

The rise of humour in creative cuisines

Anne-Claire Yemsi Paillissé

University of Toulouse, France
anne-claire.paillisse@univ-tlse2.fr

Abstract

This paper explores the diverse expressions and meanings of humour in contemporary creative cuisine restaurants, challenging the conventional idea that fine dining is incompatible with humour. Before examining culinary creations as potential mediums for humorous expression, the paper first traces the intellectualisation and artification of cuisine (Cohen & Csergo, 2012) and the development of new culinary paradigms (del Moral, 2020), such as “Nouvelle Cuisine” and modernist approaches led by Ferran Adrià. These shifts have redefined the role of chefs and encouraged the intentional use of culinary creations to evoke emotions, tell stories, and employ various tones, including humour. The article analyses forms of culinary humour from playful whimsy to dark sarcasm, through dishes from seven creative restaurants across Spain, Italy, the UK, and Denmark. Using semiotic analysis and observational methods, it demonstrates how humour strategically placed within tasting menus enhances dining experiences, which evolve into intellectually stimulating and memorable dining encounters. Humour emerges as a significant tool for chefs, allowing them to deliver food for thought (Adrià, 2010) thanks to interesting (Ulla, Aduriz, 2012) or even to shocking (Spence & Youssef, 2022) dishes or sequences, thus extending beyond “eatertainment”, and even the confines of the plate (Munk, 2021). This approach redefines the boundaries of fine dining, positioning tonalities in general and humour in particular as essential components of contemporary creative cuisines.

Keywords: humour, gastronomy, creative haute cuisine, technoemotional restaurants, culinary avant-garde.

1. Introduction

1.1. Food and humour: complex definition(s) and fruitful relationships

Upon review, one encounters precise analyses, yet also observes contradictions and vagueness in defining humour (Cazamian, 1906; Charandeau, 2006). It appears that a significant aspect of the concept lies in its indefinable nature, as Gifford (1981, p. 538) suggests: “humour is notoriously, perhaps inherently, resistant to definition”. Despite the challenge of defining humour, it is necessary to establish a framework for its interpretation within this paper. For now, and considering the challenges, a general yet effective definition is warranted. Broadly speaking, humour can be understood as a form of wit that highlights the comic, ridiculous, absurd, or unusual aspects of reality with the aim of eliciting laughter or entertainment (Larousse, 2010).

In this sense, Bergson's notion of the comic resonates with humour as it involves a transposition of reality into another tone (Bergson, 1940). Humour therefore emerges as a complex and ambiguous tool for distorting reality; serious subjects being often presented in an unconventional or eccentric manner. It thrives on contrast and reflexivity, where its emotional, moral, or philosophical undertones may sometimes cancel its initial comedic effect.

Examining the presence of humour within recent culinary creations, such as dishes or menus from haute cuisine restaurants, may initially seem incongruous. At first glance, the concept appears unrelated to fine dining. However, upon closer inspection, connections between humour and the culinary domain emerge. Just as cooking originates from physiological needs, the term *humour* itself has roots in human physiology. The ancient Greek theory of Hippocrates, later transmitted through Arab and medieval scholars, identified four basic bodily fluids, or humours: bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm (Escarpit, 1994). Yet, as some theorists propose, humour encapsulates both bodily fluids and intellectual and emotional mechanisms, referring to specific behaviours or types of comic discourse (Noonan, 2011). Thus, the concept embodies a fundamental ambivalence between the body and mind, between nature and culture (Escarpit, 1994).

In this context, across literature, cinema or performance art, raw and cooked food are frequently used as tools for crafting humour, from the light-hearted to the macabre. For instance, as Stourna (2011) examines in detail, performance arts – particularly drama – include a great variety of situations and characters related to food consumption. From the *mageroi* (cooks) of ancient Greek drama, to the poor and always hungry *zanni* servants of the commedia del arte, the glutton or obese characters who very often mock the powerful, and even the cannibal banquet, dear to the Elisabethan Theater, the act of eating covers a broad palette of humour forms. (Stourna, 2011).

Another example of Food Art Humour comes from the Futurist food art movement, which emerged in the early 20th century as part of the broader Italian Futurist movement. This revolutionary approach to cuisine sought to blend gastronomy with art, transforming dining into a performance art where humour played a central role. As Chamberlain notes in the prologue of the latest edition of the 'part manifesto, part artistic joke' Futurist Cookbook, the tone of Futurist food artists was playful, provocative, whimsical, irreverent toward sluggish traditions, and enamoured with the speed and potential of modernity" (Marinetti & Chamberlain, 2014, p. 13).

Artists have long leveraged the inherent ambivalence of food and cooking – both a vital sustenance and an ingrained sociocultural practice - as a canvas for expressing both complex and ambivalent meanings of humour. Food serves as a versatile medium for humour, spanning a spectrum of tones and objectives: from addressing serious philosophical or anthropological inquiries through darker forms, to eliciting lighter amusement via gentle satire or a playful reiteration of amusing scenarios. These instances in artistic works emphasise the intricate, multi-faceted, and hybrid nature of humour, diverging from some contemporary definitions that reduce the latter to mere synonyms of comic, funny, or laughable. Notably, the laughter provoked by humour possesses a distinct quality: it is reflexive in nature. Such a feature is crystallised in the phrase of Bierbaum: "Humour ist, wenn man trotzdem lacht" (Bierbaum, 1909, 145), which can be translated: "Humour is when you laugh, anyway".

