

## IMAGINATION AND EVOLUTION OF TASTE

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Taste is a complex biological, cultural and even psychological phenomenon. We can trace both significant differences and significant similarities in taste quite easily, if we observe human communities in different regions, countries and continents. For example, it is no surprise that most of us share a passion for sweet taste and might dislike bitter or sour. At different ages, people appreciate a variety of foods and drinks and preferences usually change due to physical and social exposure to a given diet. One thing that remains clear is that our taste constantly evolves, notwithstanding whether we discuss taste as a personal system of preferences or if we analyze it as a social convention of favoured sensory experiences.

The evolution of taste is a multidirectional process and its roots can be traced back to biology, geography, cultural and social studies, religion, etc. However, in the current paper we will focus on a less examined perspective which seems to offer a fruitful research direction. How does thinking and creativity influence the evolution of taste? How important is our imagination in the taste formation process? Are we able to create an unprecedented dish or we are obliged to follow certain rules and predispositions in our creative culinary experiments? In order to answer these questions, we will start by looking at imagination itself. We will trace this idea back to Aris-

totle and Kant to define the essence of this controversial philosophical concept and to specify its function in reasoning. Then we will analyze certain aspects of creativity in taste, in order to observe the evolution of certain culinary tendencies. Last but not least we will focus on the influence of social media and the digital communication. Does digital living today improve the culinary imagination or not? Is the culinary evolution in the XXI century triggered by the social media and ease of access to information online?

### **Knowledge and creativity**

In popular culture and everyday life, we find ourselves immersed in myths and prejudices about imagination and reasoning. One of the most widespread is the notion of opposition between rational thinking and the creative power of mind. A common mistake is to draw a dividing line between knowledge and imagination. In order to avoid doing so requires profound philosophical study of the matter.

Ever since the early ages of human kind, imagination has been recognized by philosophers as a powerful but also blurring and confusing mental faculty. For centuries it has been described as an artistic inspiration, a bridge between the sensual experience and thinking and has been usually considered an artistic characteristic. Plato discusses imagination in terms of the divine and supreme inspiration given to the poets by the Muses but only for a limited time. In the dialogue *Ion*, Plato explains the faculty of imagination as being something external to human nature, making its manifestations magnificent, but also dangerous for society. The Ancient Greeks were usually skeptical about Gods' influence in their lives and sublime moments of poetical revelations were no exception. In a moment of inspiration, the poet stands outside himself as a toy in the hands of the Muses, spreading fascinating words and describing absorbing images which do not issue from him but from a divine source, without any clarity of purpose of the performance. Plato is so skeptical about poets, and towards people involved in imaginative occupations, that he suggests they be excluded from the government of the ideal state. For him, imaginative pursuits lead both the poet and his audience away from the truth and real knowledge.

The poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him [...] but like yourself when speaking about Homer, they do not speak of them by any rules of art: they are simply inspired to utter that to which the Muse impels them, and that only<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Ion*, 534C.

In his book *Thinking through the Imagination* John J. Kaag states: “The suggestion that the imaginative poet is “out of her mind” led Plato to assert that the imagination necessarily stood against reason”<sup>2</sup>. This is probably one of the first moments in the history of philosophy and epistemology when imagination became considered oppositional to reason. It had been accepted by Plato as the “necessary evil” for human nature — as a power issuing from a divine source which could not be avoided, while philosophers are under the obligation to society to forewarn it about the possible effects.

In Plato, we find two important statements about imagination. Firstly, it is not an intrinsic quality of human nature but a *result of divine inspiration*. Secondly, *it could be dangerous* because it is in *opposition to logical reasoning*. Aristotle, Plato’s student for more than a decade, opposed many of his ideas during his path to becoming an independent thinker. Such an intellectual disagreement is Aristotle’s notion of imagination. In his philosophy, the phenomenon is stripped of its divine garments and simply described as a kind of *mediation* in thinking. Explaining imagination in the terms of the natural, internal mental function, necessary for the understanding of outer phenomenon, Aristotle eliminates fear and rejection related to the hypothesis of its divine power. To Aristotle, imagination is just “an indispensable part of human thought, noting its ability to mediate between abstract conception and sensuous perception [and] grant the possibility of formal judgment”<sup>3</sup>.

