

# Cooking and Dining as Forms of Public Art\*

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## §1. Introduction

We live in the era of culinary spectacles. Chefs populate our media portrayed as creative geniuses. Food and cooking performances are by now standard within the artworld, e.g. in art museums, art fairs, and exhibitions. In short, as some scholars have already suggested, they are highly valued and rewarding aesthetic practices, possibly counting as artforms. Philosophers Dom Lopes (2014) and Yuriko Saito (2008), for example, challenge the divide between traditional art kinds and culinary practices, contending that value ought not to be confined to the former; rather, to say it with Lopes's words, "a paradigm example of everyday appreciation is cooking and eating food" (Lopes 2014: 121).

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Many focus on the artistic nature of food by considering its aesthetic value (Korsmeyer 2005, 1999; Kuhlen 2005; Monroe 2007; Myhrvold 2011; Quinet 1981; Scruton 2009; Smith 2007; Sweeney 2007; Telfer 1996; Todd 2011). These studies, for instance, examine the sensual experience that taste can afford, its hedonic components, its representational dispositions as well as its capacity to express complex meanings. All such aspects of food are chiefly a function of our individual experiences, where the aesthetic significance depends on how a particular dish affects one's sensory, emotional, psychological, and cognitive state. This makes for an aesthetic model of food appreciation limited to the individual. Such a model, however, can only take us so far in examining food from an aesthetic perspective.

The recent "social turn" in aesthetics has illuminated the shortcomings of—what Zangwill (2012: 379) calls—an individualistic model of appreciation. When considering certain artifacts, such as memorials, monuments, and public performances, one witnesses something different: the arts' capacity for generating a form of meaning that can only be collectively realized. Food is no exception. Thanksgiving meals, wedding banquets, birthday celebrations, and all those collective rituals essentially involving food may very well be capable of producing meanings that are social in nature.

Intended as a social network, the practice of eating and dining may be taken to include acts like representing a nation during formal diplomatic meetings or via government-sponsored cultural programs that involve food (Rockower 2014), influence social identities through the lenses of a TV show (Grosplik and Lerner 2020), collecting and conserving community practices by means of recipes and cookbooks (Borghini and Engisch 2021). Thus, the social turn offers the conceptual resources to capture these aesthetic and social features of food, offering the opportunity of bringing to light unexplored aspects (cfr. Lopes 2017 and Ravasio 2018).

In this paper we discuss whether cooking and dining can and should be in some instances regarded as forms of public art. This important feature of food has been largely neglected, in the philosophical arena and beyond. We argue that some food practices carry public values and thus, in turn, are worthy of political attention and dedicated policies of promotion and protection. In the remainder of the paper, we first rehearse some key conditions that an artwork must meet in order to count as public (§2). Generally understood as a form of expression essentially intertwined with our social life and issues of public relevance, public art acquires its status primarily thanks to its accessibility, theme, and response design. We then argue that some instances of cooking and experiencing food (found not only

in restaurants, but also for instance home cooking) meet such conditions (§3). Hence, we vet the pros and cons of three avenues to support cooking and experiencing food as forms of public art: through subsidies to cooks; through museums and art events; and through establishing dedicated cooking venues (§4).

## **§2. When Is Art Public?**

While examining food as public art, we must first of all raise the question of what makes an artwork public. The issue has been extensively discussed (Baldini 2014; Finkelppearl 2001; Hein, Horowitz, and Kelly 1996; Kester 2004; Knight 2008; Korza, Bacon, and Assaf 2005; Mitchell 1992a; Raven 1989; Zuidervaart 2012). Following the “relational turn in public art,” scholars began to characterize public art’s publicness in terms of the peculiar ways in which its examples connect with their audiences rather than on matters of location or sponsorship. As W. J. T. Mitchell argues, considerations of location and funding need not be irrelevant, but “cannot provide the theoretical or practical horizon of inquiry” (Mitchell 1992b, 2).

The relational view suggests that artworks are *public* not merely in virtue of being placed in a public space or in virtue of being publicly funded (Graham 2006). They are bestowed this status in a different sense, that is, as

objects of public discussion. These artworks are then constitutively building a web of social relationships that inclusively cuts through social strictures (class, education, genders, etc.) and they are sustained primarily by discursive interactions that touch upon themes of civic relevance broadly construed. Along similar lines, Michael North anticipated some of the much-debated themes associated with Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics (1998) when he suggested that, in public art, "public debate [...] becomes a work of art" (North 1990, 879).