1.2. Research objectives and research gap

Numerous artistic productions utilise food to convey humorous messages. But do professional chefs also employ a diverse array of humorous tones? This article aims to explore how chefs and their teams integrate humour into their gastronomic experiences.

The research literature on humour spans across various disciplines, including rhetoric, literature, philosophy, and psychology. Despite the multidisciplinary interest and the increasing

acknowledgement of humour's potential significance, proper research on the connection between food and humour remains limited. For instance, Priscilla Ferguson's exploration of "what we talk about when we talk about food" highlights how food-talk offers "pleasure for the senses and sustenance for the soul" (Ferguson, 2014, p. 203), yet says very little about humour specifically. In-depth studies explore the table as a significant space for socialisation through commensality (Fishler, 2012), as a medium of communication, and particularly as a site for conflict and its resolution (Maffesoli, 2013). The table also serves as a stage for one of the many scenarios of everyday life, functioning as a metaphor for dramatic interactions (Goffman, 1959). However, a recent study acknowledges this gap and seeks to address it by examining humour in relational terms, focusing on the social significance of humour in everyday interactions with food within families and related household contexts (Jackson & Meah, 2019).

By focusing on creative cuisine productions of contemporary chefs and their teams, in the context commercial fine dining and experimental restaurants, this paper, in turn, explores a largely uncharted dimension of food-related humour. Some studies in "gastronomastics" (Lavric, 2022) have highlighted the use of poetic elements in restaurant menus, focusing on the textual and semiotic analysis of menus. The "Gastrophysics" perspective has noted the increasing prevalence of surprise and incongruity in experimental chef creations (Spence & Piqueras-Fizmann, 2014), examining diners' neuropsychological responses to sensory stimuli. But this paper takes a different approach: humour is viewed as a stylistic device and a reflexive tonality, deliberately incorporated by creative haute cuisine chefs across various elements of a gastronomic experience which unfolds like a narrative. The aim is to identify forms, vehicles and meanings of humour, in experiences conceived as journeys encompassing a variety of mediums: dishes, menus, decor, service and restaurant ambiance.

This approach could be perceived as biased and incomplete in that it analyses the producer's (the chef and her-his teams) intentions rather than diner reception. Three reasons justify our choice. Firstly, the creation of the dish and its layout precedes the aesthetic experience, making it valuable to examine what initiates the aesthetic encounter. Secondly, analysing diner reactions to humour presents challenges due to the subjective nature of responses influenced by cultural and social norms, personal background and evolving moral values (Sobal et al., 2006). Finally, the researcher's observational approach, including visits to restaurants under study, partially addresses this gap by incorporating marginal considerations about diner reception, thereby offering – for the time being – a partial view of the individual diner's perspective.

1.3. Methods

The analysis draws upon a literature review of publicly available culinary information and existing documentation from the following restaurants: elBulli by Ferran Adrià (Roses, Spain, restaurant converted into the foundation elBullifoundation), Kitchen Theory by Josef Youssef (London, UK), El Celler de Can Roca by Josep, Joan, Jordi Roca (Girona, Spain), Mugaritz by Andoni Luis Aduriz (Renteria, Spain), DiverXo by David Muñoz (Madrid, Spain), The Alchemist by Rasmus Munk (Copenhagen, Denmark), Osteria Francescana by Massiliano Bottura (Modena, Italy). Additionally, a literature review encompassing fields such as humour, creative haute cuisine and technoemotional cuisine was conducted.

Qualitative data were collected firsthand by the researcher during immersive experiences at most of the restaurants, during which photographs and notes were taken, compiled and used as sources and benchmarks for the analysis that follows. Informal conversations were held with food experts, journalists and chefs regarding the role of tonalities in creative haute cuisine. Lastly, a hermeneutic approach was employed, facilitated by semiotic analysis of gathered gastronomic texts and images, including names, images, videos of dishes, and complete gastronomic sequences. Therefore, this analysis does not aim to provide an objective,

exhaustive, and definitive assessment of the forms and extent of humour in creative cuisine. Instead, it endeavours to be suggestive rather than conclusive, shedding light on the potential of an art and communication studies approach to tonalities expressed in creative cuisine.

Firstly, we seek to contextualise the phenomenon of the recent emergence of culinary humour. Recent developments in the concept of cuisine and culinary arts, driven by the techno-emotional approach to haute cuisine, may facilitate an expansion of aesthetic dimensions and the emergence of humorous dishes or sequences.

Secondly, we present an overview of the forms of humour found in some recent creative haute cuisine examples. Two main trends are discernible: lightness and humour associated with pleasure and positive emotions, and seriousness with proposals in darker, even macabre tones. However, a dilemma arises: given that culinary productions must primarily be hedonistic, aimed at providing pleasure and satisfaction, can they incorporate grim humorous tones without compromising their essence?

Lastly, we formulate and discuss potential interpretations of the meaning and scope of the use of humorous tones in the corpus.

2. Contextualisation

2.1. The rise of tones in culinary productions

The development of tones, or registers, in culinary productions appears to follow a historical evolution, driven in part by the process of artification of cuisine (Csergo & Desbuissons, 2018). This gradual transition of cuisine as a simple craft to an activity involving creative and even artistic processes, correlates with the evolution of the cook's status from a domestic or craftsman to a creator or even an artist.