The function of imagination in the process of the enhancement of knowledge remained a matter of discussion through the following centuries. The debates oscillated from belittlement and neglect to the moderate acknowledgement of imagination as a faculty of mind and the knowing Self. It took centuries, and the rise and fall of important philosophical systems, for imagination to be recognized in Kant’s philosophy as constructive mediation in thinking, providing for free play of the mind but still following the law of logic.

### The Schematic Imagination

Imagination is a primary matter of interest for Kant’s readers and researchers. His critical project (1770–1804) abounds with intellectual challenges and far more significant issues. Imagination has been considered neither important, nor even an interesting topic in both philosophies, in general, and in Kant’s writings in particular. However, a few commenta-

<sup>2</sup> Kaag, 2014, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

tors such as Henry Allison, Paul Guyer, Mark Johnson, Eckart Förster, etc. show certain interest in that problem. They unanimously point to the third critique as Kant's most mature treatment of imagination. Martin Heidegger much earlier in 1927, in a sequence of lectures offered his own interpretation of the first critique, observing the place of imagination in Kant's system (later published in *The Phenomenological Interpretation of the Critique of Pure Reason*, 1997). In one lecture, he discusses Kant's ambiguous notion that knowledge springs from two fundamental but unknown roots in mind. Heidegger refers to imagination as a common root of understanding and sensibility. Kaag also specifies Kant's deep hesitation about the place and function of imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The German philosopher struggles to resolve the matter of how sensory information and empirical perception come within the scope of the categories in terms of being "translated" in the mind into a visual concept. In this "translation" Kant apprehends the necessity of a *special kind of mediation* and how imagination seems to provide it. However, at this point, Kant was still dependent on the philosophical prejudice about imagination, inherited from his rationalistic predecessors. We find an explicit explanation about the role of imagination in Kant's first Critique in Kaag's book:

It seems more likely that Kant exposes the importance of the imagination yet remains hesitant to thematize the point [...] This hesitation appears in Kant's tendency to subordinate the imagination to the understanding in the first Critique. While the imagination is crucial to synthetic understanding, it still serves the understanding in its synthesizing role. It serves understanding as a vassal who brings the wild mob of appearances under control. It is in this limited capacity that the imagination and its schematizing function operate in strictly productive and reproductive roles in the first Critique<sup>4</sup>.

Kant's interest in the imagination is rooted in his struggle to clarify the formation of judgments. The mind's inability to know the object directly leads the philosopher to decipher the correct kind of mediation which operate as a bridge between external reality and understanding. The imagination has been seen as a necessary relation between intuition and concept. By developing his own philosophical system, Kant's notion of the cognitive processes and the role of imagination therein would gradually crystallize. In his third Critique, he relates imagination to two main points of his system — synthetic judgment and schematism. Both explain *imagination only as an operational agent in understanding but not as a creative one*. It is just

<sup>4</sup> Kaag, 2014, 34.

a mediation which provides *communicability* of our ideas. M. Rastovic also summarizes the mediating function of imagination within Kant's synthetic judgment, in the following way: "every synthesis is threefold: first, representations must be given in our experience; second, synthesis combines manifoldness of representations in one cognition by means of imagination, and third, understanding brings synthesis to the pure concept and gives this synthesis unity"<sup>5</sup>.

However, how are imagination and schemata related within Kant's system? The first thing we have to observe here is the total inseparability of these two concepts. Being a strict logician, Kant is not tempted by the idea that spontaneous and wild imagination could be an active agent in cognition. The concept of schemata appears in his system to establish logical boundaries which will keep the imagination subordinated to reason and logic. However, this is more than a simple logical "restriction". The schemata also introduce the continuity of intuitions and provide their connection with the categories. Once schematized, intuitions "give rise to such principles as 'Every event must have its cause' and 'All substances have permanence.' Since these principles, like the categories on which they are based, apply to any experiences we may have of the world, they are universal laws of nature (of nature as appearance)"<sup>6</sup>. According to Kant, this universal law of reasoning also serves to mediate between the pure abstraction of time and all other types of intuition in which time has to be presented.

On one hand, the schemata serve as a logical mediation between categories and intuitions, while, on the other, its imagination related function is sometimes peculiar and confusing: "In the first *Critique*, Kant introduces the schema by arguing that it is necessary to mediate between the pure concepts of the understanding and imagination"<sup>7</sup>. Surprisingly we find that imagination is introduced as mediation itself, but it needs another mediation to fulfill its functions in the cognitive process. The conclusion quoted above is by Werner Pluhar in his *Introduction* (in the English translation) to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and sounds illogical and incomprehensible. On the other hand, researchers such as Kaag and Rastovic recommend apprehending the schemata as a "third thing" between the category and the appearance"<sup>8</sup>; a natural rule; a procedure of cognitive ordering.

