

Defining 'Cuisine': Communication, Culinary Grammar, and the Typology of Cuisine

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Grandma... Chopped!

Food related television programming has become extremely popular. In the United States and elsewhere, there has been a gradual shift away from the traditional cooking show, where someone who presumably is an expert in some style of cookery teaches the audience how to make dishes in that style, to formats that are competitive in nature. The first of these to achieve great popularity in the US was an import from Japan, 'Iron Chef', which aired on the Food Network starting in 1999. The success of that show moved the network's management to create its own Americanized version, 'Iron Chef America', using essentially the same format but featuring as contestants celebrity chefs primarily from other programmes on the network. Two celebrity chefs are presented with a mystery ingredient which they must use to create a number of new dishes in a limited amount of time with the aid of a well-stocked pantry and elaborate kitchen facilities; their creations are then presented as a multi-course meal to a set of judges (including usually a well-known food critic) which then ultimately declares a winner.

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The proliferation of competitive cooking shows in the US has been remarkable, fuelled by the general surge in interest in things culinary and the recent growth of the reality-television format. Thus, in addition to programmes featuring competitions between celebrity chefs, we find a vast array of programmes in which unknown contestants face off against one another in hopes of claiming a cash prize and in some cases of becoming themselves television cooking-celebrities. Typical of the genre is another Food Network production called 'Chopped', in which four aspiring chefs compete for a cash prize; their task is to compose first an appetizer, then a main course, and finally a dessert, using as principal ingredients the items presented to them in a basket, which usually contains at least one item that is not typically used in combination with the other ingredients or is generally regarded as inappropriate for the course in question. After each course, a panel of judges critiques the creations and then 'chops' or eliminates one contestant, leaving a winner after the dessert course.

From a culinary standpoint, many such competitive cooking shows share a number of encoded values of first-world culinary culture. Most importantly, the competitive food show is strongly commercial in nature: not only does the genre come to expression on for-profit networks (as opposed in the US to public television, which still offers old-style instructional cooking shows) and so are sponsored vehicles for advertisements hawking chain restaurants, prepared foodstuffs and mass-marketed

individual ingredients (olive oil, cheeses, avocados, etc.), but in addition the hosts and celebrity contestants are chefs, cookbook authors and restaurateurs and themselves often enough also entrepreneurs whose names are borne by lines of prepared foods, kitchenware, etc. Unknown contestants in the reality-show variant of the genre are, moreover, typically small-time chefs or restaurateurs or else persons who aspire to become food professionals.

Within this strongly commercial context – and certainly related to it – is the general aesthetic orientation of competitive food-show cookery. Striking, though certainly not surprising in the context of a visual medium, is the attention that is paid to the appearance of finished dishes, with contestants going to great lengths to apply principles of modern culinary architectonics in stacking items and festooning them with patterns of differently coloured sauces applied with squeeze bottles in the final moments of their allotted cooking time.

Though competing chefs may often draw on some particular culinary tradition, the entire endeavour is in a real sense anti-traditional: the dishes offered in competition are to be expressions of the individual chef's creativity, of his or her personal culinary genius. Where, as in the case of 'Chopped', contestants must create dishes from ingredients imposed upon them, this creative element is built into the game through, for example, the required inclusion of chillies and olive oil in dessert or waffles in a main savoury course. But even when the ingredients are less at odds with general (American) culinary norms, it is clear from the comments of judges that the more dishes resemble well-known preparations the more they are disfavoured: the overriding aesthetic is one of novelty. Obvious, perhaps too obvious to be noted, is that the competitive food show is about food that exists outside of any cultural context but its own, producing food that is to be judged purely on its aesthetic qualities within a style of cookery that by and large eschews or is ignorant of traditional ethnic cookery of any background and revels in its own norms of presentation, its focus on novelty of combinations and its engagement with current culinary fads regarding ingredients and cooking methods. Of course, identifiable elements of traditional cuisines constantly appear here, but they do so as dislocated and appropriated tropes that serve first and foremost to highlight the individual chef's ability to co-opt, subvert or transcend the conventional.

Let us for a moment envision a different sort of a culinary competition, perhaps more of an experiment than a competition, where the contestants or subjects are grandmothers from some particular town or small region with a strong culinary tradition, very experienced cooks who are well versed in their local tradition but with little or no real knowledge of other cuisines. The grandmothers are presented with a basket full of ingredients, most of which are to varying degrees unfamiliar to them, and they are instructed to create a festive meal for their family or close friends that in their estimation would please the diners. To aid the cooks, they would be allowed to sample the unfamiliar ingredients (cooked in a neutral fashion where appropriate) and would be provided with a pantry of basic items, such as cooking fats, herbs, spices, aromatic

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vegetables, starchy ingredients (e.g. rice, pasta, potatoes, bread, corn meal), etc.

How would our traditional cooks go about their task? I think all would agree that they would most likely try to match the unfamiliar ingredients with analogues that are well-known to them from their traditional cuisine, and then to plug those new ingredients into recipes that they have at their command. In addition, they would likely seek to build a meal with an overall composition corresponding to the norms of their traditional cuisine. In both regards, they would be pushed in the same direction not only by their own competence as cooks but also by their sense of the expectations of their audience of family members and friends. But, depending on the traditional cuisine involved and the ingredients presented, one can imagine difficulties arising.

