

No one in the hotel wears a moustache, except the cooks: Gastronomy and systems of social reproduction

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Abstract

Anyone who has worked in the food industry knows that a considerable part of a waiter's work lies in having to understand customers. A few feet away, in the kitchen, things look different. Customers are frequently portrayed as distant, unfriendly, petulant, or even downright arbitrary in their desires. A great part of working in the kitchen is thought of as distinctive from service work and the customer's wants. Cooks focus on ingredients and their transformation, in opposition to the interpretive labour done by waiters and management staff. How are cooks to make intricate luxury food when they seem to refuse to relate to those for whom they make it? What kind of political imagination are we dealing with? In this article, I explore ethnographic data drawn from my apprenticeship in a French gastronomic kitchen (south of France, 2018–2019). This data includes lists, longer descriptions and a more analytical text. Literature on kitchen work (academic and literary) provide distance and nuance to the data. Graeber's discussions on schismogenesis, sense-making in work societies, and systems of social reproduction provide a framework for a description of the ideology behind the production of luxury foods in capitalist societies. This allows for a new way of looking at what was called the subculture of kitchens, its rebellious image, and its ambivalent attitude towards work and how it should be done and talked about. By their position in the restaurant, central in production and marginal in consumption, kitchen workers navigate an ideology of defiance emerging from distant encounters with customers and their intentions, desires, and way of life.

KEYWORDS: kitchen work, haute-cuisine, schismogenesis, care and productive work, interpretive labour

Introduction: On *de facto* ethnography and making sense of powerful others

This article is longer than expected. This is due, in part, to the ‘common dilemma of ethnographic writing: points that seem simple and obvious to anyone who has spent years inside a given cultural universe require a great deal of ink to convey to someone who hasn’t’ (Graeber, 2009, p. vii). It is also due to my desire to produce a theoretically informed ethnographic description that attempts, *above all*, to be an ethnographic description worthy of reinterpretation (Graeber, 2009, p. viii). As such, most of the article consists of an edition of my notes, writings (and poorly drawn asparagus) from my time in a gastronomic kitchen in the south of France, as an apprentice under a “master”, the chef, from 2018 to 2019. The article originates¹ from the realisation that a great number of my notes dealt with what I, as a cook, thought of the customers’ lives, what we—the brigade—thought of them and how it resonated with my readings of David Graeber’s work (first and foremost on violence as a breakdown of interpretive labour and schismogenesis).

I start by describing two forms of interacting and thinking about customers in restaurants, the “front of house” are asked to serve and cater to the customers, while the “back of house”, the kitchen brigade, is in charge of producing the food. Crossing paths with the customers, or interacting through different interfaces such as the plates themselves, the ordering tickets, or even the accounts of the service workers, cooks construe different figures of their guests. A longer text, political in nature, would show how those arbitrary, awkward, and imperfect encounters generate very ambivalent emotions

Next, to understand the different scales of reflexivity at play here, I will review a selection of literary and academic writings on kitchens and kitchens workers.

Then, I debate the processes of differentiation, symbolic violence, gendered division of labour and the tension between visible and invisible work in the conclusion.

Two critical ideas stemming from Graeber’s work makes the article possible. First, his discussion of schismogenesis, or as he paraphrased earlier in his career, “culture as creative refusal”. Second, the suggestion (originating in feminist theory) that, being in a position of inequality, one finds itself doing a great deal of interpretive work. The articulation of those two ideas appears through the article: by having to care for others—interpret and imagine their point of view—from afar, cooks distance themselves from the customers. Class differentiation is then complicated by gender differentiation. Cooks tend to view their work as producing things, not directly caring for others. Waiters and

¹ I must thank Jonas Musco for his help and insights on the first draft of the article, and for suggesting I submit it. I extend those thanks to the two anonymous reviewers of this paper for their constructive remarks and criticisms.

waitresses are believed to be a more appropriate fit for reproductive work. If being enmeshed in an asymmetrical relationship produces reflexivity and knowledge, on which type of ethnographic ground are we walking here? David Graeber's outlook on violence and inequality helps in clarifying the matter here.

In 2018, I had to decide: pursue a doctoral thesis without funding or try to find a new job. I did not want to work in kitchens *while* doing a doctorate, so I decided to go through with an old "Plan B": learning to cook professionally. Granted, 'as a trained ethnographer you can't really help yourself' (Graeber, 2009, p. 12), and so I felt it would be interesting to document my journey. Karen Ho warns of the ethical dangers looming in those situations, being akin to covert ethnography, as she was 'an employee first, friend second, and a fieldworker third' (Ho, 2009, p. 14). My position was similar, though sometimes motivated by something other than generating knowledge. Kitchen work is hard, hot, and sometimes dangerous: writing about it was a way to vent, complain, discuss, and critique. In addition, time was always lacking, so I took notes while walking back home, at nights, and in the moments we called "la coupure", the afternoons between lunch and dinner. This explains the patchy look of my notes. Much of the more in-depth writings from my apprenticeship were written in moments of irritation and resentment, reflecting on the violence of this line of work. In turn, it coloured the tone and quality of my remarks.

Nevertheless, it does have ethnographic undertones: the information is recursive. I tried to map out areas of dense meanings, and this, in an inductive fashion. It seems to lie between something like Marcus and Holmes (2008) "para-ethnography", and what Graeber (2005) describes as a *de facto* ethnography:

Servants, hirelings, slaves, secretaries, concubines, kitchen workers, pretty much anyone dependent on the whims of a person or persons living in a different moral or cultural universe are for obvious reasons constantly trying to figure out what that person is thinking, how people like that tend to think. (p. 200)

If there is one point to this article, it is precisely to tease out the kind of knowledge that the relationship between the kitchen and customers might yield. What seems to appear is a double understanding of cooks through their work first and their distant interaction with the people they feed second. This is why there is an argument to be made on a case of schismogenesis of haute cuisine as an institution (at least in Europe). It is the result of having to make sense of powerful others from afar while having to acknowledge that it is an asymmetrical relationship.

