INNOVATION AT PLAY: THE CASE OF HIGH-END CUISINE

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It is a nice fall morning in Milan. Mr. Linguini is sitting in a café, drinking his hot cappuccino while glancing through the newspaper. The new edition of the Michelin guide has just been released. The article cites the restaurants awarded a star, the ones that are emerging, the ones on the way out. It was meant to be a work-free, relaxing Sunday morning, but now the doubts that had assailed him in the last months spring to mind.

Mr. Linguini is a young chef. After receiving his degree in gastronomic sciences, he worked as an apprentice in many famous kitchens around Europe. During those years, not only was he able to master the techniques of the art of cooking but was also given the chance to understand first-hand the complexity of the industry and the subtle challenges of running a restaurant. He feels that it is now time to leave the safe haven of restaurants owned by other chefs and open his own restaurant in the city.

Chef Linguini realizes that he will have to rely on his experience gained over time before actually becoming an entrepreneur in gourmand cuisine. He recalls the failures of some of his friends. He has tried to learn from the success of others. He feels ready, but wants to be sure that he is going in the right direction. His first master always used to tell him: “when in doubt, I find retracing my steps to be a wise place to begin”. For the umpteenth time, Linguini opens his notebook and re-examines his notes about the industry in general and the Milanese area of operation in particular.

Examining the Context of Gourmand Cuisine

In recent years, Italian gourmand cuisine has witnessed the emergence of a series of phenomena that are somehow changing the rules of competition and may considerably impact the survival of traditional business models.

First, the industry has experienced an increase in competitive pressure, due to the growth in the number of high-end restaurants, as well as to the mushrooming of restaurant guides and industry experts. This last phenomenon has expanded even more due to increase in the number and importance of culinary blogs that have spread since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Second, in a context in which innovation is not protected by traditional legal mechanisms, the advent of the Internet and the increasing competitive pressures have led to an intensification of issues related to the protection of intellectual property and hence sustainability of competitive advantage, as testified by the increasing interest of the academic community in the study of this topic.

Third, technological innovation has entered the kitchen, thanks to the rise of molecular gastronomy as a strong culinary trend. It is no accident that two of the main representatives of molecular gastronomy, namely chefs Ferran Adrià and Heston Blumenthal, run two of the best restaurants in the world (respectively, elBulli in Spain and The Fat Duck in the United Kingdom), according to the prestigious classification proposed by “The Restaurant”.¹

Finally, demand seems to be changing. Consumers are becoming more conscious about issues such as value for money. They are starting to approach different cuisine styles, in a country, Italy, which was dominated by traditional cuisine and regional traditions. Ultimately, they are changing their approach to cuisine, thanks to the widespread diffusion of phenomena like show cooking, targeted cuisine classes, and

house-to-house chefs, who can be hired for special occasions. This democratization of high-end cuisine, which is coupled with the previously described phenomenon of culinary blogs, may create great opportunities for change.

Increasing Competitive Pressure

In the last decades, Italy has experienced a sharp increase in the consumption of food outside home: the percentage of this category over the total food expenditure of Italian families has increased from 20.8% in 1985 to 32.4% in 2007, i.e. 67,694 million Euros in value terms. Under the stimulus of this increasing demand, Italian cuisine has undergone a profound transformation.

The roots of modern Italian cuisine started to develop in 1977, when chef Gualtiero Marchesi opened his restaurant in Via Bonvesin de la Riva in Milan. “Maestro”, as he is called for being the father of “new Italian cuisine”, started his own revolution in a world dominated by traditional gastronomy and regional traditions. He was the first Italian chef to be awarded the first Michelin star in the first year of operation, and two stars the following year. He was also the first Italian chef to be awarded three Michelin stars in 1986. His cuisine combined a strong Italian legacy with the French nouvelle cuisine and some influences from Japan. The “Marchesian” approach thus gave rise to a cuisine characterized by the combination of simplicity, complexity, traditional and modern aspects in a unique whole. “Take his risotto alla milanese (rice Milanese-style) for example. It has blossomed into riso, oro, e zafferano, or saffron rice decorated with gold leaf. So highly are the artistic merits of this dish rated that it was given the status of a painting when it was included in a Chicago exhibition. Or take the case of the humble pasta, which it was thought could never aspire to the level of haute cuisine. That perception was destroyed for good when Gualtiero Marchesi came along. Foie gras, asparagus, truffles, caviar and raw seafood were all brought into play. Breaking with tradition, which demanded that pasta be served hot invariably, the non-conformist Marchesi served it cold on occasion, with delectable results. He was also not afraid to turn the negative into the positive. Once, served overcooked ravioli, which split open on his plate, Marchesi, found himself gripped by the idea that the traditional concept of filled ravioli, a way of using up leftovers, could be modified. The result – the path-breaking open ravioli, two superimposed squares of pasta, filled with scallops.”

