

# Chef's creativity and the modern gastronomy consumption

Rita de Cássia Ribeiro<sup>1</sup>  
Rita de Cássia Marques<sup>2</sup>  
Edgar Gastón Jacobs Flores Filho<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Departamento de Nutrição, Escola de Enfermagem. Belo Horizonte-MG, Brasil.

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Departamento de Enfermagem Aplicada, Escola de Enfermagem. Belo Horizonte-MG, Brasil.

<sup>3</sup> Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, Faculdade Mineira de Direito. Belo Horizonte-MG, Brasil.

Correspondence  
Rita de Cássia Ribeiro  
E-mail: ritagastronomia@hotmail.com

## Abstract

In this essay we intend to discuss meals modern commensality, with the backdrop of gastronomy and the chefs' work. These professionals, by designing menus, enable people to eat whatever they want and to try new flavors and favor the incorporation of new eating modes. Therefore, the aim was to investigate and discuss the role of chefs' creativity in preparing menus and the impacts of this action on food consumption. In this investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with chefs of *à la carte* restaurants located in the south central region of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais state, Brazil. The interviews were conducted by saturation of information and the processing and interpretation of results allowed to establish a relationship between the content expressed in the discourse and the scientific literature. The chefs' creative process and therefore their influence on new modes of contemporary eating may indicate a new route for studies related to eating behaviors. It was found that, in times of eating modernity, creativity, personal and professional experiences and the excitement caused by it in clients are foundations of the chefs' work.

**Keywords:** Restaurants. Cooking. Food consumption. Creativity.

## Introduction

In the field of culture, it is observed that restaurants, privileged commensality sites, have been transformed into places where satisfaction and ease are sought. Homes are no longer the sites chosen for meals since day after day streets or environments outside the home stand out as frequent eating sites.<sup>1-3</sup> This is especially noticeable in the context of modern eating, a peculiar moment in which the act of consuming food undergoes major transformations due to changes in contemporary society.<sup>4</sup> To exemplify, according to the trends for the segments of food and beverages drawn by the project *Brasil Food Trends 2020*,<sup>5</sup> it is estimated that people are going to begin to make their food choices primarily guided by sensory feelings and pleasure, with the appreciation of gastronomy.

Under social and cultural points of view, the invention of cooking has started from the domestication of fire. The act of cooking was one of the great revolutionary events in history, due to the transforming mode of society, from the organization of individuals together around meals and predictable eating schedules.<sup>6</sup>

After the invention of cooking, the beginning of the systematic production of animal or plant foods was another major milestone. And from the moment when some people began to control more food resources than the others, food became a social differentiator. What mattered was the amount not the selection of dishes and how they were prepared. A gigantic appetite was usually a source of prestige in almost all societies<sup>6</sup> and there are legendary deeds of digestion recorded in the Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Modern Age.<sup>7</sup>

However, the amount alone could no longer be the sole criterion for a prestigious diet. Then taste, variety and elegance started having an ennobling effect. Accordingly, the consequences of a socially differentiated cuisine include the emergence of a high-level profession with an apparatus of techniques and a code of practices in the kitchen: the chef.<sup>6</sup>

The chef is the central character of the *à la carte* restaurant which, unlike street cuisine and guesthouses available since Antiquity, offers a menu with different options that go beyond meeting the physiological need to eat. This extensive list of items allows people to eat what they want.<sup>8</sup> The menu is designed to seduce, to instigate the taste and lead to the willingness to try new flavors.

It is estimated that restaurants, especially the *à la carte* ones, should move towards a more specific gastronomy and focus on dining and leisurely meals. Proença<sup>9</sup> refers to the level reached by restaurants as prime locations of production and sharing of culture, as well as museums and theaters. Therefore, as a producer of art, chefs are established as modern artists.

Chefs are introduced as agents influencing food choices, how people come to see food and the act of eating itself. They are the protagonists of a plot that involves the incorporation of new eating ways by diners.

In a postmodern society, characterized by the fluidity of concepts,<sup>10</sup> dealing with food requires a reflection on the transformations of eating and in this scenario the chefs' work gain more space and importance.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the objective of this essay was to investigate and discuss the role of chefs' creativity in preparing menus and the impact of this action on food consumption.

## Methodology strategies

In this research, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with chefs of *à la carte* restaurants located in the south central region of Brazilian city Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, the largest concentration of establishments with this service profile in the city, according to a restaurant guide annually published. The interviews were conducted until the saturation of information, that is, until researchers found an agreement in the responses.

The contents of each interview were analyzed according to Bardin.<sup>12</sup> An alphanumeric classification was carried out consisting in letter "E" followed by a numerical identification from 1 to 9, referring to the order in which they were interviewed. Processing and interpretation of results obtained allowed to relate the content expressed in the discourses and the relevant scientific literature.

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) registered at Brazilian National Health Council (CAAE – 0578.0.203.000-11).

