

## DEWEY, SOMAESTHETICS, AND THE CULTIVATION OF (GUSTATORY) TASTE

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper discusses the traditional neglect of gustatory taste and its object—cuisine—as topics for philosophical reflection and offers an alternative framework in which to situate the philosophy of food. By drawing on Dewey’s experience-centered aesthetic theory and Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics, this paper argues for an understanding of food as an expressive object that embodies cultural meanings. Although the expressive properties of food cannot be ultimately reduced to the literal experience of gustatory taste alone, explaining how food can be meaningful helps to refocus philosophical attention on the central role of the body in our experience of, and interaction with, the world.*

Although traditional theories of aesthetic taste have been metaphorically modeled on gustatory or literal taste, it was not until the past few decades that philosophers began to take the aesthetic dimensions of food seriously. While neither John Dewey nor Richard Shusterman offer a fully developed theory of the aesthetics of gustatory taste, both Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience and Shusterman’s somaesthetics provide enticing theoretical frameworks in which the aesthetics of food can be further developed. Dewey’s contentions that 1) art is *an experience* characterized by a pervasive qualitative wholeness that individuates it from the normal course of ordinary experience and, therefore, that 2) art as experience can flow into any medium, begin to corrode the division that has traditionally prevented the philosophical consideration of the aesthetics of gustatory taste. Likewise, Shusterman’s focus on the body as the locus of aesthetic experience means that the cultivation of *all* the sense modalities ought to be part of the program of somaesthetics. It is the purpose of this paper to argue for a pragmatic theory of the aesthetics of food and gustatory taste based on the suggestive possibilities of such a project presented in Dewey’s and Shusterman’s writings.

This paper shall begin with a brief overview of the reasons that traditional aesthetic theory, beginning with Plato, has favored visual models of perception at the exclusion of gustatory taste on cognitive grounds. Next, I shall examine the metaphor of taste as employed by Hume and show, that although he maintains the hierarchy of the senses instituted by Plato, his theory of taste is compatible with the somaesthetic project of the cultivation of literal taste as a means of perfecting the self. Finally, I shall draw on Dewey and Shusterman to suggest the ways in which the aesthetics of food and gustatory taste ought to be included in the larger framework of pragmatist aesthetics. Dewey’s frequent use of the example of “that meal” as an exemplar of *an experience* in itself shows that Dewey’s theory is not opposed to the aesthetic experience of food. Further, his suggestive example of the experience of the gourmand from *Art as Experience* shows that the development of the aesthetics of food will roughly follow cognitivist approaches to aesthetic experience where aesthetic experience is not reduced to some form of pleasure. What will ultimately distinguish the merely gustatory experience of food from the aesthetic experience of food will be that the latter enlarges experience as a whole by presenting/confronting the diner with cultural meanings that cannot be reduced to the physical operations of gustatory taste and yet which nevertheless emerge from the quotidian practices of eating and drinking. Thus, one way to know a culture is to become fluent in the meanings that are embodied in its cuisine. Further, this kind of cultivation of the self (through the enlargement of meaning acquisition via food) cannot be accomplished in the absence of the development of literal taste in ways that are consonant with Shusterman’s overall emphasis on the centrality of the body in aesthetic experience.

### 1. The Philosophical Neglect of Gustatory Taste

In order to best understand how the recent somatic turn in philosophy has helped facilitate a renewed philosophical interest in food and gustatory taste, it will be helpful to discuss the reasons for the traditional

neglect of taste by philosophers. Carolyn Korsmeyer, in *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* clearly lays out the origin of the hierarchy of the senses with taste subjugated as a lower sense, and with vision and hearing classified as the higher or “intellectual” sense modalities. While hearing and sight provide large amounts of information about the world, in comparison taste is relatively impoverished in terms of the knowledge that can be learned on its basis. This fact, in conjunction with the Platonic dualism between soul and body, forms the basis of the justification of the division of senses into higher and lower on the basis of distance from the body. As Korsmeyer notes, “Sight and hearing operate with a distance between object and organ of perception, and as a consequence they serve to draw attention away from the body of the perceiving subject to the object of perception external to the body. The senses of taste, touch and smell, in contrast, are experienced as ‘in’ the body, locatable in the fingertips, the mouth and the olfactory passages.”<sup>1</sup> Since, for Plato, the mind reasons best when it is free from bodily distractions, it follows that the senses that are the most distant from the body would be the most cognitively privileged. Since this formulation is based on the dualistic metaphysics of subject and object, I shall argue that the transactional metaphysics of Dewey need not hold onto the implications for the sense of taste justified on its basis.