The Maestro’s legacy is reflected in the evolution of Italian cuisine to its current nouvelle dimension, a modern form of haute cuisine, characterized by a higher and more widespread creativity. Marchesi has, in fact, been the master of a long list of talented chefs, who are now part of the élite of Italian high-end cuisine. Not only is the prominence of this élite testified by their accomplishments at the national and international level (e.g., 5 Italian restaurants among the World’s 50 Best Restaurants in 2010), but is also demonstrated by their active involvement as sponsors of Italian fine dining. One of the most recent initiatives in this respect is the founding of the association of Cavalieri della Cucina Italiana, i.e. the Knights of Italian Cuisine, originally made up of eleven chefs, with the aim of creating “a united voice to protect and develop the trade and image of Italian cuisine”. At a more systemic level, the rise of high-end Italian cuisine has given new impetus to the emergence of related fairs and events, such as Identità Golose, created in 2005 as an occasion for Italian chefs, as well as their colleagues from abroad, to meet and exchange ideas.

Following the development of Italian cuisine, the system of evaluating restaurants has also evolved, with two main implications: an improved evaluation of establishments, showing the progress being made by Italian chefs, and an increase in the number of culinary guides (magazines, blogs, etc). With respect to the former issue, it is enough to consider the number of Michelin stars awarded in the Italian Michelin Guide, which has risen from 90 in the first 1959 edition to 272 in the 2010 edition. The Michelin Guide is indeed an institution in the sector: it is considered as the main reference point for high-end cuisine by both chefs and sector experts. Michelin evaluates restaurants on a scale that goes from one to five forks, indicating restaurants from “quite comfortable” to “luxurious” décor, ambience and service. Restaurants offering a particularly good cuisine are also awarded stars, ranging from one star (“a very good restaurant in its cate-

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gory”) to three stars (“exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey”). Obtaining a Michelin star is one of the top achievements a chef can aspire to in his career. It is a sign of creativity and inventiveness. Also, “obtaining a Michelin star ensures that your banker will be kind to you.”  

With respect to the increase in culinary guides, chefs seem to complain about the steady increase in their number thereby contributing to growing competitive pressure. In the words of one of the most accomplished Italian chefs:

There are many guides: too many according to me…it’s like everyone is writing a guide nowadays! Guides are important, because they provide direction. I mean if you are a vegetarian then you can find a vegetarian restaurant, if you love sushi you can find a sushi restaurant. They also help you understand the cuisine style, the environment and so on. Then you have the ratings, and of course the evaluation of one guide may differ from another, and this is sometimes odd so you start wondering “who is right?” Still, I think this is normal. People trust the established guides because they were the first to appear. Still, there are more recent guides that are also reliable.

In particular, the phenomenon of cuisine blogs is now becoming more important. In the words of a talented, young emerging chef:

Sometimes it is all about blogs and fantasy-gourmands who decide the chef to be celebrated. I am not talking of journalists, but of bloggers, common people, who go around and have dinner. However, there is a risk hidden behind the phenomenon, since this community is becoming more and more influential and not all of their members are always well-prepared.

Increasing number of high end restaurants, increasing number of culinary guides, the advent of culinary blogs: Linguini feels that many things have changed since he first entered the profession. Did all this influence the relationships among chefs? He turns the page, and moves on to the next issue he has identified.

**Intellectual Property and Sustainability of Competitive Advantage**

Research on protection and diffusion of innovations has long focused on how the use of information can be governed by centralized institutions such as laws and rules. Extensive research has shown that intellectual property rights (IPRs) encourage the pursuit of innovations, allow inventors to contract with users on the use of innovations, and benefit society as a whole. Imitation efforts are hampered, and innovation is in turn favored, by a strong appropriability regime, granting protection to innovators through legal mechanisms, such as IPRs and natural barriers to imitation, such as difficulty to reverse engineer and tacitness of the technology. Incentives to innovate are provided by the effect of IPRs in reducing the threat of expropriation and by the relative returns for cooperation generated by the facilitation of a market for ideas. Without a central structure for administering and enforcing property rights, both invention and the transfer of innovation should be suppressed. Recently, scholars have begun to argue that in the absence of property rights, however, other more decentralized institutional forms can play an important role in encouraging innovation. In particular, decentralized systems within networks, communities, or social groups may restrict the transfer and use of innovations.