Scholars linked with the relational turn have often found in the notion of *public sphere* a useful tool for conceptualizing the peculiar nature of public art's connection with public debate. In a first approximation, we can for present purposes define a public sphere as the sphere of discursive and agentive spaces where (groups of) private individuals engage with issues of public relevance within the context of political action (Calhoun 1992; Crossley and Roberts 2004; Habermas 1989). Public spheres can be additionally qualified. First of all, they are multiple and relate to a multiplicity of publics (Baldini 2019; Warner 2002). Second, their spaces need not be only discursive, as they more generally are spaces of agency (including also, e.g., culinary practices) (Calhoun 1998). Finally, although traditionally the engagement between agents is required to be rational,

contemporary public spheres are often characterized by their unreasonableness (Gardiner 2004).

Artistic trends such as “new genre public art” and “dialogic art” (Lacy 1995; Kester 2004) conceptualize public artworks as effective ways to encourage engagement within a public sphere. As Korza, Schaffer Bacon, and Assaf (2005) maintain, public artworks provide “a key focus, catalyst, forum or form for public dialogue on an issue” that is of general relevance (48). These artworks are therefore initiators of public interactions promoting “dialogue among diverse communities” as well as publicly meaningful and diverse forms of agency (Kester 2004, 1). And such dialogues occasionally use food as a medium too, as the example of Rirkrit Tiravanija shows (Bishop 2004: 55-58).

Although public spheres are multifarious, we may ask what are the conditions that likely make an artwork public, by connecting it with a one or more of such discursive and agentive spaces. Hein (1996) looks into this question in her seminal contribution to the philosophy of public art. In particular, she emphasizes three conditions that are significantly connected with public artworks: accessibility, theme, and response. In the remainder of the section, we examine each condition in turn.

First condition: *accessibility*. As Hein (1996, 1–2) argues, the specific modalities through which an artwork can be accessed importantly contribute to determine its function within public society. But while free, universal, and unlimited access may be regarded as the ideal conditions for public artworks, they are not necessary conditions. Access may reasonably not be granted freely, for instance because of the cost of production. Also, it may reasonably be limited, as in the case of performances that constitutively require to impose restrictions on access. Furthermore, it need not be granted without discrimination, as in the case of an artwork that is especially dedicated to a certain audience (e.g. age group, gender category, social group). In fact, in his work on the erosion of communal life, Sandel discusses how limited access can be further connected to issues of public interest and it need not deprive, for instance, a theatre performance of its public relevance (2012, 39–45). Thus, the time and place for experiencing a public artwork may very well bear a special meaning to a society (e.g. a square or a building of civic interest; the site of a meaningful event; a special moment, day or week of the year).

The second condition is the *theme* (Hein 1996, 2–5). Public artworks must address themes that bear a meaningful relationship to public institutions, to specific communities, or to events and symbols that concern

such institutions and communities. Of course, the patterns by means of which the artwork can come to acquire said meaningful relationship are multifarious; the work may be funded by the institution or the community, or it can simply be *about* the institution or the community, or it can be made to criticize and discredit one of them (or both). What is crucial is that the artwork becomes a vehicle through which a society understands, reacts to, or lives with a certain thematic issue.

The third condition regards the *responses* elicited by the artwork. Public artworks must demand an engagement with issues that are relevant to the constitution or identity of a (civil)<sup>1</sup> society. Such engagement takes multiple forms, such as mourning, celebrating, remembering, or reconsidering. It can be qualified in two main respects.

First, in appreciating public art, responses generally require forms of collective agency rather than individual agency (Guala 2016). That is, reactions to a public artwork are shared (re)actions and involve social activities such as dialogue and collective ceremonies (Feagin 1996; Summers

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of the present discussion, we do not draw any special distinction between “society” and “civil society.” This is because we believe that the public meaning of artworks can be found in both and, in addition, because it may be debated whether all states (where arguably public artworks can be found) do leave room for the existence of civil society (see for instance Teets 2014). At a closer inspection, it may turn out that the kinds of public values expressed by an artwork depend also on its engagement with themes and endeavors specific to one (civil society) or the other (society).

1991). The appreciation of public art, in this sense, cannot be reduced to how the encounter with a public artwork makes an appreciator feel.

Second, typical responses of core cases of public art depend on design rather than mere function. The two notions are complex to pin down. A working definition of design characterizes it as something about the intentional plan of the author. Function rather refers to how appreciators actually react to an artwork (Kitcher 1998; Millikan 1984; Searle 1995). In fact, in some cases an artwork is public not by design, but by function. This is for instance when an artwork that was not designed to elicit an engagement typical of public art, at some point (for instance, as a consequence of a change in the context of appreciation) acquires the capacity for such an engagement. Unintentional or accidental public art is widespread, especially because it is difficult to foresee the way an artifact will be actually used in a context and, more generally, the evolution of cultural trends.<sup>2</sup> Whether cases of art that became public by function are genuine cases of public art is an important issue. The question is particularly relevant in the sphere of cooking and dining, too. We cannot singularly pursue this question here. However, many

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<sup>2</sup> For a sympathetic account of art and function, see Eaton (2020).

recipes and culinary practices may arguably come to be public through function more than design.<sup>3</sup>

In this section, we have laid out three conditions that are foundational to public art's publicness. We believe that not only examples of traditional art can fulfill these conditions, but also some particular cases of cooking and dining. Next, we draw on Wolterstorff's perspective on the social dimensions of the arts to examine significant examples, showing that also within the foodworld we can find public artworks.

