critical of the food critics, Anton Ego, truly invests the movie with a multi-layered and multi-dimensional approach to performance, where we witness the emergence of the diasporic-performer – rat, the 'tiny chef' - in the complexity of cooking. Although his brother Emile considers him an exclusive, his father treats him as unnatural because of his capacity to appreciate food which is why he is forced to keep his interest in cooking, a hidden affair that he discloses only occasionally and confidentially to Emile.

The film, intelligently, chooses Paris as the backdrop because Paris, unquestionably, has been for ages, a centre stage of culinary art, cuisine and sophisticated kitchen innovations:

The French...have surrounded food with so much commentary, learning and connoisseurship as to clothe it in the vestments of civilization itself... Rating restaurants is a national preoccupation. Cooking is viewed as a major art form: innovations are celebrated and talked about as though they were phrases in the development of a style of painting or poetry...A meal at a truly great restaurant is a sort of theatre you can eat. (Bernstein 168)

Gusteau's cookery shows and recipe books become an abiding presence and constant influence on Remy and Gusteau's clichéd motto 'Anyone can cook' becomes his mantra. However, Anton Ego, the grim eater, thinks Gusteau's motto is blasphemous: "Amusing title, 'Anyone can cook!' What's even more amusing is that Gusteau actually seems to believe it. I, on the contrary, take cooking seriously. And no, I don't think anyone can do it" (*Ratatouille*, 2007, henceforth referred to as *R*). Lizabeth Nicol observes that for centuries, cuisine has been one of France's greatest treasures so that: "Eating in France is not simply seen as necessary for survival and health but also as a statement of culture" (Nicol 345). For the French, besides eating and drinking, discussing food constitutes one of the major 'taste acts' (Ferguson 17) through which they *perform* their connections to taste community and also make the process of eating, a pleasurable, social activity: "In France one must not just eat and drink, but talk also. Talk stimulates new ideas about food.' They want to know all the details concerning their food: where it comes from, how it was produced how long it took, who produced it, how it should be cooked and served. They are justly proud of French cuisine" (Nicol 345). Therefore, while Gusteau's dictum 'Anyone *can* cook!' is apparently simplistic, in its deceiving projection of cooking as a democratized and popular activity, cooking as *performance*, is, Remy clarifies later, not something anyone *should* undertake.

When exploring a sleeping old woman's kitchen while Gusteau's cookery show is on, Remy watches and is inspired, as Gusteau speaks: "Good food is like music you can taste, color you can smell. There is excellence all around you. You need only be aware to stop and savour it" (*R*). Albert Arouh confirms "Music is perceived bodily, as sound waves enter our ears, while there are sensual pleasures in music akin to those associated with food. A good melody titillates the senses as much as a good flavour does....Food is like music; it needs a performance to be realised" (55).

Remy is a self-confessed addict to cookery shows that are a 'new pornography: it's people seeing things on TV, watching people make things on TV that they are not going to be doing themselves any time soon, just like porn' (Rousseau x). But Remy dreams to actually cook by borrowing human tools, techniques, and technology. The rubbish that Remy collects is his raw materials; he prefers to process the garbage rather than gobble it instantly for he states to his father: "If you are what you eat, then I only want to eat the good stuff" (*R*). Bodies "eat with vigorous class, ethnic and gendered appetites, mouth machines that ingest and regurgitate, articulating what we are, what we eat, and what eats us" (Probyn 32). Remy, through his queer *foodways* and in his attempts to transgress his usual 'habitus' and practice, becomes the *Other*; his appetite becomes "a powerful, highly charged, and personalized voice" (Hauck-Lawson 6) for self-assertion. His food voice "emerges as a term that crystallizes the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication" (Hauck-Lawson 6).

When Remy finds a piece of mushroom, and his brother Emile, a piece of cheese that Remy identifies as Tomme de chevre de pays, he immediately looks out for some Rosemary and dew drops from the tip of some sweet grass.