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that our grandmothers all hail from some town in southern Italy and that the basket includes the following items: black beans, blueberries, crayfish, collard greens, manchego cheese, mangoes, pork loin. It seems to me most likely that the blueberries and mangoes would either be used to create some sort of dessert or perhaps simply used as a fruit course to finish the meal and that the other ingredients would have to be fit into the usual southern Italian meal structure of first (*primo*) and second (*secondo*) courses, possibly with a preceding starter (*antipasto*). The pork loin would surely be regarded as the best candidate to be the basis of the second course or even to be the basis for both the first and second courses, by using it to make a *ragù* of pork, onion, and tomatoes or with less tomato and a full array of minced aromatic vegetables; the sauce from such preparations could be used to dress a first course of pasta and the meat then served with one or more side dishes and bread as the second course; an important consideration would be the availability in the pantry of an appropriate shape of dried pasta (e.g. *paccheri* or other large tubular form), or the availability of semolina flour to make an appropriate fresh form of pasta, e.g. *cavatelli* or *fusilli*. Another likely treatment of the pork for the second course would be to roast it simply with herbs and garlic, but with that choice the question of the first course would be unaddressed. The presence of the black beans in our hypothetical basket might suggest to our cooks a *primo* of *pasta e fagioli*, a universally consumed and beloved dish in southern Italy, but would the required substitution of black beans for the usual white cannellini beans render the dish visually too odd and objectionable? A greater problem with using the beans with pasta here would be that the meal is supposed to be festive and, as much as *pasta e fagioli* is beloved, it is generally speaking most decidedly not a festive dish in southern Italy. Instead, the beans could be paired with the collards and together form a reasonable side dish to the second course's pork, a *contorno* modelled after traditional dishes of beans with escarole or broccoli di rapa. As for the crayfish, little known or unknown in southern Italian cookery, they resemble other crustaceans that are popular there and could easily be adapted to traditional recipes and served either as an antipasto item or as the basis of a condiment for pasta; in either case, one could prepare them *in bianco* or with a tomato sauce, a choice one might make after deciding whether tomato sauce will be used elsewhere in the meal and thus avoiding repetition.

If the crayfish are made with pasta, a choice would have to be made regarding the form thereof; spaghetti or linguine are typical pairings with seafood, but for some the festive nature of the meal might incline one to use a less everyday form, such as tagliatelle or fettuccine. Finally, with regard to the manchego, which resembles Italian pecorino, our cooks might well choose to serve it before or after the two central courses of the meal, but if it is a more aged cheese, they might offer it to be grated on a pasta course, especially if the pasta is served with a sauce made from the pork, but they would surely not do so if they opt to make a pasta dish with the crayfish.

Now, it must be noted that within traditional southern Italian cookery, specific holidays demand meals that include particular dishes, with the links between holidays and dishes sometimes being widely observed (at the regional level) or more locally held or in some cases being a matter of family choices from an array of dishes regarded more broadly as appropriate. More generally, most families have templates for weekly meals, some even rather rigid schedules, and in addition many people faithfully follow recipes they've learned. Nonetheless, most cooks can and do improvise to varying degrees but do so within certain well-known parameters explicit or tacit. Our hypothetical situation is intended to emphasize the fact that beyond the level of set menus and recipes, traditional cooks – and their diners – are operating with a fairly elaborate set of 'unseen' rules and expectations, a set of communally shared ideas about what and how one properly eats in various situations.

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Were we to repeat this experiment with the same basket of ingredients but with sets of grandmothers from various other places – south-western France, south-central Louisiana, northern Haiti, wherever traditional cookery survives well – we would surely see meals produced that reflected each group's background; in each case our cooks would necessarily make adaptive decisions shaped by their knowledge of their own community's rules and expectations.

Defining 'Cuisine'

Given that food studies, at least as a quasi-independent academic discipline, is relatively new, it is perhaps not surprising that there is no broad consensus regarding the definition of the term 'cuisine'. It is, however, also striking that the question of what we mean by 'cuisine' has not been more of a focal point for discussion in the field. Of course, one cannot expect food writers, academic or popular, to devote a part of each publication to definitions of fundamental terms, but in the absence of consensus on what is arguably the key technical term of the field, the colloquial and dictionary definitions of 'cuisine' can and do remain very much at play in specialized food discourse, whenever we as food scholars and writers fail to address the matter directly.

English-language dictionaries, reflecting common mainstream usage, all give as the primary meaning of 'cuisine' the phrase 'a style or manner of cooking' or some slight variation thereof. The word normally occurs with a modifier that falls into one of the following categories:

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- 1) a geographical (especially national or regional) or ethnic designation, e.g.: German cuisine, Brazilian cuisine; Provençal cuisine, Szechuan cuisine; northern Italian cuisine, Mediterranean cuisine; Jewish cuisine, Italian-American cuisine.
- 2) a designation referring to an international and/or professional style of cooking, e.g.: haute cuisine, nouvelle cuisine, New Nordic cuisine, fusion cuisine.
- 3) a reference to the cooking of an individual chef or restaurant, e.g.: the cuisine of chef Paul Prudhomme, the cuisine of Noma.