As previously mentioned, gastronomy has long aimed at the aestheticisation and hedonistic elevation of food, beyond its biological purpose (Poulain, 2013). Historical milestones such as the aestheticisation of food consumption in the Italian Quattrocento, the intellectualisation of cuisine during the Classical period (Champion, 2010), and Enlightenment philosophies that emphasised the importance of the sense of taste (Csergo & Desbuissons, 2018) have all contributed to this process of artification. The emergence of the concept of authorship in cuisine further elevated the culinary arts to a realm of intellectual inquiry, allowing chefs to engage in acts of creation (Champion, 2010). These trends towards aestheticisation - marked by differentiation, the elevation of cuisine and taste, and the assertion of authorship - were essential for recognising and individualising the work of chefs. This recognition, in turn, provided the groundwork for the expression of signatures, styles, and, consequently, specific registers and tones characteristic of a chef-turned-author with a distinct culinary identity.

2.2. Emergence of tonal diversity: Nouvelle Cuisine in the 20th century

Even if the quest for creativity has been connected with the development of fine dining since centuries, the 20th century witnessed a significant surge in the recognition and celebration of both the culinary creativity, and the individual creativity of chefs. A pivotal moment occurred with the rise of the French Nouvelle Cuisine in the late 1960s: it revolutionised the perception of cooking as a creative endeavour, and Chefs as creators of novelty. Nouvelle Cuisine represented a break from the past, challenging the traditional paradigm established by Auguste

Escoffier.¹ The Nouvelle Cuisine proponents argued that “[t]o achieve culinary glory, it is necessary to unlearn what is taught by the classical schools of cooking” (Del Moral, 2020, p. 5). The culinary model of Escoffier, characterised by a militaristic kitchen organisation, standardised work procedures, hierarchical structure (Poulain & Neirinck, 2004) and the “enormous rigidity of the recipes” (Del Moral, 2020), imposed significant constraints on chefs’ creative expression.

In contrast, Nouvelle Cuisine advocated for a distancing from rigid culinary conventions, urging chefs to embrace inventiveness and originality. Central to the ethos of Nouvelle Cuisine were the “Ten Commandments” formulated by the two journalists Gault and Millau (Gault & Millau, 1973). The ninth commandment, “Thou shalt be inventive” stands out as particularly groundbreaking. This directive spurred chefs to explore new ingredients, recipes, and culinary traditions previously unexplored in haute cuisine (Del Moral, 2020). “Trompe l’oeil” dishes, designed to surprise and delight diners, as well as the poetic, evocative naming of dishes (Rao et al., 2003) represented significant milestones in the evolution towards a cuisine driven by more intentional authorship and creativity.

2.3. Technoemotional cuisine: the propagation of tonal nuances

After Escoffier’s codified classicism and the advent of Nouvelle Cuisine, the 20th century witnessed the emergence of a new approach which received many different names, all of which aimed “to capture a sense of something contemporary, something modern, to suggest both novelty and revolution” (Geary, 2022, p. 49). The journalist Pau Arenós coined the term *technoemotional cuisine* to describe a trend which he traced back to the 1990s and attributed to Spanish influence on haute cuisine. The pioneering figures of the first generation of technoemotional cuisine are Ferran and Albert Adrià (elBulli, Spain), soon followed by Heston Blumenthal (The Fat Duck, UK), Grant Achatz (Alinea, USA), and René Redzépi (Noma, Denmark) (Arenós, 2009). Technoemotional restaurants adopt an experimental approach to cuisine, dining, and gastronomy, aiming to evoke emotions in diners through the use of innovative techniques and technologies. This avant-garde approach goes beyond merely creating new dishes; its aim is to uncover new methods of cooking and even new avenues of innovation (Arenós, 2009).

One of the defining characteristics of elBulli, as articulated by the Adrià brothers and Juli Soler, is the concept of the sixth sense (Adrià et al., 2014). It aims to go beyond the traditional five senses, seeking to stimulate guests on a deeper sensory and aesthetic level. By repositioning diners in relation to food, the sixth sense transforms eating from a nourishing and social act into an experience that foregrounds sensory and aesthetic dimensions (Geary, 2022, p. 29). This transformation elevates innovative cuisine to the realm of conceptual art and aesthetic experience, allowing cooking to convey subtleties such as concepts, metaphors, philosophical principles, and tonalities: “Cooking is a language through which all the following qualities can be expressed: harmony, creativity, happiness, beauty, poetry, complexity, magic, humour, provocation and culture” (Adrià et al., 2005, p. 55).

Another pillar of technoemotional cuisine is its interdisciplinarity: “They [i.e. chefs] have initiated a dialogue with scientists, but also with artists, novelists, poets, journalists, historians, anthropologists, etc.” (Arenós, 2009, p. 323).

The approach pioneered by Adrià openly draws from resources and processes in various cultural, scientific, and artistic domains. Precisely in literature, tone serves as a vehicle for expressing the attitude or feeling of the author towards the subject or the audience (Baldick,

¹ Auguste Escoffier (1846–1935) was a renowned French chef, restaurateur, and culinary writer. He deeply influenced French cooking by simplifying and organizing traditional methods, popularizing fine dining through his work in prestigious hotels, and creating enduring dishes and culinary systems still used today.

2004). The emergence of humorous tones in culinary offerings could be seen as inspired by such literary nuances. Just as an author establishes tone(s) through words in books, contemporary chefs can establish tone(s) through their gastronomic proposition.