### **§3. Cooking as a Form of Public Art**

In *Art Rethought*, Wolterstorff (2015: 55) challenges the "grand narrative" of art, according to which disinterested attention is the standard mode of engaging and appreciating art. Contra this narrative, Wolterstorff offers a general theory of art forms that makes justice to the multiplicity of modes of engagement that works of art can sustain and encourage. In doing so, he emphasizes the social nature of the arts and of their meaning-making. As we have also suggested, according to his view the meaning of artwork is not a function of the individual response of the appreciator, rather it is rooted in the social responses of the public that it engages. Wolterstorff puts his

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<sup>3</sup> For a philosophical analysis of recipes, see (Borghini 2015, 2014, and 2010), (Borghini and Piras 2020), and (Borghini and Engisch 2021).

theoretical framework of art at use in analyzing art forms that appear essentially social in terms of their nature and meaning.

In his discussion of the arts as social practices, Wolterstorff examines at least three art forms that are particularly relevant to our argument. In fact, his framework for thinking about the arts, based on the different social practices that they can elicit, provides us with suitable conceptual resources for understanding cooking and consuming foods as ways of, respectively, making or experiencing public art. Those three artforms are Wolterstorff's memorial art, social protest art, and art that enhances. We discuss each of them separately in the remainder of this section.

### **§3.1 Cooking and Dining as Memorial Art**

The first variety of public art that we consider is memorial art. According to Danto, we “build memorials so that we shall never forget”(1998, 153).

Whereas monuments are celebratory of heroic deeds and achievements, memorials tribute those who tragically lost their lives. “The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the [defeated] dead” (Danto 1998, 153). Though memorials surely “express, preserve, enhance, and shape public memory,” they do more than dealing with remembering the past (Wolterstorff 2015, 128). Memorial art is a way

to *pay honor* to individuals, communities, and historical events that are salient for a given group or community.

Interestingly enough, in discussing memorial art, Wolterstorff does not merely use as examples traditional ways of memorializing, such as public sculptures and site-specific installations. He draws on the example of a banquet held in honor of a retired colleague as well (2015, 139). He suggests that, just like in more traditional memorials, also certain meals can serve the function of never forgetting. According to Wolterstorff, then, a banquet is not simply a moment of nutrition, a gustatory experience, or a social gathering; it can be in addition a social ceremony that bears a public meaning and thereby serves a public role.

Wolterstorff's take on memorial art opens up an underappreciated lens to look at meals and dining experiences. His framework highlights the public meaning of convivial occasions. Some remarkable instances are renowned also in art history. Prominent artist Suzanne Lacy famously understood the possibilities of everyday cooking and dining as forms of public art first with *International Dinner Party* (1979). Drawing on Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-1979), an artistically transfigured meal held only metaphorically, Lacy and Linda Pruess organized a real global dinner party on the eve of the opening of *Dinner Party*. The global meal lasted 24

hours and involved over 2000 participants. Successively, in 1993, Lacy concluded another famous project of public art, *Full Circle* (1992-1993), with an actual dinner at Hull House in Chicago. On this occasion, fourteen international women activists met to memorialize the notable and yet generally ignored contribution of women to social and political life.

*International Dinner Party, Full Circle* (1992-1993), and other similar meals celebrated as public art demonstrate the power of cooking and dining in everyday settings. These works of art exploit the simultaneously aesthetic and public function that certain social forms of dining possess. Artistic performances do not create a meaning that is not already present in the everyday; they rather highlight properties of dining occasions that are already there, showcasing the range of possible significance that they possess. As in the case of Wolterstorff's colleague, memorializing through food is open to everyone and every place, not just institutional artists and museums. A demonstration of this comes from long-standing rituals, such as the altars prepared for the Day of Dead in Mexico and other Central American nations (Brandes 1997).

In ways that are not dissimilar to Lacy's projects, some restaurants can today shape our collective memories. The remarkable ascent of these dining establishments over the past two centuries contributed to the

prominence of so-called “third places” (Oldenburg 1999). In addition to private homes and to work venues, third places are contexts of dwelling where social connections and communities build. In a restaurant, diners share private experiences in a public space. This lands the possibility of a public memorialization of common goods, values, and traditions (Rawson and Shore, 2019; Spang 2000).