It should also be noted that the dictionary definition of 'a style or manner of cooking' does not fully capture what is an extremely common and important aspect of how the non-specialist thinks about one or the other sort of cuisine: the usual way to conceptualize a cuisine is in terms of typical ingredients and typical dishes, perhaps also to a lesser degree salient methods of cooking, but all in all it is a decidedly concrete idea, perhaps elaborated with some qualification(s) of a general aesthetic nature, e.g. sophisticated, greasy, spicy, hearty, etc.

There is no arguing against common usage, even if it sometimes admits notions that bear little or no relation to culinary reality, as in the case of 'Mediterranean cuisine'.¹ The question at hand is, however, whether this popular sense of the term 'cuisine' is useful in the formal study of food and culinary culture. I believe it is not.

The popular conception of cuisine is strongly focussed on the physical manifestation of cookery – on ingredients and dishes and cooking methods. But, as illustrated in our hypothetical grandmother experiment, there are guidelines and rules that underlie any recipes or ingredients which direct the cook's decision making. In addition, there is also the question of the expectations of the intended audience which, while obviously standing in some relation to the eater's knowledge of ingredients and dishes, constitute an element that does not figure directly in popular conceptualizations of 'cuisine'. In discussing 'cuisine' in a serious way, we cannot disregard these non-physical elements.

Aside from this basic issue of the mental aspect of cuisine that lies behind its physical realization, there is a socio-economic dimension to the popular usage of the term 'cuisine' that renders it, at least to this writer, problematic for the scholarly discussion of food and culinary culture without being addressed explicitly. As a relatively recent borrowing from French (attested from the eighteenth century), a borrowing which surely was introduced by elite (wealthy, educated) speakers of English, the word 'cuisine', like many recent borrowings from French, is strongly coloured by its association with elite culture and, moreover, by its abiding strong association with French cookery in general and elite French cookery in particular. And indeed, one can see these associations clearly if we compare the uses of 'cuisine' alongside those of the partially synonymous but much older term 'cookery' (attested from the fourteenth century and built with a native English word and a nativized French suffix). Though the dictionary definitions of 'cuisine' and 'cookery' differ, in everyday parlance the two

terms overlap considerably, with 'German cuisine' or 'Portuguese cuisine' being roughly equivalent to 'German cookery' or 'Portuguese cookery'. But the elite or 'high culture' associations of 'cuisine', absent from 'cookery' (which is relatively neutral), render some pairings more common and preferable to others; thus, for example, 'peasant cookery' (or 'peasant food') seems preferable to 'peasant cuisine'. With regard to combinations with national or ethnic designations, the two words certainly both can be used broadly but while 'French cuisine' or 'Italian cuisine' seem utterly natural, in connexion with countries less internationally esteemed for their culinary cultures, 'cookery' seems to be the preferred term, as in 'English cookery' or 'Dutch cookery' versus 'English cuisine' or 'Dutch cuisine'. In the case of cultures which Westerners long described as 'primitive', use of the term 'cuisine' has been and remains even less usual; for example, 'Mohawk cuisine' has only recently come into use, as opposed to 'Mohawk food(s)'.

II0 The point is that the term 'cuisine' can be used in a neutral way but the weight of historical popular usage lends it prejudicial nuances: a proper cuisine is for many people relatively more complex, sophisticated, admirable and desirable than the mere cookery or foods of less respected culinary traditions. But these are all for the greatest part purely aesthetic judgements and comparable to what we see in popular attitudes regarding languages: some are widely held to be beautiful, rich, subtle, precise, complex, etc., while others are said to be ugly, unsophisticated, harsh, inexpressive, primitive, etc. – judgements which derive not from actual linguistic qualities but from the prejudices of individuals, often enough conforming to prejudices more generally held in their own linguistic or cultural community. For linguists, French and Dutch and Mohawk are from a scientific standpoint equally 'languages'. To be sure, both linguists and laypersons make a distinction between languages on the one hand and dialects on the other but from a scientific standpoint the distinction expresses not a structural difference but a sociolinguistic difference – a dialect of a language stands in a certain sociolinguistic relation to its related, overarching and typically standardized (national) 'language' – and when regarded without reference to the sociolinguistic relationship, a 'dialect' is no less a genuine, full-fledged linguistic system than a 'language'.

For food scholars, then, the question is whether we have a scientific definition of what constitutes a 'cuisine'.

Cuisine as a Cultural Domain

The basis of human alimentation is indisputably and firmly biological: humans normally strive to fulfil the nutritional needs that nature has set for the body. And yet it is equally indisputable that under most circumstances, human alimentation involves behaviours that clearly transcend biological need; indeed, in some cases humans either unwittingly or even quite intentionally eat in ways that run counter to what nature requires for bodily well-being. Alimentary behaviours are by and large learned and thus shared at the least within the family but typically also throughout a community located in a specific time and geographical and/or social space. Such

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learned, communally-shared behaviours are propagated through various means – casual observation and explicit demonstration, incidental remarks and focussed conversation, the full range of sensory perception of shared food, etc. – and given that food preparation and consumption occur in social contexts, these activities and the food items involved can and commonly do accrue their own socially-determined meanings as well as associations with other aspects of a given community's activities, institutions, and ideological systems: in other words, a community's alimentary behaviours, taken together, constitute a domain of that community's culture with links to various other cultural domains, such as language, religion, medicine, etc. Culinary behaviour is part of culture.