From the kitchen's point of view

Before jumping into the thick of it, there are a few points I should make about on life in the kitchen. First, much of it is really repetitive. Second, it is, to some at least, never really boring. It is fast-paced, everything is always going wrong, there is shouting—but not always, there is joke and banter—and a lot of it, and mastering that chaos is an art. Some compare it to dancing; others invoke spiritual highs when a shift goes smoothly. Or at least, that is the heroic way of looking at it. Many love the sheer delight of highly coordinated actions and random acts of *gourmandise* with grand tales of stolen bits of grilled salmon. Those are days' worth working for.

Nonetheless, there is also: the gunk, the washing up, the sting in your feet when you wake up, the abuse and the alcohol—yours or your colleagues, the realisation of the staggering amount of hours not paid and the receipt for your boss's vacation on the counter, the burns and the cuts, *that* weird smell (it's freshly cleaned and deeply tainted at the same time). All of it contrasts very much with the quietness, politeness and sparkling whites of "la salle", the dining room. Not that waitressing work is all glitter and joy, on the contrary (Beaumont, 2019; Erickson, 2004, 2009; Hall, 1993; Leidner, 1993; Sherman, 2007; Wilson, 2020), only the setting here implies two very different ways of moving and controlling your body, and ultimately two different experiences with the customers. Luxury work is supposed to be invisible and, as such, the differences between the customer's spaces and the "backroom" are stark (Beaumont, 2019; Sherman, 2007).

I will review two kinds of encounters with the customer: the firsts are closer to face-to-face interactions, and the other a more distant way of understanding them. I will categorise the first ones as crossing path with the customers (a), and the second ones as the different figures of good and bad guests (b).

Crossing paths: on the awkward violence of class encounters

Cooks, dishwashers, and the kitchen brigade at large are usually only *crossing paths* with the customers. Always in quick fashion, this is the closest one could get to interact face-to-face with a customer. Four moments typically exemplify those interactions (Coffee and cigarette breaks, restroom encounters, going home at the end of a shift, or finally, through the service-hatch), all have in common some kind of break in the workday or in the workflow. The quotes are mine or indicated otherwise.

Enjoying a break, relaxing in self-control

The sun is shining, which is not a rare sight. The kitchen is well lit but feels cold compared to the warmth of sunlight. Everybody has finished eating, hurrying in order to squeeze as much fresh air from the *pause du midi*, which happens just before service, at 11h30 sharp. Maybe you unbutton one of your chef's white, take a stroll on social media, have a lively discussion on who is going to adopt the dishwasher's kittens: 'You are definitely going to kill the cat J; I've seen you handle dead animals parts; I don't think L. should give you a small feline'—all this while having a foot on the beige painted walls of the restaurant. This 'letting go' is 'not a good look' says the *maître d'*, peeking his head through the door to straighten things up: 'There could be customers coming in, c'mon guys; stop being so loud and vulgar—this has to stop.' He will say this, but then again, everyone knows he spouts the vilest insults and jokes; that's why his act is not working too well. Nobody is *refusing* to obey his order, though, as we all try to learn and be more "polite". When a passer-by strolls along, the whole group becomes a bit quieter, a bit more professional looking. We keep our voices down. A sigh of relief if they were just passing through. There are trickier ones, like the rubbernecks. They are not customers for the day; they are here to see if the menu looks good; maybe, they'll ask a question about reservations, for which we'll have to get someone from the dining room, maybe the *maître d'*, to answer. Most of the time, they go by quickly, but that is another minute or two taken from your lunch break. This leads to endless discussions on who is a customer and who is not. It morphed into a game: 'see those two love birds, big coats, they won't look at us and go right in!' I was wrong. They gave us the warmest smiles: 'At least, they were customers after all.' Our game involved much judgement on how people were dressed and how they behaved in the public space. The hardest to read was probably the corporate types. Front-of-house workers made fun of the general refractory attitude towards *dressing well* of the back of house—they would mock the apparent disinterest in dressing in designer clothes, in smart casual or suits, in leather shoes.

Nevertheless, most of us were able to differentiate between a "penguin" (dressed in a suit but just an employee of a bank, for example) and the real deal (like a big-name lawyer coming in after the opera). In return, we would make fun of the front-of-house fascination with the customers' clothing, calling them *lèche-cul* (ass-kissers). Our brigade wasn't in total disregard of formal and business fashion though: a large part of my colleagues were total sneakerheads and bought expensive pieces of clothing, some of the youngest in the brigade would admire the more formal customers, dressed in full evening gowns, and comment on the power it seems to exude.

The restrooms: Excusing yourself and mitigating shame

The restaurant I did my apprenticeship at did not have an employee bathroom. This meant we “risked” an encounter with the customers anytime we would have to go at lunchtime or dinnertime. The restrooms were the last place where, as a cook and surely as a waiter, you would want to have to greet a customer. Excuses were plenty—greetings, not so much. The embarrassment felt on those cringe-inducing interactions are the stuff of many jokes and tales. Any interactions in public restrooms would have gone this way, although the reality of our relative positions (that of guests and hosts, and a hierarchical one at that) made for particularly uncomfortable encounters. Much of the time, very few words can be exchanged, as everyone is hastily excusing himself and avoiding eye contact. We were instructed to change our clothes if they were even a speck of dirt on them, in order to go to the toilets. Once, I was told I had to hide, as not to embarrass a customer. Also, we had to “play” the washing up of our hands—this is something the coronavirus has taught a lot of us to do: an overcorrection of a mundane task. Therefore, crossing paths with a customer at the restrooms would be dreaded moments. I remember vividly *showing* that I washed my hands, even scrubbing my nails, to really send the message. One waitress was absolutely terrified to go to the restroom and would work the whole night without relieving herself; a few of the back-of-house staff would be concerned and amused at the same time: ‘Just go; they won’t bite you.’ Ordinary embarrassment could be shameful or even, in that last example, humiliation.