A fitting case is the Nueva Cocina Peruana, sometimes also referred to as “Novoandina” cuisine. This represents—in the words of María Elena Garcia—an “ongoing gastronomic revolution” and “one of the few things bringing Peruvians together” (2013, 511). Central figures in this revolution are Gastón Acurio and Astrid Gutsche (who operated *Astrid y Gastón* in Lima since 1994) as well Virgilio Martínez (who runs the restaurant *Central* in Lima). With their work, these cooks contend to be reshaping the collective memories and shared values of Peruvian people. *Astrid y Gastón* and *Central* are much more than two businesses. They lead a growing movement of cooks who propose themselves as intermediaries between and representatives of diverse Peruvian communities of the Andes, the Amazons, and the coastal areas. The menus of these two restaurants purport to be not simply a way to remember a certain culture in approaching dieting. As Garcia puts it in her critical analysis, they aim at “reconstituting the nation through food” (2013,

511). By reenacting ancient traditions and bringing to the world stage their values, these cooks see themselves as honoring such traditions and enabling processes of construction of national identity (Wilson 2011; García 2013).

We should note that these chefs' contention that their cooking appropriately embodies national values is controversial for reasons that Garcia's study well highlights (2013). Consider, as a way of illustration, the industrial shift that some forms of meat production undertook as a consequence of the booming Peruvian restaurant industry. To fulfill the rising of the market demands for "iconic Andean animals," restaurants created and promoted the conditions for "the genetic management and intensification of animal husbandry in indigenous communities as a 'culturally appropriate' strategy to alleviate poverty" (Garcia 2013: 519). Thus, one may argue that restaurants' stories of "triumph obscure the dark sides of exclusion and marginalization and the gray zones of struggle and compromise" (Garcia 2013: 521).

These controversies, per se, are not a rebuttal of our view and they do not count against the social relevance of the practices that they accompany. On the contrary, they confirm the general point that we are trying to make, that is, that restaurants are, in some contexts, prominent venues for memorial art. In general, modes and strategies of memorialization may vary

well be controversial and constitute public sites for negotiation of public values. The vehement protests over the US confederate monuments, or the case of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982) (Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci 2009), are notable examples.

### **§3.2 Cooking and Dining as Social Protest Art**

In discussing social protest art, Wolterstorff briefly touches upon social justice movements. These are not concerned with wrongings in a general sense, but rather with those “that are the result of public social practices or of the enforcement or non-enforcement of laws” (Wolterstorff 2015, 202). Social protest art, in his perspective, calls for a particular kind of social engagement promoting favorable conditions for change. In particular, artworks of social protest are capable of presenting—though in the medium of artistic transformation—worlds that are unjust.

The initial response to social protest art are empathic feelings towards those who are victims of the *fictional world* that the artwork depicts. Successful instances of social protest art, however, are capable of bringing appreciators' moral and emotional engagement to evoke empathy towards victims of social injustice *in the real world*. Wolterstorff calls “transference” this transition of empathy from the fictional to the real world (2015, 244).

The transition can take a multiplicity of forms. He remarks that fictional stories may very well be “true to reality in important respects” (2015, 215) and that visual artworks may very well use the possibilities of representing the human body to evoke empathy (Wolterstorff 2015, chap. 15). But, more poignant examples have been offered by recent literature on street art, which argued that appropriating space with certain forms and design may very well generate the type of social response that characterizes social protest art (Bacharach 2018; Baldini 2018, 2015).

Cooking and dining have not been considered by scholars as forms of protest art yet. However, they offer some compelling examples. The soft power of food can become a means to foster social justice, civic reconciliation, or ecological wisdom (Forman and Sonenshine 2014). A nice example in this sense is offered by hunger banquets. By now, these are well-established theatrical devices to explain, through a meal, the inequalities to food access around the globe. A prototypical example of hunger banquet is offered by Oxfam. During one of their hunger banquets, participants are randomly assigned one among three specific roles within a dining setting. The majority is fed a very basic meal, typically consisting of a bowl of white rice; some (representing the shrinking middle class) are served a family style supper; very few are served a gourmet multi-course dinner (Oxfam 2011). A

hunger banquet constructs the participatory and collective experience of sharing a meal, loading it with inequalities and leaving most participants baffled. With hunger banquets, few “leave with full stomachs, but all possess a greater understanding of the problems of hunger and poverty and will feel motivated to do something about them” (Oxfam 2011, 3).<sup>4</sup>

Hunger banquets match neatly the account that Wolterstorff gives of art as a form of social protest. Obviously, hunger banquets are fictional experiences; none of the participants have to suffer from hunger in their real life and may be able to afford even high-end and exclusive dining experiences. Yet, the banquet operates a transference (in the words of Wolterstorff), generating an empathic attitude, which is not merely intellectual, but it is embodied. This ritual serves to reenact a condition of deprivation or privilege. Through theatrical devices such as showing the