The most reasonable term to use in a scientific context to refer both to this cultural domain of culinary behaviour and to its underlying ideas is, I believe, 'cuisine', with the caveat that we must do so while consciously stripping the word of its popular concrete conceptualization and associations with specifically French and generally elite cookery. From the recognition that culinary behaviour and knowledge, i.e. cuisine, is a cultural domain there follow some necessary implications:

- 1) Given that all human societies have culture and given the centrality of alimentation to human life, it follows that all societies have cuisine.
- 2) As a complex of behaviours and ideas that are learned by individuals in a social setting, cuisine necessarily relies upon communication and can itself be used as a means of communication.
- 3) Like other cultural domains, cuisine is a system, i.e. it is based on a complex of structured elements (ideas, beliefs, rules, etc.); these elements show a degree of hierarchical arrangement related in part to how and when they are acquired by the individual.
- 4) Cultural domains (language, religion, medicine, music, etc.) are interconnected and together form a higher order cultural system; generally speaking, elements of a given cultural domain are more stable (resistant to change) the greater the degree to which they are integrated into the network of cultural domains.
- 5) Cuisine, no less than other cultural domains, is an open system, with openings potentially at multiple points in its own structure and through its connexions to other cultural domains; consequently, like all open systems, it is subject to variation within a given community and to change across time.
- 6) As a cultural phenomenon dependent upon communication for its propagation and practice, cuisine is inextricably linked to the social structures that delineate networks of communication. Insofar as a community's discourse about cuisine is internally oriented, it will exhibit a higher degree of conservatism and, conversely, the denser the network of communication regarding cuisine is between communities, the greater the likelihood is that those communities' cuisines will come to share elements and structures.

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Cuisine, Language and the Concept of 'Culinary Grammar'

As mentioned above, popular conceptions of specific cuisines are focussed very much on foods and how they are cooked. But while it is natural to think in terms of the concrete realizations of a given cuisine, it is important to recognize that the preferred ingredients and the dishes and meals made with them are manifestations or expressions of an underlying set of ideas, methodologies, rules and aesthetic principles which exist in the minds of individuals and are shared by those individuals who form a given cultural community. The distinction we make here coincides with a distinction that must be made in other cultural domains and is best known from linguistics, where one speaks of *langue* and *parole*: the latter is the actual individual utterance that can be heard or read, while the former is (the knowledge of) the underlying grammatical system and lexicon that allows a speaker to create a well-formed utterance and for a hearer to understand that utterance. In music, a given performance is typically the realization of a composition which has been constructed according to or at least with reference to a set of rules regarding tonality, harmony, rhythm, etc., as well as templates for preferred forms for musical genres, etc., and the performance is subjected to aesthetic judgement and analysis by the audience according to its own knowledge of musical 'grammar'. Likewise, in cuisine a meal is typically conceived and prepared according to the cook's knowledge of a culturally specific set of culinary rules, principles, etc. and each diner consumes the meal on the mental level in terms of his/her own culinary knowledge. In each of these instances, the greater the degree to which the performer and consumer share knowledge of the grammar of the cultural domain in question, the greater the likelihood is that the consumer will understand what the performer intended to communicate.

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Recognition of the communicative aspect of cuisine has led some scholars to say that it is a language, but, while cookery often does serve to communicate in certain ways, it is only partly or secondarily a means of communication; its purpose and functions make it fundamentally different from language in various respects. For example, whereas with language, all speakers of a given dialect are able both to actively produce and decode utterances, with cuisine there is in most societies an asymmetry between a smaller group of those who can competently prepare foods and the whole group which consumes, enjoys and understands them; this mismatch resembles more what we see in music or other arts than what we see in language. Along similar lines, a dish or a meal produced by members of one culture can be thoroughly enjoyed, if not fully understood and appreciated from a cultural standpoint, by someone from a completely alien culture who encounters it for the first time; again, in this regard a stronger analogy can be made between cuisine and music or other non-verbal arts than with language, where utterances in an unknown language are simply incomprehensible to the alien. This point calls to mind an even more fundamental difference: whereas the linguistic sign and thus language as a whole is in a real sense arbitrary, cuisine has, alongside its arbitrary and culturally determined aspects (e.g. some taste preferences,

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meal structures, etc.), an essential connexion to nutritional requirements, physiological aspects of taste, and the availability of foodstuffs (conditioned by the environment, market constraints, etc.).