The context of *gourmand cuisine* is exemplary in this respect. It is indeed an industry with rapid innovation and weak protection of intellectual property. Recipes cannot be protected by patents or copyrights. Indeed, “how could you pay copyrights, if you can just misplace a leaf on the plate, the copyright would no longer be infringed?” Also trade secrets have proven ineffective, given the high rate of turnaround in the kitchen. Despite these intrinsic problems, the industry experiences a high rate of innovation.

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8 Personal interview with the authors.
9 Personal interview with the authors.
11 Personal interview with the authors.
This intriguing puzzle has found an explanation in the existence of a set of social norms that may substitute formal IPRs in a context in which such rights are not enforceable.12 It has been shown how the exchange of information in the culinary industry is regulated by three basic social norms, according to which when a chef receives recipe-related information from another chef, he: (1) must not copy the recipe exactly; (2) must give credit to the author of the recipe if he is going to significantly rely on it in developing a dish; and (3) must not pass the recipe-related information to a third party without asking the author’s permission. If the chef deviates from the norms, he will be sanctioned with: (1) negative gossiping within the community; (2) lowering of his own reputation; and (3) decreased likelihood that his additional requests for information will be answered by community members. To sum up, not only does the existence of norms imply the adherence to what the community of reference judges as appropriate behavior, but also it requires a credible commitment, i.e. the existence of likely punishment in case of deviations from the expected path. Moreover, in order to punish chefs who do not conform to social norms, other members of the community need to be able to detect misbehaviors.

Linguini shares this idea. He thinks that if management scholars can codify these rules of behavior, the entire community will think about its implicit rules. The chef knows that he will be carefully monitored by his colleagues. One of his friends once told him13:

I am sure that a good percentage of our colleagues looks at our website: they go there to see the menu that we are serving, how much we price our dishes, what we are serving…they can get an idea without actually coming here to have dinner…we do it too, I am not hiding this, we do it too…

Another colleague remarked14:

Today we have that evil instrument called the computer, which implies an exchange, not even at the daily level, but at the minute level! Every minute there is something new in it. Whenever you want to look for it, you just do it…

However, when asking them if they thought there was an ethical code regulating relationships among chefs, the answer was always: “Yes, absolutely. We need to respect each other, as in any other professional élite”.15 He feels better now: despite the increase in competition, the community seems to coherently stick to norms of good behavior. He can hence turn to the next issue to examine: the major innovations emerging in the industry, in the form of disruptive business models or new dominant designs.

A New Dominant Design: Molecular Gastronomy

The culinary landscape has witnessed the emergence of a new dominant design, an “identity movement” analogous to the one that produced the shift from classical to nouvelle cuisine.16 Molecular gastronomy was created in 1992 by the physicist Nicholas Kurti and physical chemist Hervé This who were interested in studying the science behind cooking preparations. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the term eventually came to be used to describe a new style of cooking that grouped together different avant-garde cuisines such as “culinary constructivism” and “techno-emotional cuisine”, many of which are now grouped under the umbrella term “experimental cuisine”. Ferran Adrià and Heston Blumenthal, chefs elBulli and The Fat Duck, exemplify the many who have joined (and created) this new approach to cuisine.

The main features of this approach are described in the manifesto of molecular cuisine, i.e. the synthesis of elBulli cuisine, as reported on www.elbulli.com and displayed in the appendix. In molecular gastronomy, eating is seen as an experience that should stimulate all the senses (taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing), including a “sixth” sense that is activated by reflection. Technology is used together with cooking techniques

13 Personal interview with the authors.
14 Personal interview with the authors.
15 Personal interview with the authors.
and top quality products with the aim of preserving the purity of the original flavor, despite modifications in the characteristics or appearance of the products themselves. Finally, irony, decontextualization and new flavor profiles are used to amuse and surprise the guests. In the words of a New York Times critic, “standing in Ferran Adrià’s kitchen at elBulli, it is easy to believe that you have slipped down the rabbit hole. Adrià, who would have been the caterer of choice for the Mad Hatter, invents food that provokes all the senses, including the sense of disbelief. His success is almost as amazing as his food”.17

Provocatively, one can talk of a “tyranny” of molecular gastronomy, whose foams, jellies, pearls and airs have made a large-scale entry into the culinary word. However, the huge success of molecular gastronomy has not come without a cost. In 2008, a hot debate emerged with respect to the risks associated with the use of chemistry in the kitchen. Spanish traditional chef Santi Santamaria declared to the Catalan daily La Vanguardia: “Can we be proud of a cuisine...created by Ferran Adrià and his chorus of fans which fills plates with gelling agents and laboratory emulsifiers? Additives from the food industry and fast-food chains have entered the world of haute cuisine. A dose that is wrongly measured can turn into poison”.18 Adrià responded “I don't understand (this controversy). It's nonsense, from a legal and health standpoint”,19 while other top chefs accused Santamaria of jealousy and envy 20, with public opinion split between pro- and anti-Adrià.20 What remains clear, however, it that beyond any health-related or philosophical issues brought up by its reliance on science, molecular gastronomy is the next dominant design in high-end cuisine.