He says: “There are possibilities unexplored here. We got to cook this” (R). Risking his own life, he mounts on a rooftop, pins his ingredients to an antenna rod, and starts barbecuing: “The key is to keep turning it. Get the smoky flavour nice and even” (R) after which the lightning strikes, jolting them. But Remy has no regrets. At least, he has taken his first step to cooking and to creating a new flavour: “Each flavour was totally unique... But combine one flavour with another, and something new was created” (R). With a ‘highly developed sense of taste and smell’ (R), Remy, though a rat, acts as a mediator between nature with culture, through cooking, where raw materials are transformed into a cooked product. Levi-Strauss concludes that cooking becomes a symbolic marker “We thus begin to understand the truly essential place occupied by cooking in native thought: not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined with all its attributes” (164).

In *The Culinary Triangle*, with raw, cooked and rotten at each apex, Levi-Strauss proceeds to map different cooking processes - roasting, boiling, smoking - onto those terms and argues that roasted food embodies the raw, because it often resembles bloody, uncooked flesh in the middle, while smoked food, because it is cooked right through, symbolises culture. Thus, Remy, through his attempts to ‘cook’ not only sets his foot onto culture but also into ‘Thoughtful Cooking’, an emerging concept in the field of molecular gastronomy and mode of scientific and creative cooking that requires: “paying attention to what our senses tell us we prepare it, connecting that information with past experience and with an understanding of what’s happening to the food’s inner substance, and adjusting the preparation accordingly” (McGee 4).

Gusteau becomes his guardian angel whose valuable comments on cooking become commandments: “Great cooking is not for the faint of heart. You must be imaginative, strong hearted. You must try things that may not work. And you must not let anyone define your limits because of where you come from. Your only limit is your soul. What I say is true. Anyone can cook. But only the fearless can be great” (R). But Remy is heart-broken to know that Gusteau is dead after one of the scathing reviews by Anton Ego that resulted in the loss of one star from his restaurant.

When Remy and his brother Emile are discovered in the kitchen by the old woman who tries to shoot them, the whole endangered rat colony is forced to dislocate and Remy gets separated. Holding Gusteau’s cookery book, tight to his chest, as his sole resource and soul-resource, Remy survives and migrates to Paris. Forlorn, fatigued and famished, Remy hallucinates Gusteau’s spirit saying: “Food always comes to those who love to cook.” and Remy finds his way to the glass roof of Gusteau’s restaurant from where, for the first time, he gets to watch a gourmet kitchen working. Gusteau’s spirit asks him to identify the *chef* and the *sous chef*, the *saucier*, *chef de partie*, *demi chef de partie*, *commis*, and the *plongeur*, and Remy qualifies.

Remy’s migration from the country to the city, from the rural to the urban also shifts him and his perspective from the *space* of the popular kitchen

to that of the professional. He is mesmerised to see shelves stacked with pots, pans – sauce pans and frying pans - and other utensils, racks displaying cutlery, and crockery, rows filled up with small spice containers, mostly used up or in the process of being so, sleek bottles – some of them full and some half filled with oil, and all this accompanied with the sound and fury of the whistling cooker, the sizzling pans, the buzzing chimney, and the woody rhythm on the chopping board, interrupted sometimes by the beeping of the microwave, the buzzing of the grinder or the deafening noise of the blender. As he sees the chef and the cooks performing on food, he realises that an important element of the culinary artistic expression is “the art-in-process”, suggesting that the artistic and aesthetic value of food is imbricated in the entire technicality of cooking, emanating not only from the end result, that is the literal, material dish on the table; but also the performative act of preparing, and the art of eating it: “Everyday culinary art reveals itself through the senses, through the rhythms of the body while cooking, and by the effect caused by the process of sharing a meal” (Abarca 79). It indicates that the artistic expression reveals itself in the very moment of its creation, making cooking the single site that becomes the theatre of action. The actual moment of preparing and/or sharing the meaning of a culinary practice establishes a direct communication between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, where the spectator gets slowly involved in the process and physically affected by it:

Deconstruction has turned the restaurant experience into something increasingly theatrical...In that they have created ritualised menus aimed at an elite audience, it could be said that this theatricality returns us to the ritual value of food and the deconstructionist chef is in fact reintroducing ritual to the restaurant experience. (Guttman 227-228)

The kitchen evolves like the theatre-stage, where the chefs are performing and also the greenroom from where the food makes its exit like a character. This dual ontology of food as an art-in-process and an art-of-object makes it, like Painting, Architecture or Sculpture, an abiding physical source of beauty, the artistry and the authenticity of which lies in the eye of the beholder or the eater.