It is clear, given Plato’s attitude toward the body in general, and the lower senses in particular, that the objects of perception of these senses would receive a similarly negative treatment. The bodily senses are more prone to be associated with appetites that should be controlled by reason, for if indulged they draw us away from the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, those who furnish the materials of over-indulgence are in for particular scorn from Plato. This is no more evident than in the *Gorgias*, where Plato singles out pastry bakers, along with cosmeticians, sophists and orators, as flatters who are

particularly deserving of derision. Although Plato specifically references pastry bakers, it is justified to take these comments as exhibiting Plato’s attitude toward cookery generally. For Plato cookery is a “knack”—a routine or certain kind of experience (*empeiria* in Greek). Specifically, cookery is a knack for “producing gratification and pleasure” (*Gorgias*, 462e).<sup>2</sup> Cookery may appear to be a craft, but because it is a practice that a “mind given to making hunches takes to,” it lacks the same foundation in knowledge that the true crafts possess (*Gorgias*, 463a). Rather, cookery belongs to the practice of *flattery*. Flattery is distinguished from craft in that the former will “wear the mask” of the latter but as opposed to craft it “takes no thought at all of whatever is best; with the lure of what’s most pleasant at the moment, it sniffs out folly and hoodwinks it, so it gives the impression of being most deserving” (*Gorgias*, 464d). Although pastry baking only aims at what is immediately pleasurable, by masquerading as the craft of medicine it fools the body into thinking that it knows what is best—namely, the virtues of the body that lead to health. Plato continues his attack on flattery such as pastry baking because, unlike the crafts with which they are often confused, they cannot account for the nature and cause of the objects they investigate.

Pastry baking has put on the mask of medicine, and pretends to know the foods that are best for the body, so that if a pastry baker and a doctor had to compete in front of children, or in front of men just as foolish as children, to determine which of the two, the doctor or the pastry baker, had expert knowledge of good food and bad, the doctor would die of starvation. I call this flattery, and I say that such a thing is shameful . . . because it guesses at what’s pleasant with no consideration for what’s best. And I say that it isn’t a craft, but a knack, because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them, so that it is unable to state the cause of each thing. (*Gorgias*, 464d–465a)

Ultimately, however, the distinction between crafts and knacks rests on the distinction between the soul and the body.

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 24–25.

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Plato are from *Plato: The Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

If the soul didn't govern the body but the body governed itself, and if pastry baking and medicine weren't kept under observation and distinguished by the soul, but the body itself made judgments about them, making its estimates by reference to the gratification that it receives, then the world according to Anaxagoras would prevail...all things would be mixed together in the same place, and there would be no distinction between matters of medicine and health and matters of pastry baking. (*Gorgias*, 465c-d)

If the soul were incapable of ruling over the body by possessing knowledge of what is best then the distinction between flattery and craft would collapse. What is best would be judged on the basis of what is immediately pleasurable to the body. This in turn would erode the important distinction between the *pleasant* and the *good* (*Gorgias*, 500d). Whereas the soul, through understanding the nature and causes of health, is able to aim at what is good by practicing the craft of medicine, the body in turn only aims at the pleasant. Because cookery is entirely devoted to pleasure, and the pleasures of the body no less, it is non-rational, or even *irrational*. "Through routine and knack it merely preserves the memory of what customarily happens, and that's how it also supplies its pleasures" (*Gorgias*, 501b). Still worse, the knacks supply their pleasures without "considering which of the pleasures is better or worse, and without having any concerns about anything but mere gratification" (*Gorgias*, 501b). As uncraftlike, being unable to make a distinction between the pleasant and the good, cookery pursues pleasures on the basis of habit without knowledge of either the nature of what is pleasant or its cause. Without the guidance of the rational part of the soul cookery would be consumed in an unending pursuit of the gratification of the body without being able to discern if this pursuit ultimately contributes to the good life or not.