Going home: Politeness and unfamiliar territories

Arguably, one of the biggest pet peeves of the service industry is customers coming in near closing or so close to it as to delay it all. The fact that some of our customers were well known to the restaurant and beyond aggravated this: it would feel like they had more of a “right” to come in late and stay late. Sometimes the dinners just continued for a few hours after the kitchen had to close; the entire brigade would clean up the kitchen, take a mental note of the things to buy or stock up for the day after and eventually take their working clothes off. When dressing up for going home, all would hear the customers having fun, sometimes joined by the chef. Most of the time, nobody would comment, too tired, listening to music or sending messages to friends at the bar. A few times, though, one of those latecomers would get rowdy and shout something a bit too loudly. In the kitchen, those very out-of-context telegraphic shouting would raise an eyebrow, or someone would whisper ‘WTF’ at a nearby colleague. Occasionally it would lead to mocking the lecture-like figure emerging from the shouting. Some customers had

very opinionated views of the food they ate, and making a pastiche out of them would happen from time to time. One of our colleague would impersonate them in grotesque and frankly homophobic ways, mocking their tone and pedantic proclamations: 'GaStr-OnomY is CeNtraL,' he would imitate. When preparing for going out, everyone would wait before opening the service doors. The trick was to swiftly escape without exposing other co-workers to the dining room. It was also essential to get out quickly; otherwise, the maître d' would be upset that we had been hanging around "on his turf". 'It upsets him that *we* get the thanks,' was a common explanation of his behaviour. Because, now and then, a table would politely say thanks. I would respond with what I can only describe as a *flat smile*, trying to be more appreciative than a laconic *just doing my job*, but holding it in, as I was told engaging in a discussion would "make a fuss". The sous-chef would purposely be outrageous and jovial, just to mess with the front-of-house workers, waving his hands childishly. He said that not getting any tips allowed him to do that. We would all hurry to get outside, not only because the shift was horrendous this Saturday, but mainly because we were not in "our" territory.

Through the service hatch

As the previous example shows, "crossing paths" can gradually become more distant. A customer, again a regular, shows up through that little window into the customer's world that is the serving hatch. He will say a few words to the chef—if he is in the industry or maybe just generous, to the brigade. Sometimes, he asks a question. This can go two ways, either that question is construed as legitimate by the chef, and it will be answered in a good-humoured tone, or the questions just interrupts workflow unnecessary and is met with the classics, 'I am really sorry, I don't have time' or in a very factual tone: 'Yes, exactly, there's cinnamon in the desert.' To make us laugh and vent the frustration of being interrupted in his *mise en place*, the chef would mutter something like 'next time, they'll ask if we cooked the pasta ourselves.' Those interactions could also include a more curious customer "peeking" through the hatch, and having to initiate a reparation, in Goffman's sense, and saying *hello*, sometimes sorry or even pretexting to want to see the chef. This was unusual, as the customer was "caught" and not the other way around (as would happen in the restrooms).

What characterises those interactions are their brevity and, to some extent, their awkwardness. They mark a break in the workflow, either because they are literally "breaks" or pauses or because the customers themselves interrupt the work. All of them are moments of letting go, of unreservedness. This is risky business, as any interaction between

the cooks and the customers is considered dangerous from the point of view of *la salle* and management. 'Cooks aren't *trained* to interact with a sophisticated clientele' is sometimes said to justify the taboo. This is why senior staff and management are constantly watching and monitoring the breaks, even if it is only offhandedly or through joking. The brigade is compared to a pirate ship, full of a ragtag collection of rude and childish cooks, for those reasons. More rarely, the sous-chef would step in, remembering he had a role in "holding us". The assumption is that a rookie (new to the industry) or a young recruit would not know how to address the customers, and catastrophes would ensue if he talked too much with them. This presumed social immaturity would be corrected on a daily basis by interventions of more senior staff, particularly the front-of-house staff. Some already knew or quickly learned to be more "polite" in the way it was expected of us (not talking, opening the door, bowing in some way when stumbling upon a customer in front of the restaurant, being very swift and hasty while going to the bathrooms).

In terms of class relations, it shows the importance of the restaurant as a socialising space for workers (Burawoy, 1979; Fellay, 2010; Fine, 2008; Leidner, 1993; Sherman, 2007; Wilson, 2020). The difference between regulars and "the rest" comes up regularly too. They bring familiarity and personification to otherwise detached and asymmetrical encounters in gastronomic kitchens. To save one's face, jokes, witticism, banter, or mockery all play an important role in mitigating the shame and the awkwardness that are the results of failed interactions. Humour is characteristically thought to be a coping mechanism for the violent and difficult working conditions in the kitchens (Alexander et al., 2012; Fine, 1988, 2008; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018; Lynch, 2009), and it surely helps in lightening the awkward violence of class encounters. This is something we will see more of in discussing how different guest's figures are narrated and brought to life.

Of good and bad guests.

Bad guests are moody, patronising and don't know how to eat

I have always been struck by the seemingly ubiquitous "figures of evil" one finds in anthropological literature, whether in the mines of Bolivia or the factories of Malaysia. Here, nothing so extreme (at least not in a "customers will strip you of your fat by making you work long hours" kind of way); nevertheless, some of my notes extensively recall customers as bad guests. They emerge when a customer does something our brigade frowns upon or does not fully recognise as legitimate. It is, to be understood—at least partially—as a consequence of being so spatially and socially separated from the dining

room and its guests. Those figures are less concrete than jokes and first-hand accounts and include a more generalised form of categorisation. We have seen that customers are rarely encountered, at the very least in very particular moments. They are very much distant customers. Nevertheless, they are talked about, made fun of, envied, criticised. Ortner has talked about “interface ethnography” (2010) to describe the type of observations one could do in Hollywood, only attending public and authorised events—in contrast with the every-day “going about” on set, for example. Here something similar is happening, as customers are *mediated* by and through the plate of food, the orders, or by the front-of-house workers and their accounts of the dining room. Consider this discussion between *EhOrr* and *Tripiantes*, two cooks on the *Subreddit r/KitchenConfidential*, posted by u/Tripiantes 2 years ago:

Recognizing customers by their eating habits

I work at a small kitchen, I am the only cook and usually serve to 20-30 customers every night, I rarely go out the kitchen but when I see the orders sometimes I go like “oh is this guy again” lol, does it ever happen to you?

EhOrr:

Definitely

There’s salmon lady

Balsamic on side person

Extra side of pulled pork dude

Brings in their own coconut oil for us to cook with lady...