Gusteau’s spirit motivates Remy to secretly intervene and fix the soup, when he finds Linguini, the garbage boy hired by Skinner, the new owner of Gusteau’s restaurant, accidentally spoiling it. Eager to fire Linguini, Skinner thrashes him for having dared to cook but before he can prevent the soup from being served, it is carried out of the kitchen door, to be laid out to its diner-critic Solene LeClaire who reviews: “the soup was a revelation. A spicy yet subtle taste experience. Against all odds, Gusteau’s has recaptured our attention” (R).

Quite strategically then, *Ratatouille* crucially highlights the importance and impact of restaurant reviews in helping to flourish or demolish a restaurant. The tension embedded, and the finesse demanded in the performance of cooking gets crucially merged with the politics of restaurant-

business that thrives equally on performance and on reviewing: “*Having something to say* isn’t just a social imperative, it is the mechanism through which restaurant reviews, like criticism of other cultural products, shape aesthetic judgements.... Restaurant reviews enrich our cultural capital” (Davis 1 - 2). The meta-conversation about restaurants is in many ways effective in creating, giving shape to and sometimes manipulating some sort of consensus about ‘taste’. Therefore, inspite of someone claiming a taste to be one’s personal and innate, what tastes good or bad is constructed and reinforced by the system that privileges the judgements of those with the economic and cultural capital to say so. Hence such a power to privilege certain cultural products over others is the power to define ‘taste’.

Food historians like Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson and Stephen Mennell have revealed in their studies how negotiations in the public sphere, some 200 years ago in France, led to a consensus of ‘taste’ that has produced what is today considered as French cuisine. Pierre Bourdieu, while tracing correlations between French aesthetic preferences for the arts and ‘taste’ preferences for food or fashion, has shown that ‘taste’ is not only an ideological category based on the distinction between different levels of socio-economic status and that of cultural refinement, but also between the product of cultural variable that include class, education, economic and symbolic capital, and the resulting positions these variables produce in the field of cultural production.

A review that had led to Gusteau’s restaurant losing popularity and Gusteau’s losing life, finds redemption in this performance by an agent who is ironically both alien and subversive to the human world. The soup’s success is the experimental outcome of Linguini’s accidentally adding the wrong ingredients and Remy’s incidentally administering the right ones. One remembers Gusteau’s lines: “Great cooking is not for the faint of heart. You must be imaginative, strong hearted. You must try things that may not work. And you must not let anyone define your limits because of where you come from. Your only limit is your soul. What I say is true. Anyone can cook. But only the fearless can be great” (R).

Linguini, however, proves that not anyone can cook. And because he is human and Remy is not, Remy is arrogated the performative position of the Chef. But our main concern is the act of reproducing the soup that implies negotiating art with authenticity. Reproducing a recipe demands a duplicative use of the same ingredients and implements although the context and the motives can keep changing. Therefore, every time a dish is prepared, it is *original*, even though it is replication of the same, abstract recipe. Gusteau’s restaurant claims to be recreating the signature dishes of Gusteau even after his death. However, chefs do have gone ‘missing’, opening one restaurant after another. So the question of authenticity in cooking arises not only from the chef’s figurative and literal absence in the kitchen but also from the fact that in case of food, the original is always transient:

A chef has artistic authenticity if s/he cooks in a style that follows his/her personal aesthetics in which s/he believes and onto which s/he holds

against all odds. By contrast, a chef is artistically inauthentic if s/he uncritically copies other styles, thus sacrificing his/her personal aesthetics for the sake of commercial or other gain. (Arouh 59)