In this section I have shown how the longstanding philosophical neglect of food is best understood as a consequence of the Platonic degradation of the body. The distinction between knacks, such as cookery, and their corresponding crafts, in this case medicine, is ultimately

epistemological. Whereas the true craftsmen possess knowledge of what is best in a certain field, cooks merely aim at what is pleasant to the body, achieving results based on routine and therefore distracting one from the true care of the body. Thus, Plato's view best represents what can be called *non-cognitivism* regarding gustatory taste and its object, food. Non-cognitivism about food is the view that food cannot provide any meaningful knowledge about the world and what is worse, because it traffics in bodily pleasure exclusively, distracts one from the pursuit of the good life. This assumption will be challenged below by utilizing an example from contemporary restaurant cooking. Before turning to that example however, it will be useful to explore how Deweyan pragmatism and Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics have rehabilitated the philosophical reputation of the body and as such provide the best framework in which to discuss the meaning of food and gustatory taste.

## 2. Somaesthetics: Rehabilitating Gustatory Taste

Although neither Dewey nor Shusterman offer extended comments on food or gustatory taste, I shall show in this section how both thinker's shared focus on the centrality of the body in aesthetic experience applies to the discussion of the philosophical importance of food and taste. Shusterman's expansion of the original Baumgartian project of aesthetics to encompass the somaesthetic is in keeping with Dewey's project of reconstructing philosophy generally insofar as it aims to include the body in philosophical theorizing and has an explicitly practical bent. If philosophy is concerned with the pursuit of the good life, then aesthetics, as the science of sensory perception, will be explicitly concerned with the proper functioning of the senses and hence with the body itself. Rather than being an impediment to knowledge, as Plato claimed, attention to the body becomes an instrument in the pursuit of knowledge itself, as it can be used to monitor and improve the function of the senses to limit and correct errors in sensory perception. This

understanding leads to Shusterman's definition of somaesthetics as "the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning."<sup>3</sup>

What then is the relationship of somaesthetics to the philosophy of food? As Shusterman notes, "Given the multiplicity of the body's aesthetic uses and pleasures, there is no reason to exclude our tiny eye muscles or invisible taste buds from the domain of somaesthetic exercise."<sup>4</sup> Although Shusterman is here highlighting the possibility of the practical somatic training of gustatory taste, there is no reason to exclude taste from theoretical somaesthetics as well. In fact, the preceding section on Platonic attitudes toward the body and food can be read as an exercise in analytic somaesthetics. Nevertheless, Shusterman is recognizing the aesthetic possibilities of food and drink, and although he does not pursue this line of inquiry, the aesthetics of food is comfortably located within the larger project of somaesthetics as a whole. What Shusterman is noting however is that the aesthetic experience of food will likely require somatic training in order to develop the experiential acuity required to perceive the often subtle differences that distinguish an aesthetic experience of food from a merely gustatory experience. Thus, food is an excellent example of the dual focus of experiential somaesthetics that Shusterman identifies. Experiencing food aesthetically can both make our experience more satisfyingly rich qualitatively and also hone our awareness of somatic experience itself and make it more acute. It indicates that there cannot be a sharp distinction between pragmatic and practical somaesthetics. The enriching of experience often, if not always, requires the cultivation of a somatic perceptivity that comes through direct practice.

This point was not lost on Hume. As he wrote in "Of the Standard of Taste":

It is acknowledged to be the perfection of every sense or faculty, to perceive with exactness its most minute objects and allow nothing to escape its notice and observation. The smaller the objects are, which become sensible to the eye, the finer is that organ, and the more elaborate its make and composition. A good palate is not tried by strong flavours, but by a mixture of small ingredients, where we are still sensible of each part, notwithstanding its minuteness and its confusion with the rest. In like manner, a quick and acute perception of beauty and deformity must be the perfection of our mental taste; nor can a man be satisfied with himself while he suspects that any excellence or blemish in a discourse has passed him unobserved. In this case, the perfection of the man, and the perfection of the sense or feeling, are found to be united.<sup>5</sup>