Given the important differences between language and cuisine, it is not surprising that attempts to draw far-reaching parallels between the two cultural domains' structures have only partial success, as in Montanari's (2002: vii) suggestion that ingredients correspond to the lexicon, recipes to 'grammar' (presumably morphology), meal structure to syntax and convivial comportment to rhetoric. While such an analysis may not work in detail, it is in a general sense very much correct in recognizing that the culinary knowledge that allows people to create and decode dishes and meals is hierarchically structured, an idea that has been rejected by some influential anthropologists, such as Goody (1982: 31ff.) and Mennell (1996:13ff.). These scholars clearly doubt the significance and utility of the concept of 'deep structure' in cuisine, though they are careful enough not to deny completely that it may exist; rather, they take the position that it is impossible to verify its existence, since what the analyst can derive as deep structure from the observable surface phenomena is – at least in their estimation – based on wholly circular argumentation: deep structure is derived from the surface phenomena but then used to explain the selfsame surface phenomena. Rather than resorting to such pernicious reasoning, they both argue that we can only understand how cuisine works by studying it in history – observing how it changes over time – and both ultimately focus their own analyses of culinary cultures on the dynamics of the social and economic contexts in which those cultures exist.

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There are some observations to be made regarding the rejection of 'deep structure' by Goody and Mennell. First, the focus of their reaction is on Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1965) and other structural anthropologists, who in their estimation were excessively concerned with discovering immutable structural universals, an issue which we will address elsewhere. Second, their conclusion, that a true understanding of how cuisine functions must centrally include historical and comparative analyses of cultures in their social contexts, is a view with which I whole-heartedly agree, but their further implications that internal structures of culinary systems are at best irrelevant to our understanding and further that there is necessarily some sort of opposition between the consideration of systemic structure and analysis of historical change are very much off the mark.² Indeed, it is in part precisely through study of culinary change that we can break through the circularity Goody and Mennell decry: on a small scale, we see how underlying principles and rules come to expression in a situation such as the one described above with our grandmotherly cooks and on a grander, community-wide scale we see much the same in the behaviours of immigrant communities all over the world, who upon finding themselves in new environments, confronted by new arrays of ingredients and cooking technologies and pressures from alien sociocultural standards, apply and, where necessary or desirable, adapt aspects of their culinary 'grammar' (cf. Fischler 1990: 148-49).

Detailed study of such immigrant communities' behaviour, as in Buccini's (2015 & forthcoming) analysis of the development of Italian-American cuisine, provides strong evidence for the necessity to analyze culinary change not only in terms of socio-economic conditions but also in terms of the systemic complexity of cuisine itself. In this and other similar cases, we see clearly that so long as the community and family structure allowed for full transmission of the culinary system through direct generational transfer, Italian-Americans maintained over two or sometimes even more generations a cuisine that was in all fundamental ways remarkably faithful to that which the original immigrants had brought to North America from southern Italy, faithful with regard to those elements which in a strongly family-oriented group involve prolonged exposure (aesthetics of taste and patterns of consumption) and are supported through multiple ties to other cultural domains entrenched in the ethnic community's life (other aspects of the patterns of consumption and non-aesthetic food ideology).

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Telling also is how this southern Italian culinary culture among Italian Americans has broken down in a fashion parallel to (and in general temporally lagging only a generation behind) the linguistic shift from bilingualism with maintenance of the southern Italian 'heritage' language to total assimilation to Anglophone monolingualism with only residual knowledge of some Italian vocabulary. Just as the linguistic shift among Italian Americans has tended to be quite abrupt, with no prolonged (multi-generational) period of bilingualism, we can see an abrupt shift at the culinary level: once the tight bonds of family, extended family and ethnic community are loosened as a result of exogamy and the socioeconomic exigencies of American life, requiring stronger attachments to work and geographic dispersal, even individuals who strongly self-identify as ethnic Italian Americans do not acquire the deeper elements of Italian-American culinary grammar but rather those of the dominant American mainstream cuisine, maintaining knowledge only at a more superficial level of specific ingredients and dishes and then typically only those that are aesthetically and ideologically not at odds with the grammar of mainstream American cuisine and which have come to be thought of as ethnic markers both within and outside the ethnic community.

At several points in the above discussion I have referred to culinary deep structure as opposed to the surface manifestations of cuisine. Let us now consider in a systematic way what these aspects of cuisine consist of.³ The following chart (Figure 1) provides a schematic overview of the basic structure, divided between the surface level of elements, which are easily observed and experienced even in a casual manner, and the deep structure, which consists of three sub-domains of elements represented in the minds of individual members of a given culinary culture which are not directly observable, elements which the individual acquires through prolonged exposure and/or through overt instruction from other members of the community. Though the analogy works only to a certain degree, it can nonetheless be said that part of what constitutes the surface level, ingredients and in some measure also composed dishes, forms a relatively more open set and in this way resembles the lexicon in language. The sub-domains of

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the deep structure then together correspond roughly to the complex of grammatical sub-domains in language, i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, propositional semantics.