Happier to see some than others

Tripiantes:

What the fuck? If you have to bring your ingredients to a restaurant might as well cook at your home”

What Reddit user Tripiantes suggests here is that sometimes customers seem to think they are “too much” at home. It is a common reaction to overly specific demands and sometimes weird and out-of-context commands. We would be reprimanded by the Chef, but often muttered under our breath to each other, ‘Look at that, he thinks he’s at home!’ The fact that any interaction has to go through either the front-of-house workers or the plates themselves adds to the arbitrariness and decontextualised nature of the demands. Once, and it went down as one of the strangest requests we have ever had, a waiter

asked the kitchen: 'Quick L., give us your glasses.' L., a bit taken by surprise, and too trusting and credulous to contest the order, gave up his thick glasses. We all turned our back—the work stopped for a moment—and Y. the only woman in the kitchen, asked L, 'Why did you give him your glasses L.?' He responded, 'I don't know; he said the customer can't read the menu.' We tried to get a glimpse of the perpetrator through the service hatch. Here he was, 65 maybe, wearing glasses too narrow for his big head. Content. No one in the kitchen ever understood how this was possible: was he myopic or astigmatic? Why did the waiter not tell him it just would not work, or at least ask what was his prescription? Why the hurry? The incident came up several times late at night while recollecting fun and weird moments between colleagues and attained somewhat of a "cult" status: anytime a customer was being needy or childish, the anecdote would surface.

These examples demonstrate what happens when it is nearly impossible to do interpretive work, actions are reified and reasons obscured. Nevertheless, there were plenty of situations in which the customers were more understandable. The motivations appeared more clearly, but then again explained in general terms and blanket statements. One of them could be: 'They don't know what they want (because they don't understand the work).' Working "the line" implies juggling with a great number of orders, different meats and fish cooking at different rates, plates coming back signalling Table 3 has finished eating its entrées, while Table 5 is really taking its time. A constant mental gymnastics is justifiably troubled if a modification in the plate or the menu comes up. Steaks are the great divider here: I never met a cook who would refuse to cook a steak according to a customer's liking, though I am confident a lot of them are irritated by having a great piece of beef coming back—the customer saying to the waiter, 'It's not medium-well.' It is a challenge to the one thing cooks take pride in: technical proficiency. Customers will always "be right", and cooks will carbonise a beautiful marble steak if it has to come to it (I have seen one go to the microwave, after the fourth time it came back to the kitchen) to please a customer who insisted that well done is what he thinks it is. Steak controversies are not that common, but they are representative of this shared explanation of customer's behaviour: 'They just don't know, or understand the work.'

Finally, another figure of a bad guest would be the "show off". There are great examples of this type of admonishment in the hotel industry: "new money" customers are sometimes viewed as rude, ill-mannered and boasters, in comparison to "old money" customers, who "know how to behave" (Beaumont, 2019; Sherman, 2007). There is a similar sentiment in my notes, although the distinction is less clear-cut, probably because there

are fewer social clues to judge behaviour from the kitchen's point of view. When Table 5 orders the full truffle menu, and discards almost all the truffles shavings, leaving them on the plate for each serving, comments abound: 'They're just burning money,' 'Give me your salary; I'll know what to order with it!' Insults even, as it was sometimes felt as an offence to the ingredients and the work. On occasion, this was so extreme the team would salvage the food and eat it: once, a big player ordered a turbot, whole. That's a beautiful, difficult to cook, decadent and very pricey fish. The two businessmen barely touched it, and the giant fish came back in all its glory to the kitchen. The dish was on a serving platter, so most of us did not have a problem helping ourselves to a healthy serving of the buttery fish.

Good guests eat "well" and understand that cooking for them is a collective effort.

I find plenty of good guests in my notes—fun ones, respectable ones, and great eaters at large. One of the things that really got on our nerves was that we had to do the dishes while having to work the line. This position, though, lets you have a very intimate look at the way people eat and behave, and many would be surprised by the quantity of information that can be inferred from the way a plate comes back. A clean plate, with the streaks left by the mopping of the sauce with a bit of bread, would get a comment: 'Look at that clean plate. I don't even need to wash it, L! Good to know someone's having fun.'

At the other end of the production line, being *aboyeur* is a similar position. *Aboyer* is French for barking and consist of reading the orders generated by the front of house and effectively yelling them to the different cooks. In this position, the menu of the different tables is visible. Comments on the validity or the absurdity of the choices made by the different customers are not rare. For example, ordering less popular items but interesting to make or those with a crazy appetite—like ordering the full charcuterie menu and still eating well after the entrées, the main and the cheese, both choices were regarded as the mark of a great guest. Like us, here was someone who is a *gourmand* and surely isn't shy about "coming to a restaurant to eat". Another type of "good guest" is the one that shows appreciation for the work. We did not get tips, but occasionally a table would insist on thanking the brigade, which would feel good, even if no one would expand on it. Once, someone asked if someone in the kitchen would like to taste his (very) expensive bottle of wine. Sometimes, the excitement and delight of the customers would be seen through the hatch. Seeing how grateful people can be when they experience novel foods

is invoked regularly as one of the reasons for the “calling” certain workers have with cooking.

Judging the guests either as a distant foe, or as a friendly gourmand, always rest on a difficult understanding of the people the cooks are serving. Bad guests are challenging to understand when good guests are relatable. They are surely socially different, but then again some interactions provide rare intimacy (as in the type of character judgement one can make from the way you finish your plate) and strange closeness (as in the awkward toilet encounters). Having a simpler categorisation of customers is another tool for making sense of the customers and navigating work in a gastronomic kitchen.

Thus far, the examples made available to understand the constraints and the boundaries of interpretive labour for kitchen workers were 1) face-to-face interactions and 2) discussions on the figures of good and bad guests. In this next translation of a longer text, I would like to provide a final example from my time in a gastronomic kitchen to illustrate the kind of reflexivity and imagination kitchen work can sometimes spark. It illuminates how ambiguous cooking for radically different others is, and how violence in the workplace is met with a variety of emotions and sentiments.