For Remy, authenticity in cooking is a creative performance: “Imagine every great taste in the world being combined into infinite combinations. Tastes that no one has tried yet! Discoveries to be made!” (R) as opposed to the notion of authenticity upheld by Colette for whom artistic excellence lies in skilful execution of the original recipe: “Chef Gusteau always has something unexpected.... It was his job to be unexpected. It is our job to follow his recipes” (R). Remy sticks to his conviction when later he modifies or rather improvises Gusteau’s recipe of ratatouille for serving it to Ego.

But authenticity is under threat when Skinner, after taking charge of Gusteau’s restaurant, plans to make easy money by exploiting Gusteau’s brand name to launch a chain of cheaply, ‘American’ frozen foods. The concept of canned food or fast food technology also negates the performance act in cooking.

Cooking gets more focus as performance art through the patriarchal non-acceptance of women in the professional kitchen, validated by fewer participation and even exclusion of women from it. Cooking, a determiner of gender *performativity* (Butler), through “the inseparability of women and domestic cooking” (Mennell 65), has always dwindled between the binaries of being a privilege/ priority, a performance/ pain. However, just as cooking graduated, from its basic, and emotional functions of providing nurture and nourishment, to a profession, the *space* of the kitchen also evolved as a public site of performance. Accordingly, the distinction between popular cuisine and erudite cuisine also becomes gender-based: “‘erudite cuisine’ is what ‘fathers’ do in professional kitchens; ‘mothers’ in the home kitchens do ‘popular cuisine’” (Narayan 102).

Colette, Linguini’s mentor, mocks him, showing the difference:

You think cooking is a cute job, like Mommy in the kitchen? Well, Mommy never had to face the dinner rush when the orders come flooding in, and every dish is different and none are simple, and all of the different cooking times, but must arrive at the customer’s table at exactly the same time, hot and perfect! Every second counts, and you cannot be Mommy! (R)

Patriarchy that associates kitchen with women also associates drudgery, monotony, and non-creative repetitiveness to what they cook in the kitchen, precisely because it assumes “that no culinary art is created in a home kitchen, ... based on the belief that any activity performed in a domestic traditional setting leads to routine, and routine allegedly throttles creative energy, creative inventions”(Abarca 86).

Not only does Colette highlight the panic, pressure, and propriety implicated in professional cooking but also manifest the duplicity in patriarchal ideology in relegating the task of executing this high performance only to men.

When Colette asks Linguini “How many women do you see in this kitchen?”, she clarifies “... Because haute cuisine is an antiquated hierarchy built upon rules written by stupid old men. Rules designed to make it impossible for women to enter this world... People think haute cuisine is snooty. So chef must also be snooty” (R). In this context, “...the word *cuisine* resonates with high culture, whereas cooking is what working-class people do with their raw edible material since they are, supposedly, unable to transform the raw material into *haute cuisine*” (Abarca 82). Revel claims that the raw edible materials can be metamorphosed into culinary arts by making “popular cuisine” enter the domain of “erudite cuisine”. By “popular cuisine”, he means that grounded in peasant traditions, by way of imitation or habit and executed by exploiting different regional and seasonal products through the use native cooking methods, recipients and utensils; whereas, “Erudite cuisine” is achieved only through training and education. It is “based [on] invention, renewal, [and] experimentation”; it is “a true international cuisine.” (Qtd. in Abarca 84)

Unquestionably, Revel is misogynistic in believing that the raw edible materials in the hands of “mothers” can lead to some fine “craftsmanship” but not great art, whereas the chefs have to transcend everyday methods to realise a grand cuisine which should be restricted only to professionals, who are undoubtedly men.