<sup>5</sup> Rastovic, 2013, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, 1987, xxxvi.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, 1987, lxxxvi.

<sup>8</sup> Rastovic, 2013, 9.

The Kantian view of imaginative mediation assumes a position which significantly defers from the traditional perception. Imagination is usually considered “free play” of the mind which brings a spontaneous appearance of new ideas and images. The most surprising Kantian statement is that *imagination is lawful*. Serving the purposes of understanding and knowledge, imagination has to obey the rules of reasoning. It is free for a very limited time, only at the beginning of the imaginative process but it is hurriedly subordinated both to what is present in mind at the current moment and to the logical laws.

[...] since the imagination’s freedom consists precisely in its schematizing without a concept [...] imagination in its freedom and the understanding with its lawfulness, as they reciprocally quicken each other; i.e., it must rest on a feeling that allows us to judge the object by the purposiveness that the presentation (by which an object is given) has insofar as it furthers the cognitive powers in their free play. Hence taste, as a subjective power of judgment, contains a principle of subsumption; however, this subsumption is not one of intuitions under concepts, but, rather, one of the power of intuitions or exhibitions (the imagination) under the power of concepts (the understanding), insofar as the imagination in its freedom harmonizes with the understanding in its lawfulness<sup>9</sup>.

Worthy of attention is the statement about harmony fulfilled among the freedom of imagination and the lawfulness of understanding. This is one of the rare occasions in philosophy and cognitive sciences where we can observe these two entities represented and analyzed not as contrary but as complementary. If the function of one of those entities has been changed or eliminated, the other will also lose its capacity to operate in the mind. In order to emphasize this pivotal correlation in the third Critique, Kant even writes about the “free lawfulness of imagination”<sup>10</sup>. Although a potential contradiction Kant says that when we think through imaginative mediation, at least we have to define the form of the object which we try to imagine, and to the extent to which imagination can no longer operate through free play. Instead, it has to harmonize the image with the understanding’s lawfulness in general. Kant concludes that imagination is *free in itself but in its functions, it has to be subordinated to the lawfulness of*

<sup>9</sup> Kant, 1987, 151.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, 1987, 91.

*understanding*, and this is the only possible way of operating of this faculty of mind <sup>11</sup>.

What brings imagination and understanding into such a tight and indestructible relationship is the law of association. Kant defines it as “empirical use of the imagination”<sup>12</sup>, a bound which relates the ideas already established in mind. The concept we have for the object never exists independently. In terms of being intelligible and communicable, it has to be in distinct relations with other concepts. The coherence of ideas in the mind is a sign of them being operative and productive on a cognitive level. It also provides a secure path for reasoning through which our mind constructs our subjective vision of objective reality. Without the law of associations, the mind would be lost among the huge number of singular concepts and unable to create a homogeneous picture of the world of phenomenon.

### **Imagination and culinary evolution**

After we have clarified the solid theoretical framework of imagination, it is now time to apply its principles to the specific question. How has culinary taste evolved? Following the Kantian notion of imagination and reasoning, it seems less credible to believe that culinary evolution was the result of a spontaneous glimmer. However, many unusual and surprising culinary experiments can still be found nowadays. In the following part of the text, we intend to analyze the boundaries of imagination in cooking tendencies and how that mediation influences the evolution of taste.

Today we can find an abundance of surprising foods and dishes on the market which represent a significant challenge to our traditional notion of taste. Starting with the non-traditional fast-food offers such as salted caramel, sweet pizza with marshmallows and spaghetti taco, reaching the high gourmet cuisine dishes with multiple awards such as steelhead trout roe (caviar) with a sauce of cured grapefruit and spices. Imagination in taste really seems to have run wild today. However, these examples prove nothing by themselves. The question we have to answer here is: do these examples really cross the boundaries of traditional taste or we can find a specific culinary logic behind the imagination of their creators?

First of all, let us start the discussion about taste creativity with a few visualizations. In Fig. 1 we see salted caramel and sweet pizza with marshmallows. Following the theoretical frame built in the previous sections of this paper, we have already accepted the notion that imagination has a cohesive

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, 1987, 182.



function in mind. It links ideas which are already well known and communicable in the society. In these two examples we find a precise culinary illustration of these functions.