The asparagus scenario (or the fetishism of gastronomic production; in which we see why writing ethnographic descriptions angry is odd)

The text that follows was, I think, influenced by some sleepless night fuelled by Anthony Bourdain’s *No reservations* cooking show, and very surely, by my readings of David Graeber at the time (the science-fiction bit in conclusion, even if hyperbolic, is somewhat of a botched imitation). I wrote it near the end of my apprenticeship:

A kitchen in spring: sweaty summer months, desserts melting in the “culs-de-poule” before they’re even finished, butter softened and disgusting by the 35° and up, in this submarine of hell. Also the end of school, of high school. Thus the season of the beans. Thus, the season of the trainees who come to work for nothing, in the “gastro’s” and Michelin-starred restaurants of their cities. Here they come, filled with hope and soon to be filling the pocket of the “patron”,² because a cook with free time is a cook who can cook more and better. His time freed up by the new pair of hands. In fact, a great part of the gastronomic pleasure rests on the shoulders of these little hands so little paid. The higher up the Michelin ladder one climbs, the more this maxim becomes true. It is also true that if I

² At the time, I was not aware of Orwell’s *Down and out*. Amusingly, the translation from French to English gives a, unintentionally, pastiche-like quality to the ‘PATRON!’ that populate the famous book.

complain about the quietness of an evening, I can be sure to be knocked out at 9:47 pm by a table of twelve hungry vegans, 4 of whom are gluten-free, demanding minute dishes. Just imagine the work it takes to make a Robuchon-style purée. 25% butter and a 400 million dollar empire. All those potatoes to peel. Boiling them, pulling them out of the water. Then if the intern is shelling the green beans, we can finally afford to make galantines of chicken stuffed with truffles and foie gras. If he wasn't there, that time wouldn't be free, and the quality of the food would suffer. Unpaid work such as internships, or underpaid, supervised, and state-subsidised work, such as apprenticeships, determines the quality of the dining experience. French gastronomy is obsessed with "refinement" in a morbid and tautological way. It is so precisely because "refined" means "worked". Producing starred food involves freeing up time and bodies, and by a rancid twist of fate it is this exploitation that is the object of admiration. If a Soviet propagandist and science fiction writer, on a bad day, had devised the worst of dystopian futures, it would have been the one in which the only food the bourgeois class would like to eat is the one that requires the most proletarian suffering to produce.

We could call this aesthetic "the asparagus scenario". White, purple, green. Whatever you like best. The easiest way to cook it will be to plunge the whole thing into boiling, salted water. Not too sophisticated. Tasty. Not very "haute cuisine". Now, take that same asparagus. White. From the Landes, if you feel like it. From Camargue perhaps, or Blayais, or Navarre, or from Cimadolmo. Break off the woody part by holding the heel of the fingertips with your right hand and the middle of the stem with your left hand. Cook them in salted water. Still a bit "rustic".

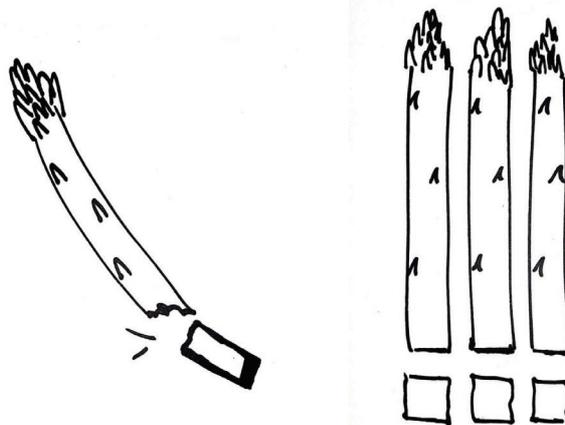


Figure 1: Drawings accompanying the original text (author's drawing, 2019)

Pick up an asparagus spear, with a “label” of course. Cut off the heel rather than break it off. It’s like your work is starting to appear on the green plant. Cut off the heel and peel off the white part. Slowly, it adds up, on asparagus at a time. But don’t stop there. Take a small peeling knife, and very lightly slash the first third from the tip. Clean up the little leaves below that line. Lay out your asparagus in a *rang d’oignon* [untranslatable joke of poor taste] and trim their heels so that everything is of the same size. Repeat these operations on 15 kilos of asparagus.

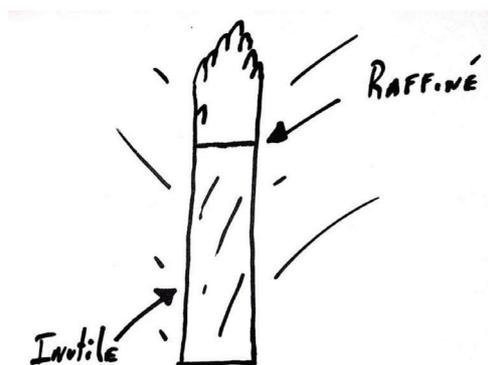


Figure 2: Drawings accompanying the original text. French reads “polished” and “useless” (author’s drawing, 2019)

That is to say, between 20 to 25 asparagus by kilos: that’ll be near 350 asparagus to be tinkered with. How could you nit-pick in such an ostentatious way if there wasn’t a brigade of badly paid workers ready to do anything for such a futile exercise? An inspired chef could write an ambitious panegyric on the “sublimation of the products of the earth”. The fact remains that in order to sell this luxury to empty individuals, too well endowed on the pecuniary side, he will need interns and apprentices, free or almost free workers. In the end, what is made visible on the vegetable is mainly the work itself.

A few instances of interest from my notes relate to this last point:

Chef told us he once had to “tourné” a kilo and a half of mushrooms [which is tedious and purely decorative], only to see it go into a blender for mushroom consommé.

When I told him I hated “doing” the asparagus and said that it is just for show (I knew he would bite, he emphasises “gourmandise” more than tiny serving por-

tion and pure aesthetics), he responded in the most matter of fact way: “Why, yes, but work has to be seen. How else would they know it’s gastronomy?”