## Results and some reflections

### The classic factors

In the literature available for planning menus there are classic factors that influence the creation such as costs, the clients' eating and cultural habits, the restaurants features (location, hours of operation and type of service offered), the stages of production and available ingredients.<sup>13-16</sup> In this research, in general, all respondents cited preparation technique, quality and seasonality of ingredients, logistics and production limit, the menus turnover and the margin of error in the dish preparation as key factors for the creation of menus.

*Because there is no use in creating a dish in which I may have a margin of error of 90% in the execution (E1).*

*There is a storage space, the limit of how many things one can prepare and what the goods are going to generate. It is always going to be fresh. Therefore, there is no way of making the menu indefinitely grow (E9).*

The chefs interviewed are in charge of renowned restaurants and certainly need to be aware of all the classic and fundamental aspects in planning menus. However, technical concerns arise in speeches interspersed by concerns of another nature. The clients' satisfaction and responsiveness, important factors in the decision on allowing or withdrawing dishes from the menu, help to understand that subjective questions that are beyond the strictly technical procedures are relevant for the chef in creating a new menu.

In analyzing the chefs' discourse, it was realized that planning menus is characterized by a creative process that is not limited to the aforementioned factors and follows other paths, such as the restaurant concept and the chef's personal and professional experience.

## The restaurant concept

The concept is one of the central elements in the creative process in *à la carte* restaurants. The type of restaurant also depends on the chef's experience, that is, for a certain target audience, the chef sets the best concept from their experiences.

*There is no use in creating a dish without having a restaurant profile [...]. This profile is related to the target audience, the type of dishes offered (regional or contemporary), decoration, type of dish, the dish value and the service offered. Every detail is going to take me to one path [...] Therefore that's where I am going to sit down and develop and look for the mix that I am going to put on my menu (E1).*

In this research, it became clear that the chef creates the menus from their target audience's social and cultural characteristics, emphasizing the appreciation of regional cuisine. The chefs understand that the preparation techniques and cuisine bases are internationalized elements that must focus the retrieval of regional food culture,<sup>17</sup> prioritizing the ingredients and, properly, the clients' affective memory.

*Affective memory [...] some dish that is going to take you down to memory lane, for example, Brazilian candy paçoca ice cream (E3).*

Food significance may have several value axes, such as memory to the tradition where the food would have a reminiscent function, which would guarantee the survival of some traditions. People need to recognize and identify foods, an increasingly difficult task in the contemporary context. Therefore the nostalgia of home cooking remains strongly alive, based on the security offered by knowing the ingredients and their way of preparation.<sup>4</sup>

In this vein, Fischler & Masson<sup>18</sup> call “generalized culinary syncretism” the globalization of products and eating habits which generate changes in food composition and forms of consumption, leading to a globalization of tastes. However, modernity can in many cases encourage the formation of local characteristics, an aspect notoriously observed in our research. Fonseca et al.<sup>4</sup> point out that there is a trend of appreciation of national and local food systems as a way to strengthen the particularities.

The chefs' work, identified in our research, can also be interpreted as a response to the alleged permeable character of our culture arising from globalization, as discussed by Garcia.<sup>19</sup> According to the author, pressured by the purchasing power, advertising and convenience, eating becomes subject to changes, culminating in contemporary food ways. However, traditional cuisine can become a globalized culture, as a reinvented tradition, which recycles elements of popular memory, recreating and updating elements of the past that are mixed with the present.

## The professional and personal experiences

It is noted that in the chefs' creative process it is essential to consider their personal and professional experience.

*The life experience, not the chemical experiment, not an experiment in a laboratory, but the experience of creating from what you experience [...]. Of course, always using the references from all I've seen, trying to do something varied and not turn into a copy (E4).*

According to Bondía,<sup>20</sup> “experience is what goes on or touches us, or what happens to us, and as they pass by us they form and transform us. Only the subject of the experience is therefore open to their own transformation.” In the chefs' reports the importance of experience in their creative process became clear. This experience causes them to have intuition and sensitivity to create and this goes beyond the factors that the literature presents as compelling and technical for creating new dishes.

Marked by creativity, the chef performs an artistic work. Therefore, Lipovetsky<sup>11</sup> points out that chefs, gastronomy and the great restaurants have never been so talked about, listened to, been in the media spotlight, since food happiness no longer finds its full expression in immoderate banquets but in the tasting sensuality and the pursuit of gustatory qualities.