Fig. 1: Salted caramel and sweet pizza with marshmallows.

Why could we not describe salted caramel or sweet pizza with marshmallows as something brand new? Despite first falling into the category of the unconventional, we could trace the culinary logic and tradition behind their invention. Before we had sweet pizza, we had the traditional pie. Pie dough is simple enough and even with some differences, it fits into the same product category as pizza dough. In the history of taste, we can find plenty of desserts prepared with a base of dough and finished with fruit, jam, and raisins, etc. On the other hand, marshmallows are usually consumed separately but sometimes they are put on a stick and baked. In the picture above, we see that the sweet pizza combines one of the traditional bases for desserts with one of the usual ways to eat marshmallows. The entire creativity of the recipe is contained within the link between the traditional (salty) pizza and its possible transformations into a sweet dish with bonbons on top. We can certainly see the role of imagination here and it functions precisely as Kant described. Really wild imagination would be a sweet pizza with marshmallows and shrimps. However, even the thought of such a dish leaves us disgusted and nauseous. Such a recipe would not be appreciated as a culinary evolution, since it is not set in any traditional combination of products. Shrimps with chocolate or shrimps with bonbons may exist but in our social consciousness they are still not well connected. That brings us to the problem: our imagination could link these foods but they will not form a communicable idea on a social level. If we aim to go further with the example, we could substitute the shrimps for grasshoppers or cockroaches. Even the boldest culinary lovers would have a problem with a pizza recipe which includes dough, insects and bonbons. Evolution



of taste requires the culinary traditions to be followed on a certain level and allows us to make only small and predictable changes.

Then how we could explain the existence of such complicated and unusual dishes like the prize-winning gourmet experiment by Chef Grant Achatz — Steelhead trout roe with a sauce of cured grapefruit and spices?



**Fig. 2:** Steelhead trout roe with a sauce of cured grapefruit and spices, awarded dish by Chef Grant Achatz.

The dish on Fig. 2 represents the highest culinary imagination in the field of gourmet cuisine for 2018. It combines rare and exclusive ingredients (steelhead trout roe) with unusual presentation (soup like grapefruit sauce) and exotic flavors (a secret mixture of spices). If it was easy to trace back the historical roots of the creation of sweet pizza, how we could explain the chef's wild imagination in this example? First of all, we have to determine whether we could find any kind of traditional relations in this recipe — a solid ground for imagination to thrive. We definitely find such ground in the simple combination of sea food and citrus flavor. This is one of the essential culinary combinations and we find it in almost any sea food or fish recipe. Such common and well-known ground in gourmet cooking is needed to make the final dish communicable not just to the critiques, but also to a wider audience of food enthusiasts. If the chef had chosen to make a wiped cream sauce instead of the grapefruit sauce, the dish would become far too strange and probably unacceptable even to the gourmet lovers.

A surprising and discussable element in the dish above is not only the combination of tastes but the presentation itself. It is not common to observe a gourmet (or any other) sea food dish sunk into the sauce. The usual concept of sauce is minimalistic. It has been set into our thinking that the sauce is just a small supplement of the dish which could be served sep-

arately in its own container so as not to influence the taste of the main dish ingredients. However, here in the steelhead trout roe recipe the cured grapefruit and spices sauce surrounds the main ingredient. This is a challenge to the traditional apprehension of caviar consumption which is also restricted to minimalistic combinations with other foods. The final appearance of this gourmet dish could be confusing and slightly unpleasant to an ordinary person. Then why did chef opt for it during a prestigious gourmet competition?

The answer to that question can be found in the nature of gourmet cooking which is all about surprises, new flavours, tastes and presentations of food. The award here has been presented for non-traditional thinking and the challenge to ordinary culinary visions. That is why we assume imagination as vital for gourmet cooking — because it relates the products and flavours we already know in new experimental dishes. However, how wild can the imagination go? If a gourmet dish has three main indicators — taste, flavour, presentation, how many of them could be non-traditional and strange to keep the final dish communicable to the audience? If all three of them challenge our thinking, it would be too much and the imaginative attempt would be ruined. At least one of them should stick to what we find usual and acceptable, in order to make the final result interesting to the audience. In the example above we see that the presentation and flavour are innovative and a little bit odd but in taste we can trace a combination which is really well known and easy to recognize.