Changes in Demand

A last phenomenon that we can observe in the current culinary landscape involves a profound transformation on the part of consumers. Gourmand cuisine has always found a parallel in the world of fine fashion, both in haute couture and prêt-a-porter. Indulging in a starred meal allows customers to experience cuisine at its best, just as high-end fashion allows fashion consumers to splurge. The exclusive experience of eating at a 3-star Michelin restaurant can be compared to indulging in a visit to an haute couture atelier for fashion designer clothes. Following this metaphor, one can think about what happened in fashion. In the late 1990s, it experienced the emergence of a new business model which short-circuited any traditional rule, i.e. fast fashion. What was new was the speed at which fast fashion firms could bring popular fashion designs to market – and the savvy with which they could sell them. Fast fashion became trendy, and consumers moved from being fashion-victims to what is called fashion-conscious. “Consumers used to be less prepared, less smart, and used to buy because they underwent a process of identification with the style of the brand. Not being self-confident, they relied on the brand and on the offer of a designer to feel more comfortable. Today, the socio-cultural context has completely changed. Everyone has become his/her own designer.”21 In the context of gourmand cuisine, this does not mean “MacDonaldization” of the whole system, but a stimulus for chefs to find another way. For instance, restaurants have started to offer tasting menus at more “popular” prices. This also exemplified by another Milanese one-star restaurant, Innocenti Evasioni, which is currently pilotting an after-dinner experience, in which it is possible to go for a drink and some food, without necessarily having a complete gastronomic experience. Although popular in other countries such as the United States, this format has never been tried in Italian gourmand restaurants. Analogously, one can think of the experience of another prestigious chef, Claudio Sadler, who opened Chic ‘n Quick, the prêt-a-porter, accessible version of his two-star restaurant, next door to the original establishment.

Another major change in demand refers to ethnic food and the emergence of alternative cuisines, in a landscape, like the Italian one, which was dominated by local tradition. This change is perceived as a threat by many chefs, as witnessed by the words of a Milanese cook22:

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20 http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gNUigAlkMfSlTS2AxtWi6fLTZrbA. Last access: 06/26/2010.
22 Personal interview with the authors.
There is such an invasion of cuisines from other countries, from China, Japan, Spain, here in Milan... it has become easier to find a sushi bar than a Milanese risotto, or a past with sardines in Sicily or a “lampredotto” or a “ribollita” in Florence... Not being able to find a good pasta with sardines in Sicily, a ribollita in Florence or a risotto in Milan would mean that we erased Pirandello, Dante and Leonardo from the history of our country...

Finally, other emerging phenomena are related to a different way of approaching food and cooking, which can be grouped under the umbrella term of show cooking. The fundamental idea behind this approach is to “spectacularize” cooking, by bringing a group of amateurs together and having a chef explaining recipes, allowing the guests to participate to the creation of the single dishes, and ultimately eat a “special” dinner.

Increasing competition and pressure on the part of external experts. Potential complaints about issues related to property rights. Emerging identity movements that are overturning the way to approach cuisine. A renewed demand landscape that is discovering value for money as well as alternative food and way of enjoying it. In the face of all these challenges, chef Linguini is wondering how he should be positioning his restaurant in this new culinary landscape. In order to do so, he now turns to his own territory, in the attempt to make sense of the innovation strategies implemented by the existing players in the Milanese area.

The Cluster of Milanese Restaurants

How are top restaurants in the Milanese area positioned? What are their innovation strategies? The last piece of information that chef Linguini needs in order to set up his entrepreneurial strategy regards the direct competition that his establishment is expected to face. He aims to open the next star restaurant in the area. He therefore starts examining what other star restaurants around him are doing. Talking to professionals in the industry, Linguini recalls that most of them said: “In Italy there are two main schools. The “Marchesiani” group who can also be very classic but still aware of innovation, and the super innovators, like Bottura or Cracco, who may come from Marchesi school but evolved along a different trajectory". He is indeed able to position restaurants on a continuum ranging from those whose innovation is more “cautious” and targeted at exalting existing products in the simplest way, to the avant-garde cooks who focus on technology and techniques and are going beyond the traditional boundaries of cuisine.