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<sup>4</sup> Here is how the Oxfam guide describes the structure of a hunger banquet. “Guests draw tickets at random that assign them each to either a high-, middle-, or low-income tier—based on the latest statistics about the number of people living in poverty. Each income level receives a corresponding meal: The 15 percent in the high-income tier are served a sumptuous meal; the 35 percent in the middle-income section eat a simple meal of rice and beans; and the 50 percent in the low-income tier help themselves to small portions of rice and water. Guests can also assume characterizations that describe the situation of a specific person at the income level to which they’ve been assigned (see page 15 for character tickets to print and distribute). Finally, all guests are invited to share their thoughts after the meal and to take action to fight poverty.” See <<https://www.oxfamamerica.org/take-action/events/oxfam-hunger-banquet/>>. Accessed on May 16, 2020.

leftovers of the ‘privileged meals’ at the end of the banquet, all participants can see and feel a simple model of the global economic inequalities at work.

A second example we showcase is the one of *South Philly Barbacoa*, a small eatery run by Cristina Martínez and her husband Benjamin Miller in South Philadelphia. *South Philly Barbacoa* is not simply one of the best places to eat barbacoa in North America. With Cristina Martínez “the personal becomes political [...] Her personal story speaks to the larger immigrant experience whose labor is often exploited and forgotten” (Cabral 2018). The eatery rapidly became one of the most important sites of socio-political pride for Central American immigrants and, more broadly, for undocumented workers in the United States. Martínez’s “existence as a woman in the culinary world and an immigrant is an act of rebellion” (Cabral 2018).

In analogy with the case of hunger banquets, most customers at *South Philly Barbacoa* have not directly experienced the issues portrayed in the meal they participate into and that, in this case, relate to undocumented immigrants. At *South Philly Barbacoa*, however, dining with dignity and simplicity serves to reconsider the rank of social values that permeate American society. The experience is somewhat true to reality insofar as the contextual details within which the elaborate gastronomic values of the meal are framed—from lining up and ordering to consuming and leaving—do

mirror the everyday meals of many undocumented immigrants. When transference obtains, this evokes empathy towards them and raises customers' awareness towards social injustice.

A third and radically different example we wish to consider is the five-years protest of Irish hunger strikers led by Bobby Sands, which culminated in the death of Sands and nine comrades between 1976 and 1981. The strike began as a means to achieve basic civil rights for prisoners. Prior strategies had been ineffective in changing the public opinion and the diplomatic perspectives, both domestically and internationally. The refusal to eat was so radical also in its fatal consequences that the public could not ignore it. Of course, these dramatic events cannot be staged for a general public if not through storytelling, movies, and other forms of fictionalized representation. However, it would be a mistake to think of the social protest of Bobby Sands and his comrades as unrelated to our topic: to dine is always a choice, not only a choice among items to eat, but also among items *not* to eat.<sup>5</sup> We may recall that some other protesters around the world as well as other artists (e.g. the candy spill artwork "*Untitled*". *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* by Felix Gonzàlez-Torres) do recurrently draw inspiration from the deeds of Sands and his comrades. Thus, arguably these reenactments of the Irish hunger

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<sup>5</sup> For the importance of refusal to the meaning of dining, see Fischler (1988). On hunger and philosophy, see Borghini (2017).

strike can be forms of social protest that exploit viewers' relationship through food as a means.

Before moving to consider cooking and dining as forms of art that enhances, we should offer some remarks on the nature of social protest. As the examples we discuss above indicate, protests come in a variety of forms and degrees. What to some people is a revolutionary or radical act, to some others is a banal or commonplace mimicry. Is it enough to part take in a hunger banquet, or to dine at *South Philly Barbacoa*, to enact a social protest? Can you buy your participation in acts of social protest? As a way to answer this sort of challenge, we point out that, oftentimes, ordinary gestures acquire a political significance that transform them into acts of resistance. When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person, she did not plan to become an icon of the civil rights movement inspiring millions of people to come after her. More modestly, many of us may enact social protests also while shopping, through what Michel de Certeau calls "tactical" actions of everyday life that lead to a "sheep-like" form of resistance (de Certeau 1984, 200). For instance, he cites the example of a person shopping for food in a supermarket, seizing the opportunity of resisting consumerist tendencies and behaviors at every new gaze of the shelves. We shall return to matters of publicness and profit in the last section of the paper.

### **§3.3 Cooking and Dining as Art That Enhances**

The last art form from Wolterstorff's account is art that enhances (Wolterstorff 2015, chap. 16). This form of art attaches a further layer of value to the artwork or its experience. Such an addition is achieved by positively transforming a social practice by means of another social practice, which could or could not be another art form. The final result is something that transcends the significance of the two practices taken separately.