3. Review of humorous forms

3.1. Incongruity: transverse phenomenon which plays with expectations

Incongruity appears to lie at the core of the primary conceptualisation of humour. It arises from a tension or disparity between two situations: one theoretical and expected, and the other, surprisingly divergent. In simpler terms, incongruity occurs when there is a mismatch between what is anticipated to happen and what actually unfolds (Bergson, 1911). For most theories on humour, it is the resolution of the incongruity whether defined as surprise/unexpectedness, contrast between opposing ideas or meanings, or disparity between a situation and its typical counterpart (Warren & McGraw, 2016) which leads to humour.

In the realm of gastronomy, incongruity has gained popularity in recent times, driven by the evolving expectations of diners who seek unexpected novelty and unprecedented culinary experiences (Beaugé, 2012). The ascent of technoemotional gastronomy, characterised by its emphasis on multisensory design and globalisation, is also regarded as a contributing factor to the burgeoning interest in incongruity within haute cuisine (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszmann, 2014).

3.2. Light-hearted forms of humour: Playfulness & interactions

Several offerings within tasting menus incorporate playful, childlike, and straightforward sequences, diverging from a formalism and a ceremonial tone, often associated with haute cuisine. Many of these fun dishes we are referring to are interactive and inclusive, encouraging guests to participate, sometimes -temporarily- involving guests in the preparation or the completion of some culinary presentation.

One of the earliest playful technoemotional dishes may be the Spice Dish (Fig.1.) from elBulli restaurant. The dish consists of an apple jelly, serving as a base for 12 aromatic herbs and spices, which are simply scattered in an arc over the jelly. Their names are revealed to the diner in random order, playfully challenging them to identify each flavour and thus name each spice in the right order:



Fig.1. 367/The Spice Dish

Source: elBullifoundation/Photo: F. Guillamet

The dish “El Gol de Messi” (“Messi’s Goal”) crafted by the Roca brothers exemplifies the application of the technoemotional cuisine principles. It is also a whimsical and multifaceted creation designed to “freeze a feeling” (Joan Roca): to replicate the emotion experienced by soccer enthusiasts, particularly fans of the Argentine player Lionel Messi, when witnessing his remarkable goals. Through a fusion of haute cuisine, sculpture, and MP3-recorded soccer commentary, the restaurant staff invites guests to an unconventional experience within the realm of fine dining. The element of surprise is guaranteed, especially considering that this dessert made a brief appearance on the menu of the restaurant, for only two days, in 2011.

In both instances, humour arises from the disparity between the anticipated experience – a meticulously crafted gourmet dessert with exceptional flavours – and the unexpected presentation of a whimsical, interactive dish.

Humour seems to be intertwined with a temporary shift in the role of the diners. In these interactive and playful sequences, the active participation and involvement of the diner is requested. This disruption of traditional roles in a gastronomic setting where the chef typically cooks, while guests observe and receive, transforms the guests into co-creators of the dish, integral agents in its preparation or completion. However, as everyone acknowledges the playful nature of the experience and recognises the true chef behind the scenes, the incongruity is resolved, culminating again in humour, stemming from the resolution of this staged incongruity.

3.3. Ironic play with tradition

Another approach to crafting humorous dishes or scenarios involves challenging norms, structures, and conventions of haute cuisine. While technoemotional cuisine acknowledges the rich heritage of previous gastronomic paradigms, many culinary creations within this realm playfully engage with the legacy, often questioning or subverting it.

As we comment on the contemporary disruption of traditional haute cuisine norms, it is worth mentioning the “technique-concept search” pioneered by elBulli restaurant since the 1990s. One of the most renowned concepts stemming from this endeavour is deconstruction: an intricate and multifaceted concept central to the research methods and techniques of Adrià. The concept bears resemblance to the philosophical notion of deconstruction by the French philosopher Derrida and its applications in art and architecture (Parasecoli, 2001; Adrià, 1997). Culinary deconstruction involves manipulating existing traditions, serving as a crucial precursor to the emergence of tones in haute cuisine. As Adrià elucidates:

Deconstruction in the kitchen consists of using (and respecting) already known harmonies, transforming the texture of the ingredients, as well as their shape and texture (...) The results are such that when the guests consume this dish, they can relate the final taste to the classic recipe. (...) In my case, within the framework of my usual style, which is characterised by humour and irony.

(Adrià, 1997, p. 86)

In addition to the deconstruction of familiar dishes (e.g., potato omelette or curried chicken), familiar preparations (e.g., mayonnaise) and products (e.g., asparagus, tomatoes, seafood) can also be deconstructed. An iconic example of a deconstructed dish is the “Menestra en Texturas” (“Textured Soup”) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. 247/Textured Vegetable Panache

Photo: F. Guillamet

Therefore, humour in the guise of irony – also a hallmark of postmodernism (Geary, 2022, p. 57) – plays a significant role in the approach of Adrià. As he articulates: “In a meal that demands solemn concentration from the guest, the introduction of a few ironic touches helps to loosen his contact with the seriousness that sometimes accompanies avant-garde cooking” (Adrià 1997, p. 64). The intended effect of humour is here twofold: to bewilder the guests and to alleviate the tension induced by the intensity and gravity of the experience.