Figure 1: Overview of the Structure of Cuisine

SURFACE LEVEL

I Concrete Aspects of Cuisine

- *ingredients (and to a degree composed dishes) represent a relatively open set*
- *surface elements are easily observed/experienced*

INTERFACE BETWEEN SURFACE AND DEEP STRUCTURE

DEEP STRUCTURE

II Patterns of Consumption

III Aesthetics of Taste

IV Non-Aesthetic Food Ideology

- *relatively closed sets*
- *not directly observable (requires long-term observation/experience and/or instruction to be acquired by an individual)*
- *II & IV: high degree of structuredness through relationships with elements of other cultural domains*
- *III & IV: enhanced stability on account of childhood acquisition and (partially) subconscious internalization/automaticization*

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A few terms introduced in Figure 1 require comment. First, we refer to ‘stability’, a notion that must be understood in the first place in terms of individual behaviour and thence can be applied in a more general way with regard to a community’s culinary culture. For a given element in any cultural system, stability, i.e. resistance to change, is dependent upon various factors, among which figures crucially the degree to which that element is embedded in the system, the degree to which it supports and derives support from other elements within its cultural domain and in some cases also elements in other cultural domains. Thus, for example, patterns of consumption (daily, weekly, seasonally) are deeply embedded in the culinary system itself but then also are intimately connected to cultural elements that belong to other cultural domains (in Figure 2 such relationships are indicated with the symbol \Leftrightarrow). Another factor that affects stability is the degree to which a given element is subject to automaticization, that is, internalization to the point where it normally exists or is triggered in the mind of the individual at a subconscious level. In language, for example, the complex movements involved in articulation are automatized and normally below consciousness and so deeply ingrained that a given speaker, when trying to learn to speak another language, naturally imposes on that target language his or her ‘articulatory habits’, rendering speech accented and foreign

sounding or even ‘incorrect’ from the perspective of native-speakers of that target language; such articulatory habits can be so ingrained that they long remain despite conscious efforts by the speaker to suppress them. Somewhat analogous in cuisine are basic taste preferences and aversions, as well as other culturally-conditioned (through taboos or notions of hygiene, etc.) ‘visceral’ reactions to possible comestibles, which are typically acquired early in life, internalized, and thus can be difficult to unlearn or alter.

In Figure 2 we find a more detailed representation of our structural chart which includes lists of the elements typically found in each of the sub-domains of cuisine, as well as an explanation of the interface between the surface and deep levels; note that this chart is intended neither to be in all details universally applicable nor exhaustive with respect to the possible elements included.

Figure 2: Elements within the Culinary Sub-Domains

SURFACE LEVEL

I Concrete Aspects of Cuisine

- Ingredients
- Composed dishes and styles of dishes
- Cooking methods, preparation techniques
- Composition of individual meals

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INTERFACE BETWEEN SURFACE AND DEEP STRUCTURE

Knowledge in the minds of individuals of ingredients, recipes, cooking methods & meal structures provide the mapping between deep structure and surface manifestations.

DEEP (ABSTRACT) LEVEL

II Patterns of Consumption

- daily meal patterns (\Leftrightarrow gender roles, work patterns, family structure, etc.)
- seasonal patterns & food procurement and preservation (\Leftrightarrow agriculture, market structure, etc.)
- feasting and fasting (\Leftrightarrow religion, ethnicity, etc.)

III Aesthetics of Taste

- preferences of basic tastes
- preferences of taste combinations
- preferences of taste with regard to meal patterns
- attitudes toward simplicity/complexity

IV Non-Aesthetic Food Ideology

- importance of food discourse
- nature of food discourse (\Leftrightarrow family structure, marketing, etc.)
- attitudes toward tradition/novelty

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- rôle of food in group identity (\Leftrightarrow ethnicity, etc.)
- beliefs regarding food and health (\Leftrightarrow medicine)
- taboos (\Leftrightarrow religion, medicine (hygiene), etc.)

A detailed discussion of this material must be reserved for elsewhere but let us return briefly to the topic of Italian-American cuisine to illustrate some basic points.

To say that an immigrant group maintained its cuisine is not simply or even necessarily to say that it continued to consume a certain number of its traditional ingredients and dishes in its new environment. Rather, it is to say that it maintained *grosso modo* the fundamental rules, principles and aesthetics which form the deep structure or grammar of their cuisine. That southern Italian immigrants, mostly from poor backgrounds, increased their consumption of pasta, meat and fresh fish as their economic circumstances in the US improved clearly constituted a change in their cuisine but not a fundamental one. The immigrants and the first US born generations still prepared these foods in traditional ways, preferring, for example, their own methods of butchering meat (thin rather than thick steaks); such foods also continued to be fit into the weekly template for meals – e.g. soup on Monday, Wednesday and Friday meatless meals (even though the Church no longer required them to be so), Sunday meals necessarily festive and including special forms of pasta, elaborate ragùs and perhaps roasted meat as well. And traditional consumption of ‘poverty’ foods such as organ meats, salted and fermented fish, beans and bitter greens all maintained central places in the cuisine, tied as they were to firmly entrenched consumption patterns, aesthetics of taste, etc. In short, in those households in which food and family, cooking and culinary discourse and conviviality all remained tightly bound together, children were fully acculturated in a complex tradition.