The Difficult Balance between Innovation and Tradition

The fundamental competitive advantage of Italian cuisine rests in its raw materials. In the words of chef Aimo Moroni, from the two-star Il luogo di Aimo e Nadia, “The French have great wines, great raw materials, great meat...still, we are luckier in geographical terms: Italy is like a dock between three seas, and this rewards us with this incredible climate, all the incredible products that we have, and an olive oil that is the best in the world”. As a consequence, focusing on bio-diversity and a wealth of supplies, many top chefs cook a simple high-end cuisine, in which tradition and creativity are used to support and exalt every single ingredient. Restaurants like Al Sorriso, Il luogo di Aimo e Nadia, Sadler and Trussardi alla Scala have built their reputation on this fundamental philosophy. Emerging establishments like Innocenti Evasioni are continuing this tradition.

Al Sorriso is one of the six Italian restaurants that have been awarded the outstanding honor of three Michelin stars. Chef Luisa Valazza describes her cuisine as based on the quality of the raw materials:

"[It] is a cooking tied to the high quality of basic ingredients and to the alternation of the seasons, when the fragrances and spicy aromas of the ingredients, searched very carefully all through the

23 Personal interview with the authors.
24 Personal interview with the authors.
territory, come to life in the dishes she serves with great pride. There is also room for creativity, but always filtered through tradition and simplicity.

Similarly, the style of Aimo and Nadia is characterized by a philosophy of simplicity, with a focus on premium raw materials. In the words of chef Moroni:26

Creativity means a profound understanding of materials, fantasy. I used to say that in a dish, the chef puts in 70% quality raw materials and 30% cooking techniques, intelligence, fantasy and love. High-end cuisine is just good, neither rich nor poor, but it is the product of love and fantasy, quality raw materials...When you cook and eat you are creating. [...] Think of my spaghetti with onions...I've been cooking for 40 years...spaghetti with onions...there are no shrimps, no mushrooms, no truffles...just fresh onion from Tropea, chili pepper from Val d'Agri, basil from Prà in Liguria, my oil, pasta from Latini and a spoon of parmigiano from Bonati, seasoned 5 years... It is a very poor dish, but someone defined it as Beethoven’s Ninth... My wife still keeps that note “The spaghetti with onions, dear Aimo, were like the Ninth Symphony by Beethoven”, signed Rita and Leonard Bernstein.

To better explain his point, the chef recalls a brief anecdote:27

There was a lady who told me “Aimo, the spaghetti I eat here are better than those I cook at home following the recipe in your book. Are you sure you wrote the exact truth?” I told her “Come here on a Saturday morning, come with the recipe that you have”. I picked her up, she had the recipe, and I told her “Ok, now I don’t have to do anything. First we go and do shopping together. I want to see which onions you buy, which basil you buy, the spaghetti and oil you use, I want to see everything”. I let her cook the recipe. Then I took my ingredients and asked her to re-cook the recipe. And she told me “Aimo, you were right, it is all about raw materials”...

Another chef in this tradition of cooking is Claudio Sadler the chef of the 2-star restaurant Sadler who is “a synonym of solidity: he isn’t a conservative in the strict sense of the word [...] but rather a purist and a cautious innovator”, with a passion for dishes coming from the traditional gastronomy of the entire peninsula.28 Talking about his cuisine, chef Sadler says:29

I am moderately innovative, I do not love cooking a dish to surprise someone, I couldn’t care less. Nor coming to your table with a covered dish that emits steam when uncovered and you say “How amazing, how wonderful”, but then you eat it and say “so what?” It’s the same with techniques. They have to be applied if and only if they enhance the final outcome: I do not need to cook in a low-temp oven for 90 hours to obtain the same thing that I would cook in 3 using normal methods. Why waste 90 hours of cooking? I prefer using 3 hours, losing less time, and wasting less electricity...

Despite the constant experimenting with cooking methods, combinations and consistencies, the cuisine of Andrea Berton at Trussardi alla Scala is also deeply rooted in “an in-depth study on raw materials: starting from the selection of the best ingredients and thanks to the continuous research for clean and essential tastes, [he] experiments […] to obtain authentic and easily identified flavors”.30 The chef explains:

Raw materials do not have to be spoiled but have to be exalted, you can do it however you prefer, but you need to exalt them and add some value to the finished dish. In my opinion, the customer should be made curious by what he chooses but, in the meanwhile, he should get something real in the dish, otherwise everything fades away...