More broadly, such ironic manipulation of tradition and norms permeates various aspects of the dining experience: its organisation – already disrupted by Adrià’s principle of sweet and savoury worlds symbiosis² –, its utensils – cutlery, plates – and even the ambiance and symbolism of the establishments. The renowned Spanish chef David Muñoz, who holds three Michelin stars, embraces a profound fusion of punk popular culture and highbrow culture at his flagship restaurant in Madrid. The décor exudes a baroque-grotesque and eccentric vibe, complete with whimsical statues of flying pigs suspended from the ceiling or peering out from the walls. The depiction of flying pigs serves as a nod to the sarcastic phrase “when pigs fly”, denoting an impossibility that the restaurant aims to defy. This décor, the most overt aspect of an exceptionally nonconformist aesthetic, distances itself again from the visual and aesthetic norms of elite haute cuisine.

Another establishment extraordinarily pushing the boundaries of haute cuisine conventions is Mugaritz in Renteria, Spain. This disruptive restaurant offers an iconoclastic menu, while delivering an elevated creative and reflexive experience. For instance, since 2017 the Basque restaurant presents a menu that goes beyond the – already groundbreaking – concept of sweet and salty symbiosis, inherited from Adrià. Mugaritz wants to break with the socially preconceived idea of dessert which limits the ability to surprise the diner and, at the same time, restricts the creativity of those who design the experience (Mugaritz, 2017). Upon arrival, the guests are seated at an almost empty, pristine table (Fig. 3) – except the abstract and metaphysical sculpture entitled “Par Móvil” (“Moving Pair”) inspired by the works of the famous sculptor Jorge Oteiza. Then during the experience, more than 20 dishes are served, with no bread, no cheese, no dessert, and most of the times without any cutlery. In the Basque restaurant, the disruption extends to many of the most expected landmarks of the gastronomic journey, with the objective of “rethinking paradigms and enjoying experiences, regardless of whether they involve sweet or salty, hot or cold, fish or ice cream.” (Aduriz, 2019, p. 197).

² The symbiosis between sweet and savoury worlds is one of the pillars of elBulli’s cuisine. Ingredients, preparations and even the vocabulary of one of the worlds are transferred to the other and vice versa (Adrià et al. 2005). Examples: salty sorbets, sweet salads, snack lollipops, olive oil in desserts, among others.



Fig. 3. Mugaritz table upon guests' arrival

Photo: O. Oliva

Two further insights can be drawn from these examples of gastronomic creation that questions tradition. Firstly, the humorous tone plays a pivotal role in the dining experience, aligning with the relief theory of humour: it alleviates individual or collective tensions and demystifies a longstanding heritage. Secondly, the relief of tension can only be fully appreciated if the recipient possesses prior knowledge, cultural background, or a curiosity about the recipes, symbols, and customs of haute cuisine. This consideration gains full significance when presented in the section dedicated to ironic tone, one of the most intricate forms of humour. Irony is not merely a convergence of meanings or a blend of semantics; it also creates vivid “scenes”, offering a simultaneous perception of multiple meanings. It relies on profound, shared understanding, where one implies what one does not explicitly state, conveying something entirely different. (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 57). Hence, humour stemming from the distortion of culinary heritage is not only reflexive: it is also addressed, as it resonates more particularly with individuals who possess a particular gastronomic culture and background.

3.4. The surprise of sensory incongruity

Sensory incongruity occurs when “the sensory features present in one modality (e.g., vision) do not match (or agree) with those present in another sensory modality” (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszmann, 2014, p. 218). For example, when the visual appearance of an ingredient does not match the actual taste.

Chef Josef Youssef of the London-based multisensory supper club Kitchen Theory uses sensory incongruity not only to create humour effects but also to experiment with gastrophysical phenomena, such as how vision alters taste. Youssef, in collaboration with psychologists at Oxford University, proposed an experiential dish based on the phenomenon of bistability or multistability, whereby two or more interpretations can be perceived from a single sensory input. The “Duck-rabbit illusion” (Fig. 4) is an edible version of Jastrow’s famous duck-rabbit illusion. The dish consists of a sketched version of the duck-rabbit illusion stencilled on the plate and a “crispy dumpling” of confit duck and rabbit leg placed to one side. The humour arises from the initial ambiguity of the dish appearance: some guests perceive a duck while others see a rabbit on the plate. The visual confusion is further compounded when tasting the dumplings: the sense of view influences the other senses as it becomes uncertain which pieces of meat are rabbit, and which are duck.



Fig. 4. The Duck-rabbit illusion

Photo: Kitchen Theory

3.5. Self-deprecating humour: a new role for the chef

In a culinary paradigm in which chefs have slowly gained social autonomy, visibility, authorship, and, more recently, prestige (Champion, 2010, p. 78), self-deprecation could appear as false modesty or artificiality. However, self-deprecating humour temporarily casts chefs in the role of humourists, practicing self-criticism and a willingness to include themselves in any satire they aim at others, a sentiment succinctly captured by the aphorism: “Humour is the self parodied” (Paul, 1979, p. 136).