Hume is noting that the perfection of a sense comes when one is able to distinguish the smaller, complex components that go into the experience of the whole. It would take considerable training of the palate to be able to distinguish the components of a dish and understand how they combine in a unity of harmony and balance, where the ingredients are evident individually and yet combined in the flavor of the dish as a whole. This sort of perception of food extends beyond the merely gustatory to the aesthetic because of the ability to identify aesthetic qualities such as balance or harmony (or lack thereof) in the composition of the dish overall. While this gustatory acuity clearly relies on the cultivation and perfection of the palate, once that cultivation has been achieved it opens up a vista of experience characterized by the aesthetic. This is exactly the sort of enriching experience that Shusterman supposes will become available through the cultivation of the body. Hume goes even further to claim that the perfection of the human being is united to the perfection of the senses. Hume's use of gustatory taste, read through the lens of somaesthetics, is not merely metaphorical. Rather, it is the care and improvement of all the senses, and therefore the body,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 267.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

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<sup>5</sup> David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 241.

which he identifies as coextensive with the cultivation of the self.

In Hume's account of the cultivation of the senses it is the lack of satisfaction with oneself that ultimately leads to the refinement of taste. On this view the somatic training of gustatory taste could be viewed as aiming at the refinement of one's personal pleasure, opening up somaesthetics to the criticism, which Shusterman rejects, that the cultivation of the body is ultimately superficial and self-satisfying. The rejection of the claim that food merely provides for the indulgence of self-satisfying pleasure, central to Plato's attitude toward food but not altogether absent in Hume, is aided by the understanding of food as a mode of communication. When the dining experience is understood as a transactional experience between chef and diner it becomes clear that eating is less the pursuit of self-indulgent pleasure than it is an exchange of culture. As a mode of communication eating can be understood as the transmission of cultural meanings embodied in a sensuous medium, in this case, food. Although Dewey does not provide an extended treatment of gustatory taste and its aesthetic possibilities in *Art as Experience*, he does provide one telling example of the experience of the gourmand in order to point to the inherently communicative aspect of aesthetic experience. Using Dewey as a guide, I shall argue that the somatic training of gustatory taste, rather than being geared exclusively toward the pleasure of the diner as an end, is instead aimed at cultivating the ability to experience food as a means of communicating complex cultural meanings. On this view, the end of self-cultivation is explicitly social. One cultivates the sense of taste in order to better understand how culture can be transmitted through gustatory experience. When this sense cultivation has been sufficiently refined, gustatory experience is transformed into aesthetic experience by becoming a means of communication.

The sensory satisfaction of the eye and ear, when esthetic, is so because it does not stand by itself but is linked to the activity of which it is the

consequence. Even the pleasures of the palate are different in quality to an epicure than in one who merely "likes" his food as he eats it. The difference is not of mere intensity. The epicure is conscious of much more than the taste of the food. Rather, there enter into the taste, as directly experienced, qualities that depend upon reference to its source and its manner of production in connection with criteria of excellence. As production must absorb into itself qualities of the product as perceived and be regulated by them, so, on the other side, seeing, hearing, tasting, become esthetic when relation to a distinct manner of activity qualifies what is perceived.<sup>6</sup>

This passage is incredibly rich and suggestive of how Dewey might have developed an aesthetics of food. Initially, it is important to note that Dewey does not rule out the possibility that taste can generate aesthetic experience just as readily as sight or hearing. It is the quality of the experience itself that designates it as aesthetic regardless of whether it is produced by something that one tastes, sees or hears. What first marks off a merely sensory pleasure as aesthetic is that it functions as a sign; it stands as the completion of the activity of which it is the end and does not have reference merely to itself. Note that in keeping with Dewey's larger aesthetic commitments the end of a creative activity is not the art object or the finished dish but the enjoyment of that object *in* experience. Thus, the experience itself functions symbolically and refers to the activity of which it is consummation.