Talking about his approach to innovation, the chef says:32

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26 Personal interview with the authors.
27 Personal interview with the authors.
29 Personal interview with the authors.
31 Personal interview with the authors.
32 Personal interview with the authors.
For instance, I have this revised tiramisu. I liked this idea of changing the classic recipe and giving my personality to it. Therefore, first of all, I tried to exalt the taste of the ingredients. Tiramisu has coffee and mascarpone, as the two main ingredients. Then there is cocoa. I prepared this cream of mascarpone that has a very intense flavor. I liked the idea of showing the different ingredients, since usually tiramisu is served in pieces or in spoons, depending on your choice. I serve it in a very large, transparent glass where you can see all the different layers of ingredients: you have the mascarpone cream at the bottom of the glass, a biscuit that recalls the biscuits in the tiramisu. Rather than soaking this biscuit in coffee, I prepare this semi-hot coffee mousse, so that you have this different texture and this contrast of temperatures, since the mascarpone cream is cold, the biscuit is crispy and more solid, and then the coffee mousse that recalls the biscuit soaked in coffee but with a different texture. On top of the glass, you have this brittle cocoa, which is prepared with a special procedure…this recalls the cocoa powder that you expect to be on top. So, when you are served, you have this glass, with this thing on top that you have to break with the spoon…it is almost like breaking a glass…a feeling that is very different from what you expect. What I try to do is to stimulate the customer, so that he can taste something common but in a version that has been re-invented by me…

This strong belief in the quality of raw materials is the main tenet even for some of the young emerging chefs, such as Eros Picco and Tommaso Arrigoni from Innocenti Evasioni, which was awarded its first Michelin star in 2009. They describe their cuisine style as a combination of local products and creativity, with a continuous balance between tradition and innovation. Pastry chef Arrigoni explains how this applies to patisserie:

If I start from scratch, as he was saying, and you don’t want to work on something that you have already done. I always look at tradition. I usually start from what the Italian tradition has and then start interpreting it in a modern way, based on the new techniques, new ingredients that you have. Nowadays, on the market, you can find products that it was impossible to find four, five, ten years ago…essential oils, jellies, products that allow you to work at different temperatures…there are a lot of ingredients that four, five years ago didn’t even exist! Therefore I can create anew the classic recipes of Italian cuisine. And we have lots of them, using these products and serving a dish that maybe has or recalls the same flavors, but maybe has a completely different shape, a completely different texture, and you can play with these things.

Analogously, Tano passami l’olio, awarded its first Michelin star in 2009, bases its cuisine on one central ingredient, i.e. extra virgin olive oil. In this respect, chef Gaetano Simonato says: “I’ve been using it [extra virgin olive oil] exclusively since 1991. I abolished butter, using it only to cream certain dishes at low temperatures, I also consider sautés (onion, shallot, garlic or others) old fashioned and superfluous. That is, I think that to increase body and flavor in a dish it is not necessary to overburden it with the complex heavy structure of these ingredients (which I do use in a “softer” version). I like to maintain the original flavor and integrity of the freshest and best ingredients on the market. I do not even take cream into consideration”.

This search for simplicity is then coupled with innovation, as the chef himself mentions in saying that:

Obviously, nowadays I have something molecular in my menus, without exaggerating since my way of cooking is completely different, it is not about molecular cuisine. But cooking the air of something, i.e. having the feeling of the taste of a product without actually biting it, is really fascinating. And hence it may happen: I did the mozzarella air, spinach air, asparagus air... The same with “spherification”... you can extract caviar from any product...strawberries, oranges or other ingredients...I was able to extract it from chocolate, and it was quite difficult because the texture of chocolate is different, less liquid...if you squeeze an orange you get some kind of liquidity, if you whisk strawberries you get another kind of liquidity...chocolate has its own density, and hence, obtaining a good spherification that maintains its shape and taste was quite difficult. It was

34 Personal interview with the authors.
36 Personal interview with the authors.
exciting, because I really did it! No one else had done it before me, and I succeeded in cooking an orange jelly with orange mousse and chocolate caviar!

Techniques and Technology at their Extreme

The avant-garde of Italian gourmet cuisine is the clique of extreme innovators, who change the rules of the game. Chefs who love to surprise, mesmerize, provoke. This tradition is exemplified by restaurants like Cracco located in Milan and Osteria Francescana, which is the quintessential example of this tradition and is located outside of Milan.