A notable example of such culinary self-deprecation is “RocaNas” (“Roca’s Nose”), crafted from a mold of its creator Jordi Roca’s nose and filled with strawberry and rose water ice cream. Chef Bottura (Osteria Francescana, Italy) takes self-deprecation to another level with “Oops mi è caduta la crostatina al limone” (“Oops, I dropped the lemon tart”). This dessert (Fig. 5), comprising zabaione and lemongrass ice cream, is deliberately presented in a chaotic manner, as if it had just tumbled onto the floor, served on a plate that appears to be broken. The humour arises from both the incongruity of the situation – serving a whimsical dessert in one of the world’s most esteemed restaurants – and the simulated self-mockery briefly assumed by Bottura. Like many humorous culinary creations, the *faux pas* dessert carries a deeper significance: it conveys a sense of liberation, suggesting that mistakes are permissible. Bottura’s inspiration for this dish stems from a Japanese chef who accidentally dropped a perfectly crafted lemon cake in front of him, an incident Bottura found both beautiful and profound. Just as the dropped dessert reflects a style and a philosophy of breaking conventions, transforming, and innovating, it underscores the notion that every end marks the beginning of something new. Hence, self-deprecating humour, far from diminishing the creator, serves to illuminate their brilliance.



Fig. 5. Oops, I dropped the lemon tart

Photo: Paolo Terzi

3.6. Dark humour in culinary creations

One might assume that addressing more disturbing subjects with a humorous twist has no place in a gastronomic experience which, even in its most innovative forms, should prioritise hedonism and the principle of the search for deliciousness (Spence & Youssef, 2022).

However, Mugaritz restaurant proposes an alternative gastronomic language, through a very wide range of sensory stimuli, sounds and emotions. The “Toasted soup of oxydised wine” dish (Fig. 6) is inspired by the iconic figure of Bibendum – also known as Michelin Man, the mascot of the Michelin tire company, which also publishes the famous red gastronomic guide. The dish features a sweet marshmallow Michelin Man immersed in a sour, tongue-cutting oxidised sauce. The proposition demonstrates that a dish can convey both an ironic and political message: a sardonic commentary on the inordinate power of the renowned culinary institution – whose star-awarding methods are often criticised – while also transposing a negative emotion – bitterness – into a culinary creation. The soup of oxidised wine also challenges cultural norms of the appreciation of rancidity, defined by the Oxford dictionary as “smelling or tasting unpleasantly as a result of being old and stale”, but valued in other cultures such as Moroccan and Tibetan (Drain, 2016).



Fig. 6. Toasted soup of oxidised wine

Photo: L. López de Zubiría

This dish - tinged with a dark, wry sense of humour - crystallises one of the core characteristics of the Mugaritz restaurant's aesthetics: the questioning of preconceptions, certainties and dogmas. In the case of the oxidised soup, the short-circuit generated during the tasting aims to denounce the dictatorship of the delicious by proposing a third way, beyond the dichotomy of good vs. not good. In fact, Aduriz is convinced that pleasure and deliciousness are multifaceted. Such "enjoyment" can be generated by a variety of tonalities, nuances and intentions – including humour – both generated and exceeding the (multi)sensory sphere: "We want our clients to enjoy themselves and we strive to make sure they do so through all their senses, appealing to a set of mechanisms that include warmth, closeness, affection or memory, but also playfulness, humour, unpredictability, provocation or contradiction" (Aduriz, 2019, p. 67).

Other propositions include humour while being primarily disconcerting, rather than delicious. Some of them belong to the growing trend of "shocking dishes" (Spence & Youssef, 2022). This trend includes dishes that play with the principles of animals' life and death, also related to sustainability issues. One of the impressions – or dishes – served at The Alchemist restaurant by Rasmus Munk (Denmark) denounces the living conditions of intensively farmed chickens. The restaurant offers an immersive multisensory experience using a complex combination of technical, technological and artistic media (Yemsi, 2024). In the "Burnout Chicken" sequence, dynamic images of caged chickens are projected onto the restaurant's domed roof, accompanied by the disturbing sounds of metal cages clattering together. As these images scroll before the diners' eyes, an unsettling dish is served: chicken feet served in a cage that is proportionally the same diameter as the floor space of a cage-bred chicken. The dish itself (Fig. 7) consists of a deboned chicken thigh stuffed with a chicken and shrimp soufflé seasoned with green curry spices, then glazed with tamarind paste and rolled in fried fjord shrimp and puffed potatoes. The situation is a trap – another cage? – in which the guest is placed, while being ironically invited to free the chicken from its cage, to eat it.



Fig. 7. Burnout chicken

Photo: Søren Gammelmark

In some of Munk's dishes, dark humour aims to generate a sarcastic or even embarrassed laugh. While this humorous tone remains somewhat peripheral at The Alchemist, it contributes to the overarching goal of the restaurant's "holistic cuisine" (Beck & Munk, 2019). This approach seeks to encompass all facets of the gourmet dining experience - sensory, aesthetic, emotional and reflective - with the aim of catalysing social change on both an individual and

collective level. The use of dark humour is also notably avant-garde, as it diverges from the typical definition of gastronomic hedonism, which typically aims to evoke positive emotions in diners through a combination of nutritious, delicious food, convenience, atmosphere, value, and emotionally satisfying entertainment (Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2021).

Given their unconventional and contentious nature, dishes infused with grim humour are bold, risky, and inherently double-edged. In this regard, they may well represent the epitome of avant-garde dining experiences.