There are a number of problems here and a great deal to say if we were to unpack this odd text. What is relevant to our argument here is mainly:

1. the feeling that all of this is seems to be for people who don’t deserve it,
2. the widespread and implicit knowledge that, at some level, what is important is to make visible a tremendous amount of work through minute details
3. finally that this results in varying degrees of violence, all of them owing to the (very visible) arbitrariness of the situation.

This last point is crucial: it hinges on the fact that the relationship between cook and customer is asymmetrical in who tries to understand who. It hinges on the fact that luxury goods need a great deal of manpower while being invisible (Beaumont 2019; Sherman 2007). This account is certainly peculiar. However, the very ambiguous emotions and ideas being poured in seem to be coherent with the ambiguities created by crossing paths with the customers: shame, mocking, anger, interrogation, surprise.

I have reviewed face-to-face encounters and different degrees of reflexivity (figures of guests and political writings), all developing from my apprenticeship. A quick review of literary and academic writings on kitchen work should provide nuance and hopefully a sense of historical depth. I will review two of the most influential autobiographies in the restaurant industry, namely *Down and out in Paris and London* (2013) from Orwell and Bourdain’s *Kitchen confidential* (2000). This will provide nuance and a bit more ethnographic thickness to my argument. The work of sociologist Gary A. Fine and contemporary ethnographies of restaurant and service work provides examples and conceptual insights to the data presented here. Anthropological and historical works contextualise haute cuisines with regards to gender and class relations.

Non-fiction and academic writings on working as a cook: differentiation, violence and historical depth

Orwell and Bourdain on kitchen work

The title of this article is taken from a passage in Orwell’s *Down and out in Paris and London* (2013) which exemplifies quite well how different parts of the restaurant saw their work as worlds apart from each other:

On my third day at the hotel the CHEF DU PERSONNEL, who had generally spoken to me in quite a pleasant tone, called me up and said sharply: 'Here, you, shave that moustache off at once! NOM DE DIEU, who ever heard of a PLONGEUR with a moustache?'. I began to protest, but he cut me short. "A PLONGEUR with a moustache—nonsense! Take care I don't see you with it tomorrow.

On the way home I asked Boris what this meant. He shrugged his shoulders. "You must do what he says, MON AMI. No one in the hotel wears a moustache, except the cooks. I should have thought you would have noticed it. Reason? There is no reason. It is the custom".

I saw that it was an etiquette, like not wearing a white tie with a dinner-jacket, and shaved off my moustache. Afterwards I found out the explanation of the custom, which is this: waiters in good hotels do not wear moustaches, and to show their superiority they decree that PLONGEURS shall not wear them either; and the cooks wear their moustaches to show their contempt for the waiters. (Orwell, 2013, p. 81)

The distinction between cooks and waiters is so stark it comes down to facial hair (and routinely culminates in shouting). Orwell even speaks of 'elaborate castes systems' ordained by an attribute of 'prestige' (2013, p. 82). The distance to the customer, and the proximity with the handling of the food—eaten or to be eaten, is the dividing factor, in Orwell's book and beyond it seems. The cooks appear throughout the book as recluse, sweating, shouting, and insulting as much as they can and all around being very protective of their identity and work. Technique is always the measure of one's value—not their capacity to understand and anticipate the customers wants and desires. Even more so, they seem to take pride in *not* understanding the guests. This is evidence again of the gendered division of labour, as cooks do not see their work as a service—rather as productive work, while waiters and waitresses merely serve it and have to be obsequious with the guests. It is worth quoting Orwell extensively on this matter:

Undoubtedly the most workmanlike class, and the least servile, are the cooks. They do not earn quite so much as waiters, but their prestige is higher and their employment steadier. The cook does not look upon himself as a servant, but as a skilled workman; he is generally called 'UN OUVRIER' which a waiter never is. He knows his power—knows that he alone makes or mars a restaurant, and that if he is five minutes late everything is out of gear. He despises the whole non-cooking staff, and makes it a point of honour to insult everyone below the head

waiter. And he takes a genuine artistic pride in his work, which demands very great skill. It is not the cooking that is so difficult, but the doing everything to time. Between breakfast and luncheon the head cook at the Hotel X would receive orders for several hundred dishes, all to be served at different times; he cooked few of them himself, but he gave instructions about all of them and inspected them before they were sent up. His memory was wonderful. The vouchers were pinned on a board, but the head cook seldom looked at them; everything was stored in his mind, and exactly to the minute, as each dish fell due, he would call out, 'FAITES MARCHER UNE COTELETTE DE VEAU' (or whatever it was) unfailingly. He was an insufferable bully, but he was also an artist. It is for their punctuality, and not for any superiority in technique, that men cooks are preferred to women.

After describing the "back of house", Orwell continues in describing the "front of house" of the restaurant. He speaks directly of the impact one's proximity to the customers has on one's "outlook".

The waiter's outlook is quite different. He too is proud in a way of his skill, but his skill is chiefly in being servile. His work gives him the mentality, not of a workman, but of a snob. He lives perpetually in sight of rich people, stands at their tables, listens to their conversation, sucks up to them with smiles and discreet little jokes. He has the pleasure of spending money by proxy. Moreover, there is always the chance that he may become rich himself, for, though most waiters die poor, they have long runs of luck occasionally. At some cafes on the Grand Boulevard there is so much money to be made that the waiters actually pay the PATRON for their employment. The result is that between constantly seeing money, and hoping to get it, the waiter comes to identify himself to some extent with his employers. He will take pains to serve a meal in style, because he feels that he is participating in the meal himself. (Orwell, 1933, pp. 88–89)

There is, however, solidarity and a sense of belonging that surpasses the caste-like system of the hotel, the creation and maintaining of a collective identity clearly differentiated from the customer's and the boss's. 'Look out for the PATRON, and as for the customers, S'EN F—PAS MAL!' (1933, p. 94). This is clearly laid out in this episode:

Sometimes we met some of our cooks and waiters in the BISTROS, and they were friendly and stood us drinks. Indoors we were their slaves, but it is an etiquette in hotel life that between hours everyone is equal, and the ENGUEULADES do not count. (Orwell, 1933, p. 74)