Perhaps more significant is that Dewey makes a distinction here between mere sensory pleasure and aesthetic pleasure. This can distinguish between the epicure, who is capable of having an aesthetic experience of food, and the person who merely likes what he or she eats. The difference between the two however is not quantitative (the epicure does not merely enjoy his or her food more intensely) but *qualitative*. The epicure experiences felt qualities embodied in the food that

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, vol. 10 of *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 55.

others do not. As Dewey notes, these qualities penetrate the gustatory experience itself. The significance of this point cannot be overstated. It is important to emphasize that the aesthetic experience of food requires 1) that the epicure has cultivated her sense of taste to the point of being able to detect qualities in food that function as signs for the method of production, 2) that food is itself capable of embodied these meanings through the transformative creative activity of the chef, and 3) that there is a normative aspect to the experience—it is connected to criteria of excellence. What Dewey is indicating is how the triadic relations that comprise all aesthetic experiences are present in the case of chef-dish-diner just as they are in the case of painter-painting-viewer. Any activity of making will infuse the finished product with properties that point to the act of production itself. This activity then qualifies the way that the final product is perceived. That food embodies meaning, and thus can serve as a medium of communication, is evident for Dewey due to the fact that taste may embody properties that symbolically function as references to the productive activity of the chef. These embodied properties might not only be linked to the productive activity of the chef, but, arguably, can be extend to those of the artisan farmer as well. In this case food would bear properties that refer back not only to the transformation of raw materials into a cultural product but also to the productive activity of the farmer, who intelligently controls nature in order to produce a product that stands as perhaps the first, and most significant, example of the transformation of nature into culture.

The understanding of food as language is central to the aesthetics of food because it elucidates the distinction between food and cuisine. Whereas food qua nature is directed toward the maintenance of healthy biological functioning, food qua culture, that is, *cuisine*, is an example of the emergence of culture from nature. This occurs through the transformative activity of a chef by which food becomes imbued with culturally salient meanings that can be communicated to a thoughtful

diner. That is, as cuisine, food is expressive. An alternative way to state this proposition, in terms of the end product rather than the process of cooking, is that food, qua cuisine, *embodies* aesthetic properties such as beauty, humor, irony, surprise, and balance. It is one thing to claim that cooking is expressive or that food embodies culturally salient attributes. It is another thing entirely to explain how this is accomplished. While on one level this would require a sophisticated food criticism that explores the ways in which a specific dish might be humorous, beautiful, creative, poetic or ironic (I provide an example of this type of food criticism in section 3 below), on a deeper level it requires a metaphysics of cultural artifacts which explains how food has semiotic and representational structures and functions.<sup>7</sup> It is this latter issue that requires the work of philosophers, food historians and food anthropologists in conjunction with examples provided by innovative chefs. To that point it is important to observe how others, besides Dewey, have argued for the expressive possibilities of cuisine and how these discussions are consistent with the interpretation of Dewey's thinking about food provided above. The Italian food historian Massimo Montanari has stated this idea as follows.

The analogy between food and language that we have made by juxtaposing the two as semiological systems, beyond (in the case of food) their material reality, characterizes both as codes of communication. They convey symbolic and *signifying* meanings of widely differing kinds (economic, social, political religious, ethnic, aesthetic), both inside and outside the societies that express them. Like spoken language, the food system contains and conveys the culture of its practitioner; it is the repository of traditions and of collective identity. It is therefore an extraordinary vehicle of self-representation and of cultural exchange—a means of establishing identity, to be sure, but also the first way of entering into contact with a different culture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the type of metaphysics of culture which supports this claim see my "John Dewey and the Ontology of Art" in *Dewey's Enduring Impact*, ed. John R. Shook and Paul Kurtz (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 219–235.

<sup>8</sup> Massimo Montanari, *Food is Culture*, trans. Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 133.

What is significant in Montanari's formulation is that food functions, like language, as a code of communication because it is more than mere material reality. When food functions as a language, it is transfigured from mere material reality into a cultural entity, into cuisine. Although Montanari is speaking more broadly of the ways in which food expresses meanings within a culture and thereby serves as a means of forging collective identity, his comment can also be taken to indicate the ways in which individuals may come to express themselves through cooking as well. The personal expression of a chef can only take place against the broader background of the semiotic functioning of food within a culture generally. Further, the understanding of the broader cultural context in which food functions as an expression of cultural meanings requires an understanding of food as a cultural entity.