The experience of the professional – that is, their various experiences in the kitchen – provides knowledge, mastery of techniques and understanding the client's desire, resulting in a growing ability to create and transform new dishes. In this sense, in the process of creating a dish, chefs can search the same ingredient and reach close to or different results, because creativity happens while working. When creating a dish, the chef intuitively acts, transforms, and arranges something new. According to Ostrower,<sup>21</sup> “all the time they are going to have to wonder: yes or no?, something is missing, I follow, I stop... that they deduce and weigh the validity.” This is only possible from the knowledge that they have already incorporated in various contexts, such as family or professional ones, as expressed by one of the interviewees:

*The techniques are the same, the look from who is creating is what is going to differentiate it (E4).*

This chef's “look” is what defines a good restaurant which always goes beyond following a successful formula and standard recipes, widely circulated and available to all professionals.

*Often the recipe is the same, but each has the tricks of the trade. Then, for each situation the recipe is adapted. I can even use all their ingredients... the recipe is not going to be equal but I am going to try to make it equal. The following week, when I get to cook that recipe, I am going to use my feeling. Because this is how cooking works. Cooking is about feeling (E1).*

## The client's feelings

The creative chef's experience is also able to provide new experiences for the client. The client is emotionally affected, engaged, creates links, and this impacts, in a sense, the restaurant concept and the creation of menus.

Meals intertwine the various aspects of individual human experiences, such as the senses, affections and intelligence and at the same time they are presented as a moment for meeting and having satisfaction. Meals are a humanizing event par excellence, as a school of senses, relationships and coexistence.<sup>22</sup>

*Satisfying others is very important to us. I think this is fundamental because cooks like that, they especially like to provide joy (E5).*

With their client's satisfaction, chefs are appreciated and grow professionally,<sup>23</sup> especially in a postmodern society, in which examples to be followed and not leaders are sought. People who, in the spotlight, show how things that really matter are done.<sup>10</sup>

*The creation process has to be an endless search. I, for one, always like [...] to do differently so that precisely the person has this unique experience, because otherwise it's all the same (E7).*

Customer loyalty to a chef's creation and the new way of eating already known ingredients have led many people to attend restaurants with differentiated concepts to discover new places and dishes and to look for fantasy and originality in meals. A hedonistic culture is observed under the rule of variety, accelerated change, fantasy show.<sup>11</sup> In this scenario, the demand for chefs' work has grown, which makes one always think something new, that surprises and at the same time retrieves emotional memories related to eating.

*The surprise of seeing that product made in a different way, in an unusual way, is also a new discovery. Part of chefs' role, inserted in gastronomy, is to try to retrieve those products that have already been on the table and that for some reason are gone (E4).*

Therefore, the creation accompanies all the chef's work in order to meet customer expectations with un-traditionalized dishes that cross aromas, moving the products from their usual appearance and context.<sup>11</sup>

To exemplify, the now defunct restaurant elBulli, of the renowned Catalan chef Ferran Adrià Acosta, which presented the highest number of gastronomical innovations in recent decades, became not only an eating place, but a stage for new gastronomical performances that appeal to all senses, presentations that can only be fully savored if followed by an entire scenic direction by the service personnel, that is, each dish is a work of art. According to Adrià, in order for cooking to become a work of art, it is necessary that the chef be aware that "cooking is a language that can express harmony, creativity, happiness, beauty, poetry, complexity, magic, humor, provocation and culture."<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, it is noted that the novelty never fully arises in a vacuum, disengaged from traditions, habits, and agreements. To achieve what is really new one needs to be confronted with what exists and is and known.<sup>24</sup> At this point, what's new is that the chef's image and no longer tradition itself has become a reference.

## Modern gastronomy consumption

Even in an era when eating and drinking go through reflexivity and individual responsibility, in Lipovetsky's<sup>11</sup> words a "patchwork cuisine" arises that gives so much importance to the dish content as to creativity and surprise in view of decontextualization. Eating has become synonymous with entertainment and it is assumed that these experiences are increasingly gaining ground in everyday life. We have seen the rise of a new diner and this scenario opens new possibilities for new tastes, flavors, and ingredients and heats the food market up such as, for example, the growth of specialized supermarkets called gourmet, always linked to the chef's image – who, in this case, propose that diners incorporate the creativity from this social actor.

The intense media coverage of gastronomy reflected in the rising number of media vehicles such as books, magazines, major newspapers sections, television programs with celebrity chefs and Web sites<sup>25</sup> may be indicative of new eating modes. Moreover, it is possible to see a high demand for higher education courses in gastronomy.<sup>26</sup> In both cases, it is also possible to see an invitation to a postmodern culture whose reference is selected by the individuals themselves among many options presented to them and that they themselves can create.

## Final thoughts

All these issues discussed here collaborate for the growth and spread of new habits, which directly impact food consumption and suggest a new look at the ways of contemporary consumption. A look that realizes more the importance of chefs at the expense of adequate food traditions and behaviors and even generalizing trends.

Finally, chefs' creative processes and therefore their influence on new ways of contemporary food may indicate a new route for studies related to eating behaviors. It has been found that, in times of food modernity, creativity, personal and professional experiences and the excitement caused by it in customers are the foundations of the chefs' work.

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