4. Conclusion

This study represents a preliminary exploration into the manifestation of tones within creative haute cuisine, focusing on an area that has been largely overlooked in academic research. Given the limited research on the manifestation of tones in creative haute cuisine, this study serves as a foundational step for further exploration. Future research should delve deeper into how diners perceive and respond to culinary humour. Capturing meaningful feedback from guests in the context of fine dining is highly complex, necessitating a blend of consistent data collection methods, including direct observation, quick surveys during the experience, semi-structured interviews post-experience, and analysis of online reviews. An important criterion to consider, highlighted by the current study, will also be the high degree of knowingsness required for guests to fully appreciate most forms of culinary humour. Addressing this challenge will require thorough screening of respondents' profiles based on their prior knowledge and background in creative gastronomic experiences. This aligns with the conclusions of Jackson and Meah who emphasised that “an understanding of the ‘background disposition’ through which consumers make sense of their multiple encounters with food is critical to the analysis of food-related humour” (Jackson & Meah, 2019, p. 264).

The study reveals that the conditions necessary for the effective deployment of humour – such as a background position and a moral disposition towards food – are relevant both in the context of domestic food humour and within the creative cuisine restaurant. This connection underscores a recurring pattern in food-related humour, bringing together seemingly disparate contexts.

Culinary humour, as explored in this context, also makes a distinctive contribution to the broader field of humour studies. In the realm of creative cuisine, “taking humour seriously” as advocated by Palmer (2003), requires a careful and quite disruptive balance between sensory pleasure and several forms of reflexivity. While the quest for guest's delight and maximum sensory satisfaction remains a key element of the dining experience, several contemporary chefs like Adrià, Aduriz, Munk, the Roca brothers, Youssef, Bottura or Muñoz introduce alternative nuances to their proposals, hence questioning the immutable mission of fine dining. The famous restaurant elBulli revindicated as early as in the end of the 20th Century a right to propose ironic dishes. The restaurant Mugaritz refers today to a quest for “interesting” cuisine, freed from “the dictatorship of deliciousness”. Some dishes at the Basque restaurant – just like certain creations served at Munk's restaurant in Copenhagen – exhibit a biting humour, highlighting the absurdities or harsh realities of contemporary society or the gastronomic institution, in a way that might provoke deeper reflection, and even make guests feel uncomfortable.

Another distinctive feature of food-related humour lies in the principle of incorporation. Such principle, a powerful and symbolic foundation of human eating, differentiates culinary humour from literary or dramatic humour by making it more physical, direct, multisensory, and ephemeral. As “the almost universal belief that any liquid, solid, or gaseous element that penetrates the innermost part of our being can change our identity” (Corbeau, 2008, p. 79),

incorporation operates on three levels. First, the vital level – eating is necessary to keep us alive and healthy, and therefore also carries risks –, then the level of physical appearance – what we eat affects our appearance – and finally, the symbolic level, “as incorporation can ‘contaminate’ our spirit when an ‘impure’ body – or considered so by magical, religious, ethical, ideological, or ‘scientific’ thought – penetrates our intimacy” (Corbeau, 2008, p.79). A humorous dish that is incorporated will have a unique physical and symbolic impact on its recipient, as incorporation reinforces the intensity and significance of the encounter by allowing food – especially that prepared with strong intentionality – to alter our perception of reality.

This research emphasised the multidimensional nature of humour in recent creative cuisine. Humour serves as a reflective tone intentionally cultivated by the culinary team, manifesting in various sub-tonalities such as playfulness, irony, sensory incongruity, self-mockery, and, though less frequently, dark humour. The study confirms the relevance of referring to creative cuisine humour through a variety of “culinary tones” or registers. The objectives behind these humorous expressions are diverse, ranging from challenging diners’ senses and cultural norms to alleviating tensions in emotionally and sensorially intense experiences, showcasing the chef’s technical prowess, or prompting social and political contemplation. In its many forms, creative cuisine humour transcends mere sustenance to offer aesthetic and reflexive journeys. As a result, the dining experience becomes ambivalent, navigating the space between *commodification* – where the experience is expected to be positive and pleasurable – and *artification*, which may introduce moments of confusion or discomfort.

References

- Aduriz, A. L. (2019). *Puntos de fuga*. Planeta Gastro.
- Adrià, F. (1997). *Los secretos de El Bulli*. Altaya.
- Adrià, F., Soler, J., & Adrià, A. (2005). Synthesis of elBulli Cuisine. Available online at: <https://elbullifoundation.com/en/synthesis-of-elbulli-cuisine/> (accessed: December 16, 2018)
- Adrià, F., Soler, J., & Adrià, A. (2014). *elBulli 2005-2001: Evolutionary analysis*. Phaidon.
- Arenós, P. (2009). Periods, movements, avant-garde and 20th and 21st century styles in western Haute Cuisine. In R. Hamilton & V. Todolí (Eds), *Food for thought, thought for food*. Actar.
- Beaugé, B. (2012). On the idea of novelty in cuisine: A brief historical insight. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 1, 5-14.
- Beck Brønnum, L., & Munk, R. (2019). The holistic cuisine. A focus beyond the plate. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 15, 32-35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2018.11.009>.
- Bergson, H. (1911). *An essay on the meaning of the comic* [C. Brereton & F. Rothwell, Trans. from French]. Macmillan.
- Bergson, H. (1940). *Le Rire. Œuvres*. Presses Universitaires de France. (Othe original work was published in 1900).
- Bierbaum, O. J. (1909). *Die Yankeedoodle-Fahrt*. Salzwasser-Verlag.
- Cazamian, L. (1906). Pourquoi nous ne pouvons pas définir l'humour? *Revue germanique*, 601-634.
- Champion, C. (2010). *Hors d'œuvre, Essai sur les relations entre art et cuisine*. Menu Fretin.
- Charaudeau, P. (2006). Des Catégories pour l'Humour ? *Questions de communication*, 10, 19-41.
- Csergo, J., & Desbuissons, F. (2018). *Le cuisinier et l'art, Art du cuisiner et cuisine d'artiste*. Menu Fretin.
- Cohen, J. & Csergo, J. (2012) L'artification du culinaire. *Sociétés et représentation*, 34, 7-11.