It is the ontological difference between food as a physical object and cuisine as a cultural product that *explains* why it is appropriate to employ the metaphor of food as language. A cultural entity is as an ontologically irreducible entity that emerges from the physical world when it is imbued with cultural meaning(s) through a transformation effected by human beings to its embodying base. Describing how this transformation takes place is an essential component of a cultural ontology. In the present case it explains the difference between food and cuisine, with food serving the role of the physically embodying medium from which the cultural category of cuisine emerges. The sociologist Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson has observed this distinction in the following way.

*Food* refers to the material substances we humans consume to meet the physiological requirements for sustenance; food is what we eat to live. . . . Comprehending producer and consumer, cook and diner, *cuisine* refers to the properly cultural construct that systematizes culinary practices and transmutes the spontaneous culinary gesture into a stable cultural code. Cuisine, like dining, turns the private into the public, the singular into the collective, the material into the cultural. It

supplies the cultural code that enables societies to think with and about the food they consume. As cooking makes food fit to eat, so cuisine, with its formal and symbolic ordering of culinary practices, turns the act of nourishment into an object fit for intellectual consumption and aesthetic appreciation.<sup>9</sup>

Without employing the language of metaphysics, Ferguson is describing how cuisine is a culturally emergent phenomenon that is embodied in food. Whereas food is a material phenomenon, cuisine is inherently cultural. Note again how Montanari's and Dewey's discussions of the communicative power of food relies on this distinction. The transformation of food into cuisine, which takes place when a public discourse about food is "formally and symbolically ordered," transmutes a merely material entity into a cultural one by suspending it in a cultural matrix of meaning. Further, it is cuisine, and not food, that is the proper object of aesthetic appreciation in Ferguson's formulation because this type of appreciation requires access to the shared meanings that constitute a culture. There is a normative aspect to the creation and appreciation of cuisine that is missing from food construed as a physical object. Particular dishes should be prepared in particular ways, served at a specific time of year, and can be evaluated for how well they conform to the established standards of the culinary arts. Further, it is against this backdrop that the creative innovations of contemporary avant-garde cuisine are to be experienced and evaluated. By codifying culinary codes, cuisine provides a way to talk about what we eat independent of the nutritional requirements of biological organisms. It is only when food has become cuisine that it can be properly said to exemplify a culture or to embody meaning. Questions about whether or not something is food would require answers that make reference to the physical properties of an object. Is it digestible? Does it possess nutritional content? Is it poisonous? Questions about cuisine however require answers that explicitly refer to a cultural context, to the history of eating and cooking in a

<sup>9</sup> Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

region, or the shared culinary traditions of a group. Once food is transformed into cuisine it becomes appropriate to discuss the aesthetic and intellectual qualities of eating in a way that is incorrect to do so for food taken solely as a physical or material object. We can even push Ferguson's discussion further to claim that, strictly speaking, no one ever eats food. While there may have been a point in the evolutionary past of human beings where our species had direct access to food construed as a physical object, valued exclusively for its nutritional qualities, the culinary practices of preparing, consuming and sharing food are so deeply penetrated by cultural meanings that it has become nearly impossible to encounter food outside of confines of culture.

Understanding how cuisine expresses cultural meanings relies on first observing the distinction between food and cuisine. Having shown how Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics and Shusterman's somaesthetics provide the necessary frameworks from which to approach the aesthetics of food I shall now turn to the discussion of how the distinction between food and cuisine, which explains the communicative power of cuisine, functions in practice. In order to do so, I shall draw on the work of Chef Grant Achatz and his Chicago restaurant *Alinea*, which is at the cutting edge of experimental cuisine in America. In doing so I shall employ the neologism *conceptual cuisine* to refer to the style of avant-garde or modernist cuisine that has become prevalent in recent decades and argue that this type of cooking has the potential to make the aesthetic dimension of eating more readily apparent.