Bourdain's work is also a behind-the-scenes look at the workings of restaurants, here all more high-end than the hotels of *Down and out* (Orwell, 2013). *Kitchen confidential* (Bourdain, 2000) is a riff of the same energy, violence and laughter always going hand in hand, toxic friendship and indestructible bonds. In regards to the way he sees guests, he describes, for example, customers of the *Rockefeller Center Luncheon Club* as 'mostly geriatric business types.' For the buffet, he had to revive leftovers and 'make it look edible' (Bourdain, 2000, p. 125). He seemed to despise having to serve them:

And then, of course, I'd don a clean jacket and apron, cram one of those silly coffee filter-like chef's hats on my head, and stand by a voiture, slicing and serving the hot entrees. "Would you care for some Tongue en Madère?" I'd ask through clenched teeth, my face a rictus of faux cheer as I'd have to repeat and repeat for the hard-of-hearing captains of industry who ate the same spread of sauce-disguised leftovers every lunch and for whom the hot entree was clearly the highlight of their day... The Irish waitresses who worked the Luncheon Club with me were more like nurses after years of this. They had nicknames for our regulars: "Dribbling Dick" for one ninety-year-old who had a hard time keeping his food in his mouth, "Stinky" for an apparently incontinent banker, "Shakey Pete" for the guy who needed his food cut for him, and so on. There were famous names in banking and industry with us every day, all New York laid out below us beyond the floor-to-ceiling picture windows—eating garbage at the top of the world. (Bourdain, 2000, p. 125)

Bourdain, too, shows how involved the specialisation is, how much it depends on machismo, productive proficiency, and bragging.

The boys across the street were considered to be a championship team, the perfect example of the culinary ideals of the time. Mario's Restaurant was a hugely successful Southern Italian joint and the Mario crew were feared and respected because they did more covers, by a few hundred each night, than almost anyone else in town. It was fairly sophisticated stuff for the time: whole legs of veal were actually butchered on the premises, stocks were made from real bones (not commercial base), sauces were made from scratch with quality ingredients—and the Mario crew were the loudest, crudest, most bad-ass bunch of cookies in town. When they'd swing by the Dreadnaught for a few pops after work, they made our ragtag bunch of part-time roofers feel small. They were richer, more confident, and moved with even more swagger and style than our motley crew of oddballs and amateurs. They moved in a pack, with their own dialect—a high-

pitched, ultra-femme, affected drawl, salted with terms from eighteenth-century English literature and Marine Corps drill instructor-speak—a lush, intimidating, sardonic secret language, which was much imitated. (2000, p. 29)

He insists in the first pages of the book on the bonds of solidarity, the kin-like relationships one creates in working the line:

If I need a favor at four o'clock in the morning, whether it's a quick loan, a shoulder to cry on, a sleeping pill, bail money, or just someone to pick me up in a car in a bad neighborhood in the driving rain, I'm definitely not calling up a fellow writer. I'm calling my sous-chef, or a former sous-chef, or my saucier, someone I work with or have worked with over the last twenty-plus years. (2000, p. 3)

Academic writings on kitchen work

Fine, a sociologist in Chicago, details much of what we've seen here in a beautiful ethnography of time and work in several restaurants of the American Midwest. There, a strong undercurrent of mischievousness, minor rebellions, experimentations and adaptations mitigates the contradictory tensions between economic constraints and a liveable life in the kitchens. Sometimes it is just that 'formal rules and demands are secondary to the practical doing of food preparation' (Fine, 2008, p. 20). Approximations, shortcuts, and 'tricks of the trade' are all part of this arsenal (2008, p. 23). Fine points out to moments where cooks "role-play" the customers, imagining what would be best for a Wednesday night for certain types of customers. This is something entirely absent from my notes: probably blinded by a desire to write about what appeared as the most symbolic of haute cuisine work. How does one learn to understand and anticipate the customer's desires in the highly constrained and violent environment described here? How does one learn to do it when the legitimacy of the customers is so undermined? We've also seen that the asymmetry of the relationship is evident for everyone in haute cuisine brigades (in any case, it is felt, through shame, for example). This symbolic violence is a given—baked in the very setting of haute cuisine cooking. Going through historical and anthropological works shows that this process, the tension between having to do emotional work (interpreting and caring for others) and trying to avoid it, has deep historical and anthropological roots.

Goody has shown that haute cuisine, meaning cooking specialised and differentiated from domestic and regional cuisine, rests on a gendered division of labour (Goody, 1982, p. 193). Domestic and regional cooking is "taken over" by male cooks and made into

haute cuisine. Another specificity of haute-cuisine is that it, as an institution of class reproduction, hinges on differences of “styles of life”. This, in turn, creates ‘contradictions, tensions and conflicts’ at varying scales (1982, p. 191). It is then less incomprehensible that cooks in Europe, as we’ve seen through the examples of Orwell, Bourdain, Fine or indeed in the imperfect and hesitant writings of a young apprentice in a gastronomic kitchen of the 21st century, are ‘a strange bunch. Always straddling the line between the outside world and the inner sancta of their kitchens’ (Whibbs, 2015, p. 1). Distant and out of sight, they are in a way “too close”: cooking for others is intimate work, pollution, prohibition and taboos never too far. This ambiguous position (intimate and socially distant) renders cooks and servants alike, as Goody notes, always prone to suspicions of all sorts (1982). Graeber and Wengrow, following Bateson, describe schismogenesis as ‘the progressive and self-conscious differentiation of cultural norms within groups, as a direct outcome of cumulative interactions between them, leading eventually to rupture’ (Wengrow & Graeber, 2018, p. 240; see also 2021, pp. 56-58). Without leading to rupture, the cumulative, and as we have seen, highly ambivalent, awkward and imperfect, interactions of kitchen workers with their guests is bound to have some sort of transformative effect on the institution as a whole.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, a few persistent details emerged. The importance of differentiated spaces, noted in previous literature (Beaumont, 2019; Fine, 2008; Harris & Giuffre, 2015; Sherman, 2007; Théry, 2015; Wilson, 2020), appears very clearly here as a central matrix for work in the kitchens. The way the restaurants are structured generate a great deal of reflexivity and imagination, although in a very uneven fashion. It also generates ambiguous and confusing affects that are central to one’s identity as both a cook to other cooks and as cooks to others in general. Also, much of that reality is more nuanced than the accounts given by my apprenticeship writings. Kitchen work is not defined by an out-and-out refusal to understand the guests, instead by the contradiction and tensions created by the confrontation of styles of life and class relations (Goody, 1982). As Fine noted, ‘role playing’ the customer and having servers as ‘mediators,’ despite being a source of struggle, is an essential part of making choices in the kitchens (2008, p. 186, see also pp. 103-107).