Restaurant Cracco and its chef Carlo Cracco represent the cradle of avant-garde cuisine in the Milan area. Alessandra Meldolesi effectively observes: “Many wonder what is avant-garde outside and inside the kitchen. An authoritative reply […] came from […] Eugène Ionesco. “Avant-garde? It is an expression against its time. And in its movement against trends and automatisms of contemporaneity, it coincides perfectly with the essence of the classic”, he more or less wrote. The definition is well-fitting for the style of a chef that, not without provoking, has discovered at length the simplicity of a very elegant minimalism. […] Because the professional career of Carlo Cracco, by now a mythical figure of avant-garde cooking, is […] a shuttle between the past and the future that the inverted logo of the Milanese restaurant until some time ago seemed to unequivocally denounce”. 37 In describing what high-end cuisine is, the chef explains:38

The point is not creating a new dish, but being represented by that dish, having a philosophy basically shared by your community but then is interpreted in a different manner by each of us. Pasta can be an egg, gnocchi, a jelly similar to prehistoric eggs, whatever…this is haute cuisine: many different persons that are linked together by a common thread making very different dishes.

With Osteria Francescana, another two stars according to Michelin, Massimo Bottura created another temple of Italian avant-garde, where the most sophisticated techniques encounter local ingredients and typical products to create extreme Italian dishes. Indeed, “Massimo Bottura is somehow scary because he breaks past without stopping being italiannissimo”.39 Chef Bottura describes technique as a weapon, “the element that transforms raw ingredients. It is what sublimes them to realize an idea”.40 For instance:41

Sous-vide permits a chef to cancel, camouflage, cut and paste but more importantly concentrate as never before: aromas, flavors, colors and concepts. All those plastic bags do not make for a romantic kitchen. Cooking elements separately with distinct temperatures and times becomes a mental exercise of great intention.

The emergence of a third way?

Chef Linguini has a clear picture in his mind. He can almost see how the new Italian cuisine developed and evolved. Nurtured by the experimentation of Maestro Marchesi, supported by the creativity and talent of a young generation of chefs, sustained by the increasing esteem of national and international critique. Italian chefs are trying to strengthening their community through fairs, events, activities like the Knights of Italian Cuisine. Advanced techniques, lessons from chemistry, and technological advancements have entered the kitchen. Still, there are some chefs that seem to escape from this clear-cut distinction between more cautious and extreme innovators.

Linguini has two of them in mind. The first is Pietro Leemann, chef patron at Joia, “one of the first of Gualtiero Marchesi’s pupils to set himself up on his own, [who] has the great merit of having decided to be

37 Personal interview with the authors.
creative without resorting to meat and fish". As Leemann himself explains, “I am an intermediary, almost transparent, between Nature and the guest who enjoys my creations. My dishes are conceptual and symbolic and guide the guest, becoming part of their memory, a memory which cannot be forgotten. My cuisine respects the world and respects us as individuals living in this world, and it does this with care and joy”.

Despite a reduced set of ingredients on which to rely, if compared to other colleagues, chef Leemann is able to push innovation to its extreme, as testified by the description of some of his most representative dishes:

The most important is called “Colors, tastes and consistencies”. It is a dish created in 1990 and it marked the success of Joia. I had this experience in Japan and China, where pleasure is lived mostly through the consistency of food, so I created this dish in which what mattered was not content, and hence the single ingredient, but their color, taste and consistency. On the plate you had white, black, red, yellow and green as the combination of yellow and blue, hence all the primary colors. Then, there is another dish from 1996, called “A rock is rolling” and this is a moving dish, so you have a sphere that rolls on the plate, and hence it is a dish on dynamics. Another one is called “Gong” and is a musical dish, where you have a gong played in front of the customer and then a relationship between sound and taste. Another dish in this direction is called “Contact and Consensus” where guests eat food on one side and touch some elements on the other…a rock, some rosemary, some ice…so that there is a feeling both in taste and in touch, so to amplify the perception in tasting, your perception of taste…There are many more…One is called “Hand Raviolo”, with a raviolo having the shape of a hand, or “Notes from a journey” where the guest is accompanied on a journey that ends with a balsamic vinegar aged 25 years, through a series of tastes like soft parmigiano. Another dish that has become very famous is from 1998, called “Under a colored blanket” and it represents a walk in a wood, and this walk change with every season and with every season the dish changes…In practical terms, under a soft mousse, you discover some elements that represent the season, and the mousse represents the wood and the feelings you have when you walk in a wood, both in terms of touch, light, perfumes. Hence it is a game, you play with feelings. Another dish is called “Memory” and is a dessert based on childish memories, and hence it is served on a plate for children, a symbolic plate, and so on…

A second name that surfaces to Linguini’s mind is Davide Oldani, chef patron of D’O, a one-star small trattoria located in the proximity of Milan, where food is based on “poor” raw materials and surprise taste with an intriguing combination of sweet and savory, high culinary artistry and seasonal ingredients, tradition and innovation. Chef Oldani describes his style as “pop” cuisine:

They call me “pop” and I gave up asking myself what they mean by that and, most of all, if this is the case. However, I started to think about it. If exalting the territory, the different areas that characterize my country from a gastronomical point of view, with their poorest and humble (and neglected!) raw materials…if this means being pop, then ok - call me pop and I will be proud of that, because this means being popular in the traditional [noblest] sense of the word.