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Also instructive is the view from the opposite perspective, namely of how Italian-American and Italian food has been taken up by the American mainstream. It has been claimed, most famously by Mintz (1996: 106) that the United States does not possess a cuisine, a view that from my perspective is untenable but clearly depends upon how one defines ‘cuisine’. As cuisine is defined here, the American mainstream clearly possesses one, though it is a cuisine that differs in a number of ways from the traditional cuisines of southern Italian and of the Italian-Americans. The grammatical structure of American cuisine can be seen at play in how it filters and alters elements that it accepts from other cuisines. A visit to a garden variety mainstream American ‘Italian’ restaurant offers ample evidence: Italian meal structure (*primo-secondo*) is rejected, and a main course typically conforms to the American presentation of protein/starch/vegetable together on one plate (with pasta often treated as a ‘side’); salad is moved from its Italianate position toward the end of the meal to the beginning. The restraint and balance that characterizes traditional Italian cookery of all regions, conflicting with American culinary aesthetics, is set aside, and dishes that purport to be Italian(-American) are rendered unrecognizable through habitual over-saucing and

inappropriate and profligate additions of garlic, cheese, chillies, etc. Not surprisingly, American takes on foods from other cuisines (Mexican, French, etc.) show the same general tendencies and specific adaptations, conditioned as they are by the mainstream's culinary grammar.

Toward a Typology of Cuisine

In this paper I have defined cuisine as the cultural domain that is principally concerned with the knowledge and behaviour of a given cultural community regarding the preparation and consumption of food; it has a complex internal structure like other cultural domains and in addition is interconnected with other cultural domains in important ways.

So far in the discussion I have not addressed other scholars' definitions but this neglect has been for the sake of brevity. There are, however, two such definitions which I would like to consider now for the light they shed on a crucial aspect of cuisine as defined here. They are diametrically opposed in a fundamental way and yet both scholars agree that the US does not possess a cuisine.

118 The first of these appears in Freeman (1977: 144-45) in the context of the history of Chinese food: 'Our definition is historical: the appearance of a cuisine, a self-conscious tradition of cooking and eating, implies the confluence of certain material factors – the availability and abundance of ingredients – with a set of attitudes about food and its place in the life of man.' Freeman elaborates on this idea and states that 'a cuisine does not develop out of the cooking traditions of a single region' for 'ingredients are apt to be too limited, cooks and eaters too conservative' (p. 144) and subsequently makes it clear that his notion of what constitutes a cuisine is limited to supra-regional, elite cookery: 'The appearance of a cuisine, then, involves the availability of ingredients, many sophisticated consumers, and cooks and diners free from conventions of region and ritual' (p.145). Writing almost forty years ago, Freeman was perhaps right in saying that the US did not have a cuisine according to his (narrow) definition, and perhaps that is still the case, but it is also abundantly clear that a kind of cookery that is not merely supra-regional but supra-ethnic is emerging in the US and elsewhere, which relies on a maximally wide array of ingredients, is prepared and consumed by people who believe themselves to be culinarily sophisticated and focussed on aesthetics and novelty, unfettered by 'conventions of region and ritual' – this is precisely the sort of food celebrated in the competitive cooking shows and served up in ever-increasing numbers of trendy restaurants and the home kitchens of 'foodies'.

Mintz's (1996: 104) definition contrasts sharply with that of Freeman for he not only rejects the strict association of 'cuisine' with elite cookery that Freeman embraces but also asserts that the only real cuisines are those that are regional in nature: "'Cuisine", more exactly defined, has to do with the ongoing foodways of a *region* [emphasis added], within which active discourse about food sustains both common understandings and reliable production of the food in question.' From this, it would seem to follow logically

that Mintz rejects the notion of national cuisines: 'A "national cuisine" is a contradiction in terms; there can be regional cuisines, but not national cuisines. I think that for the most part, a national cuisine is simply a holistic artifice based on the foods of the people who live inside some political system, such as France or Spain' (p. 104). From Mintz's rejection of the notion of a national cuisine, it also follows that he would deny that there is such a thing as 'American cuisine', but his further observations on American eating habits show that there are three specific features of mainstream American foodways that help render the nation cuisine-less (pp. 108ff.): 1) Americans are exposed to a great many ethnic cuisines and are generally quite promiscuous in their eating habits, often consuming in a given week meals of very disparate origins, say, of Anglo-American origin one day, Chinese, Mexican, Italian and Thai origins on subsequent days; 2) an extraordinarily high percentage of the meals they eat are not home-cooked but rather purchased already prepared for home consumption or eaten in restaurants; 3) despite a recent rise in interest in local and seasonal foods, 'industrial' and seasonally independent imported foods purchased from grocery chains constitute the norm for the majority of the US population. These behaviours are increasingly common throughout the world but they have been especially prevalent in the US for a relatively longer time.

Mintz seems then to want to make central to his definition of cuisine a more prominent role of home cookery and a closer relationship between food consumer and food producer. Beyond that, he also lays particular emphasis on the role of communication in cuisine: 'I do not see how a cuisine can exist unless there is a community of people who eat it, cook it, have opinions about it, and engage in dialogue involving those opinions' (p. 117).