- Del Moral, R. G. (2020). Gastronomic paradigms in contemporary western cuisine: From French Haute Cuisine to mass media gastronomy. *Frontiers of Nutrition*, 6, 192. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2019.00192>
- Drain, J. (2016). Aged butter part 1: background and basics. The Nordic Food lab, <https://nordicfoodlab.org/blog/2016/01/aged-butter-part-1-background-and-basics/>. Consulted March 2024.
- Escarpit, R. (1994). *L'humour. Que sais-je?* Presses Universitaires de France.
- Fischler, C. (2012). Commensalité. In Jean-Pierre Poulain (Ed.). *Dictionnaire des cultures alimentaires* (pp. 271-286). Presses Universitaires de France.
- Gault, H., & Millau, C. (1973). *Nouveau Guide Gault-Millau*. Société de Presse/Éditions du Soleil.
- Geary, F. (2022). *Experimental dining. Performance, experience and ideology in contemporary creative restaurants*. Intellect.
- Gifford, P. (1981). Humour and the French mind: Towards a reciprocal definition. *The Modern Language Review*, 76(3), 534-548.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of the self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
- Jackson, P.A., & Meah, A. (2019) Taking humor seriously in contemporary food research. *Food, Culture, and Society*, 22 (3), 262-279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2019.1580535>
- Hutcheon, L. (1994). *Irony's edge, the theory and politics of irony*. Routledge.
- Larousse (2010). Humour. In *Dictionnaire de français*. Retrieved from: <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/humour/40668>
- Lavric, E. (2022). Les cartes de la grande gastronomie française – valorisation, identité, créativité. In E. Lavric, C. Feyrer & C. Konzett-Firth. *Le vin et ses émules : Discours oenologiques et gastronomiques* (pp. 45-82). Frank & Timme.
- Maffesoli, M. (2013). La table comme lieu de communication. *Cahiers Européens de l'Imaginaire*, 5. *Manger Ensemble*, 119-121.
- Moura, J.-M. (2012). *Poétique comparée de l'humour. Esthétique du rire*. Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pupo.2330>.
- Noonan, W. (2011). Reflecting back, or what can the French tell the English about humour? *Sydney Studies in English*, 37, 92-115.
- Poulain, J. P., & Neirinck, E. (2007). *Historia de la cocina y de los cocineros*. Zenderera.
- Poulain, J. P. (2013). *Sociologie de l'alimentation*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Palmer, M.J. (2003). *Taking humour seriously*. Routledge.
- Parasecoli, F. (2001). Deconstructing soup: Ferran Drià's culinary challenges. *Gastronomica*, 1, 60-73.
- Paul, J. (1979). *Cours préparatoire d'esthétique* (A.-M. Lang & J.-L. Nancy, Trans.). Éditions l'Âge d'Homme. (Original work published in 1984 in German as "Vorschule zur Ästhetik")
- Rao H., Monin, P., & Durand, R. (2003). Institutional change in toque ville: nouvelle cuisine as an identity movement in French Gastronomy. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108, 795-843. <https://doi.org/10.1086/367917>
- Sobal, J.A., Bisogni, C.A.M., Devine, C.M., & Jastran, M. (2006). A conceptual model of the food choice process over the life course. In R. Shepherd & M. Raats (Eds.), *The Psychology of Food Choice* (pp. 1-18). CABI Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1079/9780851990323.0001>
- Spence, C., & Piqueras-Fiszmann, B. (2014). *The perfect meal: The multisensory science of food and dining*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Spence, C., & Youssef, J. (2022, December). On the rise of shocking food. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2022.100615>.
- Stourna, A.-H. (2011). *La cuisine à la scène, boire et manger au théâtre du 20e siècle*. Presses Universitaires François Rabelais.

- Sukhu, A., & Bilgihan, A. (2021). The impact of hedonic dining experiences on word of mouth, switching intentions and willingness to pay. *British Food Journal*, 123(12), 3954-3969. <https://doi.org/10.1108/BFJ-10-2020-0901>
- Ulla, G. (2012, May 16). Andoni Luis Aduriz on fun, expression and didacticism. *Eater* <https://www.eater.com/2012/5/16/6586125/andoni-luis-aduriz-on-fun-expression-and-didacticism>
- Warren, C., & McGraw, A. P. (2016). Differentiating what is humorous from what is not. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 110(3), 407-430. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000041>
- Yemsi, A.-C. (2024) Fine dining multisensory restaurants and intermediality: An exploratory case study on Ultraviolet and The Alchemist. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 35, 100882. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2024.100882>
- Youssef, J., Chulia Sanchez, C., Woods, A. T., & Spence, C. (2018). “Jastrow’s Bistable Bite”: What happens when visual Bistable illusion meets the culinary arts? *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 13, 16-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2018.04.004>