In his account of art that enhances, Wolterstorff focuses on work songs. These songs, he suggests, do not merely accompany people during their work day, just like some sort of Muzak could do. On the contrary, "they create an entity of a new genre," that is, "*sung work*" (Wolterstorff 2015, 259–60). Work songs are forms of creative excess of distinct public relevance and value. They show workers' refusal to be reduced to mechanisms within a system of production and constitute "an uplifting statement of human dignity as expressed in labor" (Wolterstorff 2015, 260). Thus, a blues song originated in the fields is an artistic expression meant to enhance the toils of fieldwork and to humanize enslaved workers.

A cooking practice that well exemplifies art that enhances is the homemaking of pasta. If pasta making were simply a matter of efficient

delivery of a staple, we would witness a limited variety of pasta shapes. On the contrary, functionalistic considerations cannot account for the huge varieties of hand-made pasta nor for the specialized skills and the difficulty involved in producing some of its specimens. The practice of expressing oneself through the making of pasta in a creative shape is a means to enhance the experience of both preparing and consuming the pasta.

Consider, for instance, *trofie*, a typical pasta shape originated in Liguria, Italy. Making trofie is connected to specific bodily gestures. These not only enrich what could be mere mechanical actions, but also at the same time create a community of people who share some traditional knowledge, which is transmitted among its members horizontally (i.e. through peers), vertically (i.e. through generations), and obliquely (i.e. across generations of people who are not in a same family group). Making trofie, to put it in a slogan, is a way to add meaning to pasta making. On the consumption side, the specific shape of trofie afford diners the experience of a food that is creative and specific, enhancing the sense of community; the eccentric variations of the pasta shape can also be associated to specific recipes and manners of consumption, such as the size and shape of plates and utensils, thus affecting the entire dining ritual (Alexander 2000; La Cecla 2007; White 1976).

It is worth noting that practitioners of pasta making conceptualize and discuss their activities in terms that distinctly echo the account we have just provided. A fitting illustration is 93 years old Cesaria, one of the “pasta grannies” featured on the well-known archival repository *Pasta Grannies*, who is filmed while making *lorighittas*. “The aim”—the description reads—“is for an elegant earring rather than chunky bracelet style pasta.”<sup>6</sup> The use of this aesthetic language shows the embedded significance of creating something for its specific appearances, thus enriching an activity that could be construed in purely functional ways. Such an effort enhances the pasta making and the dining experience.

#### **§4. Fostering Cooking and Dining as Public Art**

If some instances of cooking and dining can be regarded as public art in at least the three forms we specified, then the question arises of how such art could be fostered, supported, and preserved. We now suggest strategies to deepen and improve the practices of cooking and dining as public art. What we discussed shall not remain as a “*wrapper*” theory, as Shusterman (1992) calls purely classificatory or descriptive theories that entangle reality into a fine piece of philosophical wrap. Our approach is, in an important sense,

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<sup>6</sup> Cesaria’s video can be retrieved at: <[https://www.instagram.com/p/B-pCE63j\\_gG/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B-pCE63j_gG/)>. The *Pasta Grannies* website can be found at: <<https://www.pastagrannies.com/>>.

transformative and has a *critical traction*, as Fraser (2007, 8) puts it. For this reason, in this section we represent possible ways that cooking and dining as public art can be promoted.

In human societies, foods play different roles, which take a shape based also on the place of production and consumption. Although some foods may fit reasonably well in all contexts (e.g. pizza may be sold and consumed probably in any venue), some foods are particularly apt for restaurants (e.g. hot pot), others for a diner (e.g. a burger), others still as take-away (e.g. gelato in a cone) or for home cooking (e.g. polenta with mushrooms that is shared by all table companions).

It may well be that, in a given society, cooking and dining are realized as forms of public art more in one type of place than in another. For example, in Paris, a significant gastronomic value rests in the cooking and dining of cafés and bistros; in Naples, a parallel significance is held by some pizza parlors; in Sidney by some coffee shops; in Shanghai by some restaurants, while in a small village on the Andes by some home cooking. For this reason, fostering cooking and dining as forms of public art cannot mean to preserve the same sorts of social institutions—be they commercial or not—across all contexts.

Following, thus, a contextualist approach in promoting cooking and dining as public art, we now point out three different strategies to achieve this goal: (i) distributing subsidies to restaurants and other cooking agents; (ii) sponsoring cooking and dining in museums; and, (iii) creating public venues where to experience cooking and dining. In fact, the first two strategies are already endorsed and practiced. Yet, such a promotion typically happens with no explicit acknowledgment that those modes of cooking and consuming food are forms of public art. The third strategy represents a novel proposal, which we believe has great potentiality to showcase the aesthetic *and* public relevance that cooking and experiencing food has achieved today. Finally, prominent food movements such as social gastronomy may serve as underlying models to inspire and shape the strategies that we present.<sup>7</sup>

*Subsidies to selected restaurants, street food vendors, and home cooks.*

The first strategy to foster cooking and experiencing food as public art is to subsidize restaurants, street food vendors, or home cooks so that their work may reach communities or individuals that typically cannot enjoy it.