### **3. Conceptual Cuisine: An Example—*Alinea***

Modern avant-garde cuisine has often been denigrated by describing it as the application of scientific techniques to the realm of cooking for its own sake. This is most evident by the use of the popular misnomer "molecular gastronomy" in much recent food writing to refer to this style of cuisine. While molecular gastronomy is a legitimate and emerging branch of food science, no chef

in a restaurant can be properly said to be engaging in its practice. While chefs may use the conclusions of molecular gastronomy to inspire creativity and innovation in the kitchen, the food that they produce is far from being a contribution to molecular gastronomy itself. This misnomer is especially damaging because it implies that cookery can and should be reduced to a science, thereby drawing attention away from the fact that this emerging style of cookery has greatly expanded the expressive power of cuisine. Further, the enjoyments, both gustatory and aesthetic, that diners can experience through an engagement with this type of cuisine have perhaps never been available to the dining public before the current moment. Thus, rather than continuing to reinforce the misapplication of the term "molecular gastronomy" to this style of cooking, I shall refer to it as "conceptual cuisine" which, as a term of art, has the benefit of pointing to the cognitive, creative, and expressive aspects of the dining experience.

The distinction between molecular gastronomy and conceptual cuisine observed above can be illustrated by looking at the example of "hot jellies" and the application of this technique by Grant Achatz, one of the leading practitioners of conceptual cuisine in America, in the dish "Pheasant, Shallot, Cider, Burning Oak Leaves" served at his Chicago restaurant *Alinea*. This dish serves as an excellent illustration of conceptual cuisine and its relationship to molecular gastronomy because, as we shall see, only one component of the dish involves the use of a technique informed by science. To reduce this dish, and the cognitive/emotional reaction that it invokes, to a single technique is not only to misunderstand the meaning of the dish, but also to do a grave disservice to the creative synthesis of the chef. Further, "Pheasant, Shallot, Cider, Burning Oak Leaves" is firmly rooted in culinary traditions of the past. In many ways, it is a classic preparation reflected through the prism of a creative chef utilizing modern techniques.

Ferran Adria, chef at the now shuttered *el bulli* and founding father of conceptual cuisine, first served hot jellies in 1998 through experimenting with hydrocolloids. However, this culinary innovation did not have anything to do with the scientific understanding of hydrocolloids. Rather, it was a result of trial and error. Hot jellies can be made by the use of a gelling agent, in this instance agar-agar, that has the property of being able to withstand high temperatures and still retain the consistency and physical properties of a gel. The study of the physical properties of hydrocolloids, which are “proteins or complex carbohydrates that have the capacity to attract water, causing the formation of gels, or to thicken a blended product or liquid,”<sup>10</sup> would be a matter of food science. Understanding the transformation that takes place when agar-agar is used in a culinary application would be molecular gastronomy. Finally, employing the knowledge gained by food science and molecular gastronomy as a means to the creation of new culinary experiences is the task of the creative chefs who produce conceptual cuisine. One does not need to know how hydrocolloids are structured or behave in order to use them in creative ways in the kitchen. Yet, once that knowledge is obtained, it can be used to improve and refine those culinary applications (for example, establishing the temperature range at which a specific hydrocolloid will remain a gel can help a chef to decide which additive to use in a high heat application).

In “Pheasant, Shallot, Cider, Burning Oak Leaves” agar-agar is combined with apples and apple cider which are then simmered, strained and cooled until they set into a cider gel.<sup>11</sup> Since agar-agar has the property of being able to withstand high temperatures it can then be combined with roasted shallots and sous-vide pheasant and deep fried at the end of an oak branch fashioned into a skewer. As agar-agar produces a thermoreversible gel (a

gel in which temperature can change the consistence of the gel) the chef can control the texture and resulting mouth feel, based on the temperature at which the dish is served. Thus, when the battered and fried pheasant, shallot, cider gel combination is consumed, the diner will experience the release of warmed cider jelly creating a temperature/texture contrast with which they are unfamiliar and hence unprepared for. This texture explosion creates a new way to experience an otherwise familiar taste (Autumn game and fruit), which provides the opportunity to reflect not only on the way in which texture alters our experience of taste but also how our expectations shape that experience. There is nothing innovative about pairing fruit with game. But what might have traditionally been served as a cider reduction or gastrique can, through the application of new techniques and ingredients, create the illusion that something familiar is something entirely new.