For Revel “The history of gastronomy is above all that of erudite gastronomy, for this is the tradition that has left the greatest number of written traces. The great cookbooks are obviously the fruits of study, of invention, of the reflection of a change, rather than the fruit of the everyday run of things” (144). This hierarchical stance in Revel’s gastronomical history creates binaries - art/craft, cultivated or educated professional cuisines /local cooking, and male chefs/female cooks. Paradoxically enough, no sooner is cooking transformed into a socially prestigious commodity than it ceases to be “popular cuisine”, and becomes a culinary art, fostered within public institutions that have historically excluded women from entering the professional kitchen via culinary schools or by promotion. Even worse, when women have entered the professional kitchen there have been efforts to “forbid women from wearing the chef’s hat, the symbol of the profession.” (Boydston xv).

The climax in *Ratatouille* approaches in Ego’s sudden entry, during Linguini’s press conference and challenging his cooking when he would come to dine and review his restaurant, the next day:

Restaurant reviews, which, in addition to recording eating experiences, educate and inform us about how to culturally contextualise, judge, and compare eating experiences in both explicit and implicit ways. Restaurant reviews are one cog in the synchronic concatenation of cultural symbols that defines a nation by binding an imagined community of people with shared tastes, similar dining habits, and widely held opinions about food.” (Davis 15-16)

In this climactic act of performance that can either seal the success of the restaurant or permanently jeopardise it, Remy faces the ultimate challenge

and Linguini almost a catastrophe now that, his colleagues have deserted him after knowing the pretence behind his performance. But on that dramatic night Remy acts as the chef-leader by effectively regimenting the process of cooking, efficiently directing and monitoring his rodent community that had decided to help him in his unique endeavour. It is *perspective* that Ego orders – *perspective* that should not only reflect performance but also a point of view. Perhaps, that is why Remy deliberately chooses to prepare rat-atouille, a popular cuisine that offers a *perspective* of the *terroir* - linking the food to the land through a time-honoured agricultural tradition. It is about bonding food to the soil that is tilled, the farm that fetches fresh vegetables, the poultry that yields warm meat, the diversity of the soil and the variety of micro-climates. Braudel aptly acknowledges the French farmer as ‘the architect and labourer’ (65).

Ratatouille underscores the mnemonic and cathartic function of taste when the frowning Ego bites into the rat-chef’s ratatouille and is transported back to his blissful childhood days when he used to return home, depressed and was cheered up as his mother served him ratatouille: “In a Proustian sense, taste ... serves as a mnemonic device, allowing us to recollect situations, recall feelings, remember places, and reconnect with the past.... Such mnemonic tastes are often invoked by restaurant critics searching for traditional or authentic flavours in otherwise ersatz settings” (Davis 58).

Through the evocation of such restorative nostalgia, Ego instantly connects to his origin, feels distant and distinctive from the glam and sham of the elite world of haute cuisine. For Ego, ratatouille is a revelation of his true identity; it is a realisation of the rusticity producing food.

Finally Ego’s insistence to meet the actual chef marks the return, reappearance, and recognition of the “missing chef” and his final remarks, besides exposing both the easiness and the edginess of a critic’s task, shows that:

... the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something and that is in the discovery and defence of the new. Last night, I experienced something new, an extraordinary meal from a singularly unexpected source. To say that both the meal and its maker have challenged my preconceptions about fine cooking is a gross understatement. In the past, I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau’s famous motto, “Anyone can cook.” But I realize only now ...what he meant. Not everyone can become a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere. It is difficult to imagine more humble origins, than those of the genius now cooking at Gusteau’s, who is, in this critic’s opinion, nothing less than the finest chef in France. (R)

Needless to say civilisation is hardly patient and permissive with such deviant patronising and this controversial review brings an end to Ego’s career as a critic and Gusteau’s restaurant business. However, this doesn’t end the career of Remy who continues to cook in an alternate eatery set up by Linguini, named ‘Ratatouille’ – a symbol of the rat-performer and firmly establishes

food/cooking as a performance act. The movie, in its magical-realistic handling of the performer's body (Remy) and the act (cooking/food), fulfils all the parameters of performance art that "plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory" (Phelan 148).

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