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From my perspective, what Freeman and Mintz define in mutually exclusive fashion as the only kinds of cuisine are, in fact, both a kind of cuisine – where these two kinds of cuisine differ is not a matter of their status as cultural domains or their structural complexity with regard to sub-domains and specific elements within those sub-domains but rather of the differing social structures and patterns of food discourse of the communities that create and maintain them. Mintz clearly limits his notion of cuisine to traditional, regional culinary cultures; Freeman limits his to supra-regional elite culinary cultures. In a traditional regional cuisine the central locus of that discourse is the family, then the extended family and circles of friends and then the broader local, sub-regional and regional communities. Such discourse is not 'closed', and thus the cuisine remains to a degree open to external influence and change, but the higher the degree that culinary knowledge is passed on within familial or very local circumstances, the more it will show continuity across generations. A reasonable name for this sort of cuisine might be an *endo-cuisine*, not in the limited sense that Levi-Strauss (2008: 42) first used the term, but rather to express the idea that the network of communication and culinary discourse that supports a cuisine is focussed locally.

Standing in natural contrast to the endo-cuisine would then be the *exo-cuisine*, a cuisine supported by a network of communication and discourse that is more outward

looking and diffuse, in which a significant part of the transfer of culinary knowledge is not limited to familial and local circles but extends outward, across ethnic and regional and national boundaries. These kinds of exchanges of knowledge go hand in hand with exchanges of trade goods, allowing for the sort of consumption of exotic and out-of-season foods that characterized only elite cuisines in pre-modern times, as in the case of the supra-regional elite cuisine that Freeman discusses in his article on the Chinese Sung dynasty. But the sort of long-distance exchanges of foods and culinary knowledge that formerly were available only to the elite have over the past two centuries become increasingly available to broader sectors of more and more societies around the globe.

In the case of mainstream America, there has been a wide range of socio-economic factors at work for a long time that have led to looser familial bonds, greater mobility of individuals and nuclear families and increased reliance on commercially prepared foods. In addition, some of the forces, *mutatis mutandis*, that Appadurai (1988) describes at work in the formation of an Indian national cuisine in the 1970s and 1980s were also at play in the development of a bourgeois supra-regional American cuisine earlier in the twentieth and even in the nineteenth century. And finally, there has been in the US a long-standing and pervasive intrusion of corporate marketing in all levels of food discourse. Thus, if we are to allow for the existence of national cuisines – which we must, insofar as modern mobility and ease of communication have forged national cultural discourse communities – then mainstream American cuisine can be seen as a somewhat precocious and extreme version thereof, a quintessential exo-cuisine.

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Notes

1. The term 'Mediterranean cuisine', even if not originally of commercial origin, certainly has a strong commercial attachment through its use in marketing and is an excellent example of the concrete conception of 'cuisine' as a matter first and foremost of ingredients and dishes that are popularly thought of typical for a geographic zone – Mediterranean cuisine is a catch-all for those cuisines which use ingredients common around the Mediterranean region, such as olive oil, chick peas, fava beans, garlic, lamb, etc., or also a (primarily commercial) style of cooking of recent origin which draws promiscuously on various culinary traditions from countries around the Mediterranean Sea and that uses such ingredients. The term clearly serves a purpose in non-technical discourse but is, of course, difficult to justify in a more scholarly sense: 'Mediterranean cuisine' exists no more than there exists 'Mediterranean language', 'Mediterranean religion' or 'Mediterranean music', even if we can identify specific elements from these various cultural domains that are more or less widespread in lands around the Mediterranean Sea.
2. Note Goody's (1982: 34) criticism of Chang: 'There are important reasons of a theoretical and empirical kind for paying more attention to the time dimension. When anthropologists talk about the culture of food, they tend to see this as a continuing normative structure that, in the words of one recent writer on the subject, "absorbs or rejects foreign imports according to their structural or stylistic compatibility"' (Chang 1977: 7).' Goody's comment here is odd. While there are some 'universal' structural constraints on culinary structure (e.g. the physiology of taste) – or the structure of any cultural domain, including language (e.g. the articulatory apparatus) – the more interesting structural aspects for this discussion, the cultural aspects, are themselves subject to change. But that said, it is also true that culture, by its very nature something shared by a community,

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normally shows both openness to change and resistance to change, and communally shared cultural constructs do often function as filters regulating the acceptance or rejection of innovations. The necessity of considering structural aspects of cuisine (or language) when analyzing change over spans of time is to make sense of why some elements are (within a given culture but also cross-culturally) more liable to change and others less liable.

3. This discussion is hardly the first in which the structure of cuisine or of 'culinary grammar' is presented as being a system with hierarchical structure. For example, Montanari's (2002) aforementioned comparison of cuisine to language is clearly an attempt to call attention to the internal structure of cuisine. Chang (1977: 1) writes explicitly of the need to relate 'food variables hierarchically' and his discussion of Chinese food culture bears similarities to the general views presented here. Though the focus of her discussion differs from mine, Rozin (1982: 201) presents an allied position: 'All cuisines, like other cultural systems, are sets of rules or prescriptions about how to organize our knowledge or beliefs of human behaviour.' My views seem to be very much in line with those of Fischler as presented in *L'Homnivore* (1990), though I read his work only after I had developed my positions from my own perspective as a linguist. Unfortunately, space restrictions here make it necessary to reserve a thorough discussion of other scholars' views for another publication.

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