What is truly interesting about this dish however, is not the application of agar-agar, but rather the way that this component combines with the other parts of the dish to invoke a conceptual or emotional reaction in the diner. This dish is an excellent example of Achatz’s culinary approach because it incorporates many elements for which he is well known, including employing unique serving vessels. The dish is served in what is called a “squid service piece.” In lieu of a plate the deep fried pheasant-shallot-cider gel is served suspended within a stainless steel nest of five angled arms, which was designed exclusively for Alinea. The oak leaf skewers, which are upright, are lit on fire and then extinguished. When the dish arrives at the table the dinner is first enveloped by the scent of smoldering oak leaves, a scent reminiscent of Chef Achatz’s midwestern childhood. Thus, before diners even taste the dish they are presented with a sensory signal that triggers memories of autumn. This environmental component to the dish is the first indication that the chef is playing with memory and emotion as components of the overall experience.

<sup>10</sup> Alicia Foundation elBullitaller, *Modern Gastronomy A to Z: A Scientific and Gastronomic Lexicon* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2010), 110.

<sup>11</sup> Grant Achatz, *Alinea* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2008), 223.

The proper understanding of the content of the dish cannot be reduced to its gustatory components alone.

The dish also has an explicitly architectural component. The relationship between the oak branch and the deep fried pheasant takes on the appearance of an acorn on a branch. By serving the dish upright there is a strong implication of the verticality of trees. The olfactory, architectural and gustatory components of the dish combine in a way that transcends the individual parts. They conjoin in a way that creates an overall impression of “autumn” that unfolds in time and is reinforced by each successive element of the dish as it is experienced. In one dish the diner can explore the relationship between scent and emotion and reflect on the role that architecture and presentation have in reinforcing this initial emotional response and how these form the context in which the dish and its warm cider gel are finally experienced through gustatory taste. All of these components, in turn, embody the concept of midwestern autumn in a way that a traditional roasted pheasant with cider reduction, because of its familiarity, may fail to do. Like a work of art, the diner has been presented with a complex composition that can be interpreted. How does the relationship of the parts combine to produce the desired effect? What role does scent have in the experience of taste? How do visual cues serve to signal the concept of autumn? How do the taste of the roasted shallots reinforce the initial experience of burning oak? How does the texture of the cider gel raise questions about what can be considered a sauce? Are functional definitions of sauces acceptable or does something need to have a specific texture to be considered a sauce? None of this complexity can be reduced to a simplistic explanation based on science or technology or to any individual component of the dish taken in isolation. Rather, molecular gastronomy plays but one small part in the overall drama of the dish which, when taken as a whole, is an invitation to reflect on the possibility of food as an expressive medium and the roles that taste, smell,

presentation and technique play in exploring those possibilities. To call such a dish an exemplar of “molecular gastronomy” is seriously misleading. The dish is about the exploration of concepts and how concepts can be presented in the medium of dining. It is *conceptual cuisine*.

In this paper I have endeavored to show how the somaesthetics of Richard Shusterman and Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics can provide an interesting philosophical framework for the discussion of the expressive power of cuisine. However, it may be objected that in focusing on a culinary example that draws attention to the cognitive or conceptual this discussion obscures the centrality of the body in aesthetic experience of cuisine rather than highlighting it. This is mistaken. By forcing the diner to experience cuisine in a new way, through manipulating environmental as well as gustatory components of the eating experience, conceptual cuisine forces the diner to think through the body. By serving “Pheasant, Shallot, Cider, Burning Oak Leaves” in a sculptural way the dish requires that the diner rethink her approach to the act of eating in bodily terms. The very question of how one is supposed to eat a certain dish provokes the diner to think about eating as a fundamental way of orientating the body to the environment. Further, it is the emphasis on gustatory taste as a sense modality equipped with the power to provoke intellectual and aesthetic reflection and enjoyment equally that reinforces the somaesthetic view that it is the body that is the site of aesthetic enjoyment. Illustrating how the aesthetic may be embodied in the gustatory is a specific application of the general contention that all understanding is mediated through the body. As philosophers continue to explore the aesthetic dimensions of food and drink, the somaesthetics of Richard Shusterman will undoubtedly serve as an essential element in the philosophical understanding of food and its relation to the body.