There is a bundle of ideas here that I have not found a definitive way to unpack, although I would like to address two of them. Doing so will show how much they owe to David Graeber’s work. The first one speaks of the relationship between interpretive

work and violence, while the other explores schismogenesis and “creative refusal”. What I think this article does, is to illustrate how the two processes (having to understand others who do not reciprocate and gradually defining oneself in contrast to them) entangle each other.

Following Graeber and feminist thought on violence and interpretive labour, I have attempted to unpack a few ways kitchen workers make sense of their customers. Graeber insisted that the burden of sociological imagination lies on the exploited in any asymmetrical relationship. Violence is the ‘only form of human action that holds out the possibility of operating on others without being communicative’ (Graeber, 2011, p. 28).³ In the kitchens, being away from the public eye and their customers, working in tough conditions with potentially impure products (blood, dirt, flesh), cooks have developed a very convoluted way to care for others. Caring without having to say and show they do. In ‘the lopsided structure of imaginative identification’ (Graeber, 2011, p. 49) of restaurants, the brigade is both shielded from the direct violence of the customers and left to perform interpretive riddles with the bits and pieces they glean through the windows, the plates, their colleagues. One of the first things that has been evident in my notes is the central role of emotions such as shame, fear, and awkwardness. Those arise in situations in which the possibility for kitchen workers to engage and relate with the customers are marked by relationships of avoidance. To the point, the typical emotion of relationships with high formality, as Graeber points out in his essay *Manners, deference, and private property: Or, elements for a general theory of hierarchy* (2007), is shame. The proximity that service workers endure in their interaction with their customers (see Memmi et al., 2019 for a recent case in point) is here more a *closeness*, a distance manifested by a series of mediation. Customers are interpreted through awkward and furtive interactions, bits and pieces like the plates or the menu orders, and crucially, through the service workers and their accounts of the customers. In discussing the figures of good and bad guests, I have tried to show how this distance also involved schematisation of the customers, with the same underpinnings of avoidance and distance. Bad guests are unpredictable and narrated with contempt; good guests appear to be the ones more resembling the brigade: gourmand without the fuss, or those cognisant of the collective hard work required to cook good food.

³ I find the topic is fairly transversal to his writings, although a number of explicit discussions informed my understanding of the subject: Graeber (2011, pp. 48-52), discussing imagination and violence, and the way standpoint theory informs his argument; Graeber, 2007 (pp. 101-102), on violence and ignorance and commodity fetishism. Graeber (2005) on auto-ethnography, cited in introduction of this article, draws some methodological conclusions. His later work on *The utopia of rules* (2015) also engages directly with the idea that the lack of interpretive work is constitutive of the way violence can arise. Finally, there is great interest in reading Chapter 2 of *On kings* (2017), as the interplay between arbitrary violence and sovereignty is very clearly laid out.

This speaks then of self-conscious differentiation. Differentiation from the service workers, and *through* the front-of-house workers, sometimes with them, differentiation from the customers. This why, I think, schismogenesis, Bateson's concept, understood as 'people's tendency to define themselves against one another' (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021, pp. 56-57), can be a powerful way to interpret the persistence of the dichotomy between cooking and serving in restaurants, thought as a dichotomy between productive work (creating material things) and reproductive work (creating social things). It is also a rejoinder, for the joking relationships kitchen workers and service workers entertain appear in a new light, as the flip side of the relations of avoidance they observe with diners on a Saturday rush.

Not too long ago, while watching a heist movie with a colleague from my apprenticeship days, now sous-chef in a great restaurant far from his hometown, he confessed to me: 'We're writing a heist movie too. It starts with us robbing the customers and then using the boss's business contacts to conduct a bigger heist. Cooks *vs* the world!'

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Povzetek

Kdor je delal v industriji hrane, ve, da je pomeben del dela natakarja razumevanje strank. Nekaj metrov stran, v kuhinji, so stvari videti drugače. Stranke so pogosto video kot oddaljene, neprijazne, razdražljive ali celo naravnost samovoljne v svojih željah. Velik del dela v kuhinji se razlikuje od strežnega dela in želja stranke. Kuharji se osredotočajo na sestavine in njihovo preoblikovanje, v nasprotju z interpretativnim delom, ki ga opravljajo natakarji in vodstveno osebje. Kako naj kuharji pripravijo zapleteno luksuzno hrano, ko se zdi, da se nočejo povezati s tistimi, za katere jo pripravljajo? S kakšno politično domišljijo imamo opravka? V tem članku raziskujem etnografske podatke iz mojega vajeništva v francoski gastronomski kuhinji (južna Francija, 2018-2019). Ti podatki vključujejo sezname, daljše opise in analitično besedilo. Literatura o kuhinjskem delu (akademsko in literarno) zagotavlja distanco in nianse podatkov. Graeberjeve razprave o shizmogenezi, smiselnosti v delovnih družbah in sistemih družbene reprodukcije, zagotavljajo okvir za opis ideologije, ki stoji za proizvodnjo luksuzne hrane v kapitalističnih družbah. To omogoča nov pogled na tisto, čemur pravimo subkultura kuhinj, na njeno uporniško podobo in na njen ambivalenten odnos do dela in tega, kaka to delo opravljamo in o njem govorimo. S svojim položajem v restavraciji, ki je osrednja v proizvodnji in obrobna v potrošnji, kuhinjski delavci krmarijo po ideologiji kljubovanja, ki izhaja iz oddaljenih srečanj s strankami ter njihovimi nameni, željami in načinom življenja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: kuhinjsko delo, visoka kuhinja, shizmogeneza, negovalno in produktivno delo, interpretativno delo

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