Since their origin in the second half of the eighteenth century, restaurants served the special public function of creating private experiences

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of social gastronomy, see <<https://www.socialgastronomy.org>> and <<https://www.cargill.com/page/gastromotiva>>. Accessed on December 23, 2020.

in public places (cfr. Rawson and Shore, 2019; Spang 2000; Trubek 2000, Chapter 2). Precisely because of their private dimension, restaurants were typically regarded as businesses that, no differently than other food shops, would serve a clientele without concern for issues of public relevance. With time, however, some restaurants began to play a different and additional public function, including, representing specific recipes, culinary traditions, or—as we have seen in the previous section—values. The recent spectacularization of the restaurant experience, popularized ventures whose main function is to embody, represent, or enhance core values and issues within a community. Restaurants such as *Astrid y Gastón* and *Central* in Lima have played precisely such a function,<sup>8</sup> which in turn significantly connects with possibilities of cooking and dining as public art.

A major issue that emerges from the discussion of restaurants with respect to public art is accessibility. As private enterprises, restaurants tend to follow the fortunes of the market. Often, they do not accommodate customers in ways that are compatible with the accessibility that any plausible understanding of public art should include. Despite this, or in seeming contradiction to this, chefs often see their work as aiming to serve

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<sup>8</sup> The list of restaurants that may be cited here is long. It includes, for instance, venues that led the development of Nordic Cuisine (e.g. *Noma* or *Fäviken*), or others in the Basque region (e.g. *Mugaritz* and *Asador Etxebarri*), Catalunya, Spain (e.g. *El Bulli* and *El Celler de Can Roca*), Italy (e.g. *Osteria Francescana*), or Brazil (e.g. *D.O.M.*).

public values and interests. Hence, it seems fitting to consider manners in which the work done within a restaurant can be brought to meet the conditions for public art. Subsidies could represent a means to effectively contrast the exclusionary tendencies that restaurants generally enact, thus at least mitigating issues of accessibility.

Responses to the crisis of the food and beverage retail industry amidst the recent COVID-19 pandemic implicitly confirm that some restaurants do serve a civic and political role.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the specific actions taken by the James Beard Foundation and by the Social Gastronomy Movement illustrate how a system of subsidies could enhance accessibility, promote cooking and dining activities while not following exclusively a logic of profit.<sup>10</sup>

Restaurants are not the only venue that may deserve to be specially funded in recognition of the public value of the cooking and dining experiences they may offer. Also, the work of specialized street food vendors or artisans can deserve support. Consider the value of particularly skilled pizza makers in Naples (e.g. *Da Michele*), or some butchers within their

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<sup>9</sup> The topic has not been documented in scholarly research yet; for a newspaper article addressing it, see: <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-16/coronavirus-restaurant-cafes-reopen-changes/12252530>>. Accessed on May 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> For the fitting example provided by the program started by the James Beard Foundation in support of the restaurant industry in response to the COVID-19 crisis see <<https://www.jamesbeard.org/a-message-about-covid-19-and-events-and-programs>>. Accessed on May 16, 2020. For the initiatives of the Social Gastronomy Movement see <https://www.socialgastronomy.org/covid19-resource-hub>. Accessed on December 24, 2020.

communities (e.g. Dario Cecchini in Panzano in Chianti), or some ice cream parlors within a city context (e.g. *Toscanini's* Ice Cream in Cambridge, Massachusetts). Finally, home cooking may well deserve to be supported, too, as the case study of homemade pasta discussed in the previous section illustrates.

Which sort of initiatives may be used to support commercial and non-commercial sites for cooking and experiencing foods? Even just the recent ascent of social gastronomy initiatives offers a wide array of directions that can be pursued. Here are just a few.

*First.* Fund a certain number of seats in restaurants that would allow targeted groups (e.g. young adults<sup>11</sup> and underprivileged individuals) to experience high-end dining at affordable prices. The few selected venues to be included in such initiatives would be those whose cooking and dining practices foster discourses and values that count as forms of public art.

*Second.* Establish programs whose goal is to create recipes for dishes that can be easily distributed and enjoyed by wide sections of the population. A case in point was offered in 2012 by BBC, who sponsored the collaboration

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<sup>11</sup> In many instances, individual initiatives have come close to this. For instance, in 2014, a *New York Times* initiative treated second graders from P.S. 295 in Brooklyn to a sophisticated culinary experience at French restaurant Daniel in Manhattan <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/magazine/fine-dining-for-second-graders.html>>. The initiative missed. Coming at it from the opposite direction, chef Dan Giusti and colleagues at Brigaid aim at bringing the restaurant experience to schools <<https://www.chefsbrigaid.com/>>.

between Basque pastry chef Jordi Roca and Gastón Acurio, to produce small desserts made of heritage potato varieties from the Andes; an additional example is the *Food for Soul* initiative promoted by Massimo Bottura, in collaboration with several other notable chefs, which is being disseminated in several countries.