In the examples above we find confirmation that imagination should obey certain logical predispositions, if it strives to achieve a communicable goal. It could not leave entirely the habits of thinking if it aims to transmit the new ideas to other. The rules of culinary imagination do not differ from these in other areas of its action. Taste defiantly evolves through the imaginative mediations and it has been changing in time but it usually needs to stay with one leg into tradition. That is the reason why culinary evolution progresses slowly and only in small steps. Gourmet cuisine is trying to push this process by offering us new and surprising taste challenges every year, although only usually reaching a limited and specific audience of food enthusiasts. Of course, what has been achieved in gourmet cuisine is not lost upon the wide audience. We also adopt some ideas but it takes time. For example, during the last few years, gourmet burgers and gourmet pizzas have entered mass consumption. Maybe one day caviar with grapefruit sauce will become something ordinary, but we are not there yet in the terms of everyday taste. Evolution in taste needs its time but it is a constant

process and if we are keen on observing its tendencies, we should keep an eye on the gourmet chefs and their imaginative creations.

### **Digitalization of taste**

It may sound as an oxymoron but today we should ask the question: has taste evolution gone digital as we have? In the last five years we have observed a rapid growth in digital content devoted to food and culinary experiments. Today we have infinite number of food blogs, vlogs, Facebook pages and groups. The exponential increase of the trend has been so fast that it has become difficult to generalize specific numbers and statistical data. The liberalization of online information and mass media trends focusing on gourmet cuisine have opened up a new field of self-expression for many people around the world. Cooking has become not just a relaxation technique or a self-improvement strategy but through social media, it has also become a status engine to generate prestige and fame for those doing it well. Today we have food influencers who compete with chefs and celebrities in the terms of fame and audience recognition. Some of them even choose their own culinary profile — desserts specialists, bakers, vegetarian cuisine experts, etc.

The question we have to trace here is how has the digital era influenced the culinary imagination? The liberation of information online has obviously created this explosion of culinary experts in the digital world. Today we have some precedents like the thirteen-year-old Californian food blogger Chase Bailey. He is an autistic who wrote his first cookbook in 2016 after gaining more than 200,000 views for his YouTube channel, Chase 'N Yur Face. It is amazing that in the digital era everyone is able to find his audience and express culinary passion but are these people really original in their blogs and vlogs? Due to the formal limitations of this paper, we will not be capable to trace many different food experiments by bloggers and vloggers. However, we will focus on the signature breakfast of Chase Bailey. As we all know, the signature dish of any chef is the highest point of his talent and expertise. So, let us look at Bailey's breakfast<sup>13</sup>. What we see in the video is a more complex recipe of the classical French toast. The upgrades made by Bailey are the addition of cinnamon and nutmeg to the eggs and then the addition of brie cheese between the two fried slices of bread. The result looks and sounds appealing and tasty, but if we set aside this first impression and examine his signature dish, we do not find a high spark of cre-

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<sup>13</sup> Chase Bailey's signature breakfast: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktmZFeX-i5Sg&ab\\_channel=TheMeredithVieiraShow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktmZFeX-i5Sg&ab_channel=TheMeredithVieiraShow) (accessed 14 May 2021).

ativity or burst of imagination. Bailey combines in a very traditional way the sweet and salty tastes and also improves them with a pinch of spices. His breakfast is far removed from the creativity observed in the Chef Grant Achatz's dish presented in the previous part of the paper. More or less, this is the scenario we find in most of the culinary blogs and vlogs. The cooking influencers present us with classical recipes with certain small changes or just mixed with other well-known dishes and cooking techniques. It is a rare occasion to find a unique signature dish in a blog or vlog. What we usually find are interpretations of recipes we already know and like.

What makes this qualitative difference in the cooking imagination of bloggers and professional chefs? If we go back to the theoretical background provided at the beginning of this paper, we will easily find the answer. What causes taste evolution is the personal experience with food and different culinary cultures. Bloggers and vloggers are amateur chefs who take their expertise from cooking books and TV shows, from online content in social media and from other amateur chefs. Most of them have never really experienced exotic or foreign cuisines. For example, Bailey has never been to France to experience French culinary culture and taste first hand. Professional chefs spend 3 to 6 months per year travelling around the globe, tasting and living the culinary cultures of different countries and regions. We can conclude that the extended digital world has contributed to the quantity increase of the global culinary culture. However, what makes the real difference and presuppose the evolution of taste is the personal experience and knowledge gained in the real world.

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