**What’s next?**

Linguini has finished reading all his notes. He knows he faces a hard choice. He is willing to become an entrepreneur in a novel, complex and evolving culinary landscape. He has chosen a crowded market, the one of his hometown, which has always inspired his dishes through the power of memory. His mapping of the area has revealed a variety of approaches to innovation, ranging from the centrality of raw materials to the avant-garde of sophisticated techniques.

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44 Personal interview with the authors.
45 Personal interview with the authors.
Still he feels like he is missing something. Is he really grasping all the differences between the restaurants he thinks about. Are they all the same? If so, how could they co-exist in such a small area but still be able to profit and succeed? Even more fundamentally, what can he do? Is there really a third way? Which one is that? Can he walk that path?

He cannot help but think: what’s next? The cappuccino went cold. Linguini orders another one. The radio in the café sings “it’s a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life for me…and I’m feeling good”. Mostly, however, he feels as if he is about to take the biggest leap in the dark of his entire life.
Appendix

Synthesis of elBulli cuisine

The mid-1990s saw the emergence of a new style of cuisine, which has since been fully consolidated and can be defined as follows:

1. Cooking is a language through which all the following properties may be expressed: harmony, creativity, happiness, beauty, poetry, complexity, magic, humor, provocation, and culture;
2. The use of top quality products and technical knowledge to prepare them properly is taken for granted;
3. All products have the same gastronomic value, regardless of their price;
4. Preference is given to vegetables and seafood, with a key role also being played by dairy products, nuts, and other products that make up a light form of cooking. In recent years red meat and large cuts of poultry have been very sparingly used;
5. Although the characteristics of the products may be modified (temperature, texture, shape, etc.), the aim is always to preserve the purity of their original flavor, except for processes that call for long cooking or seek the nuances of particular reactions such as the Maillard reaction;
6. Cooking techniques, both classic and modern, are a heritage that the cook has to know how to exploit to the maximum;
7. As has occurred in most fields of human evolution down the ages, new technologies are a resource for the progress of cooking;
8. The family of stocks is being extended. Together with the classic ones, lighter stocks performing an identical function are now being used (waters, broths, consommés, clarified vegetable juices, nut milk, etc.);
9. The information given off by a dish is enjoyed through the senses; it is also enjoyed and interpreted by reflection;
10. Taste is not the only sense that can be stimulated: touch can also be played with (contrasts of temperatures and textures, as well as smell, sight (colors, shapes, trompe l’oeil, etc.), whereby the five senses become one of the main points of reference in the creative cooking process;
11. The technique-concept search is the apex of the creative pyramid;
12. Creation involves teamwork. In addition, research has become consolidated as a new feature of the culinary creative process;
13. The barriers between the sweet and savory world are being broken down. Importance is being given to a new cold cuisine, particularly in the creation of the frozen savory world;
14. The classical structure of dishes is being broken down: a veritable revolution is underway in first courses and desserts, closely bound up with the concept of symbiosis between the sweet and savory world; in main dishes the "product-garnish-sauce" hierarchy is being broken down;
15. A new way of serving food is being promoted. The dishes are finished in the dining room by the serving staff. In other cases the diners themselves participate in this process;
16. Regional cuisine as a style is an expression of its own geographical and cultural context as well as its culinary traditions. Its bond with nature complements and enriches this relationship with its environment;
17. Products and preparations from other countries are subjected to one’s particular style of cooking;
18. There are two main paths towards attaining harmony of products and flavors: through memory (connection with regional cooking traditions, adaptation, deconstruction, former modern recipes), or through new combinations;
19. A culinary language is being created which is becoming more and more ordered, that on some occasions establishes a relationship with the world and language of art;
20. Recipes are designed to ensure that harmony is to be found in small servings;
21. Decontextualization, irony, spectacle, performance are completely legitimate, as long as they are not superficial but respond to, or are closely bound up with, a process of gastronomic reflection;
22. The menu de dégustation is the finest expression of avant-garde cooking. The structure is alive and subject to changes. Concepts such as snacks, tapas, pre-desserts, morphs, etc., are coming into their own;
23. Knowledge and/or collaboration with experts from different fields (gastronomic culture, history, industrial design, etc.) is essential for progress in cooking. In particular collaboration with the food industry and the scientific world has brought about fundamental advances. Sharing this knowledge among cooking professionals has contributed to this evolution.