*Third.* Sponsor selected home cooks to foster traditional recipes in targeted communities. The recent and growing inclusion of recipes and culinary traditions into the United Nation list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity (e.g. kimchi, Singapore street food, Neapolitan pizza, Mexican culinary culture) suggests that such programs may, or should be, adopted in the near future. So-called social gastronomy offers another neat and important example, by promoting forms of dining that foster social inclusion and underrepresented minorities (Mendelson Forman 2016 and Rockower 2014).

How to determine the public value of a commercial location or a home cooking site can of course be controversial. The three forms of public art discussed in the previous section (memorial art, art as social protest, and art that enhances) along with the three general conditions for public art (accessibility, theme, and elicited response) may suggest some heuristic criteria and obviously exclude the criterion merely based on number of seats

or customers. The extent within which a given case study fits these forms and conditions can be, naturally, divisive even to expert eyes. But, this in itself is not a good reason to rule out special funds for selected commercial enterprises and home cooking sites. Equally debatable may be which projects in other fields of art pass the threshold to qualify as public artworks deserving special funding—and yet, it is widely accepted that some artwork or other may deserve such funds. These complications are evident in any process of cultural selection, as for instance in the case of cultural heritage sites by UNESCO.<sup>12</sup>

*Cooking into art museums and art events.* The second avenue to foster cooking and experiencing food as public art is to bring cooking into art museums and art events. A notable example was set by *Documenta* in 2007, when the then director Roger Buergel invited Ferran Adrià to showcase his work during the twelfth edition of the art exhibit. Since then, several museums and art events partnered with prominent chefs to showcase their work (Levent and Mihalache 2016), such as the program on Gastrodiplomacy organized in 2018 by the New York Museum of Modern Art.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, our position here is broadly inspired by the UNESCO Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention; see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://momarnd.moma.org/salons/salon-27-gastrodiplomacy/>. It is far more common to see instances of specific food museums or gastronomic products showcased in museums and dedicated venues, such as *La Cité du Vin* in Bordeaux.

Pursuing this avenue raises at least two major issues, however. First of all, museums hours and spaces do not always line up with the needs of high-end restaurants; similar considerations typically apply to art events, with possibly less restrictions though. Hence, (re)creating the conditions for preparation and consumption requires substantial investments and organizational rethinking. Secondly, the inclusion of some chefs' cooking performances into a museum or an art event *per se* does not demonstrate the *public* value of what would be showcased, and would require to be assessed through a careful case-by-case examination.

*Create public spaces for cooking.* The third avenue that we envisage is a simple and powerful idea, that has hitherto, quite surprisingly, not been implemented. In analogy with museums for visual arts, music halls, theatres, and cinemas, we suggest the opportunity of creating public venues where to showcase forms of cooking that deserve to be regarded as forms of public art. Of course, not any sort of food would be suitable for such a venue; but it could work for many foods. Imagine a venue, perhaps publicly funded, selling season tickets to host cooking events that would promote reflection over specific ideas and values, such as ecological ties, national identity, animal ethics, hunger, bodily pleasure, appearance and reality, and so on. Such a

space could showcase the aesthetic values of cooking as well as those of experiencing selected foods.

A public space devoted to food events would free the experience of thoughtful dining from the institution of the restaurant that so far dominates how high-end gastronomy has been enjoyed in the past 250 years. It would also offer an important alternative to private home-cooking. In other words, it would finally bring cooking and dining experiences into a public terrain as it happened to other aesthetically relevant experiences (music, theatre, dance, figurative arts, etc.) through a dedicated and specialized venue. Such a venue would solve issues of accessibility that concern restaurants, because tickets would not be directly managed by individual restaurants. It would also allow for a balanced selection of the themes and, finally, it would encourage diners to approach cooking and dining with the aesthetic gaze proper of the highest forms of artistic experiences.

## **§5. Conclusions**

In recent years, food has acquired an unprecedented political, social, and ethical power within society at large, possibly replacing the role that cinema had in the past century. Though philosophers and theorists have started to discuss cooking and dining as potential art forms, no one has looked at these everyday human activities as possible embodiments of public art yet. The

goal of this paper has been to showcase the public relevance of some forms of cooking and dining. We have argued that cooking and dining *may* be considered a form of public art in three different ways. We have also suggested new developments of cooking enterprises, which can be endorsed to promote food as an aspect of public culture. Thus, we conclude, food can do much more than fulfil the biological needs of our bodies or the hedonist desires of the glutton: it can replenishing that “esthetic hunger” that significantly shapes our public lives (Dewey 1980, 12).

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