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Transformative Taste Encounters: Contemplations on life, death and relational bodies at the (culinary) artist's table

Abstract

This article considers the potential and significance of taste as a transformative part of the theatrical and culinary experience. The cross-pollination of food and performance in restaurants and contemporary theatre is explored through an analysis of Reckless Sleepers' *The Last Supper*, Leo Burtin's *The Midnight Soup* and restaurateur and chef, Simon Rogan's 'Tasting Menu' served in his Michelin-starred restaurant L'Enclume. Drawing on Michel Serres' philosophy of taste (2008) and theories of the body and eating from Elspeth Probyn (2000), I examine how the performances of taste in these three dining events were constructed as relational encounters that invited intimate and active engagement with food and bodies. In particular, I consider how the taste experiences in these instances afforded contemplation on the relationship between life, death and eating. I identify culinary aesthetic strategies of distaste, agency, catachresis and synaesthesia that were in play across the theatrical and culinary-performative contexts discussed. I argue that these strategies can contribute to a discourse of 'a beyond of taste' by revealing the interconnectedness of taste, and enabling the perceived nebulousness and seeming impossibility of taste to become manifest in new ways.

In 2009 I dined at restaurateur and chef Simon Rogan's Michelin-starred restaurant, L'Enclume, in the village of Cartmel, Cumbria. I enjoyed a thirteen-course 'Tasting Menu' inspired by the natural world and demonstrative of Rogan's commitment to farming and foraging – the culinary practice of finding wild ingredients. Course twelve, 'Sticky Taffy Pudding', comprised five edible spheres dipped in capa, a seaweed-based gel, each containing one sticky toffee pudding flavour: sponge, date, toffee, vanilla and butterscotch. The waiter instructed that the spheres should be eaten by hand in quick succession moving from left to right on the plate. The sensation was immediately pleasurable as they burst in the mouth releasing an intense flavour, just before fusing with

the flavours that followed. Diners were physically implicated in the construction of the unique taste-encounter, which depended on a specified interaction between hand, mouth and tongue. This emphasis on tasting (rather than eating), alongside the heightened performative rituals of dinner service, is an acute example of the way in which experimental dining can operate as an aesthetic experience. Experimentations in culinary practices continue to shift the contemporary gastronomic landscape and the possibility and potential of the taste-encounter, which can offer new ways of conceiving, experiencing and performing with food. These developments have led to the cross-pollination of food and performance in restaurants and contemporary theatre, in which the interplay between the performative and the theatrical alters the ways that eating and dining are constructed and experienced, and require specific consideration across performance and culinary-performative practices. This article seeks to develop a discourse of 'a beyond of taste' to consider the potential, and significance, of taste as a transformative part of the culinary and theatrical experience.

In order to hypothesize a transcending of taste, I first acknowledge its nebulous and seemingly impossible status. Attempts at articulating the experience of taste are necessarily subjective and language often fails in the endeavour. Carolyn Korsmeyer, in her co-authored article with David Sutton, acknowledges the ambiguity of taste, which, of all the senses, receives the most 'skepticism about ... [its] discerning abilities' (2011: 463). Perhaps, because taste inextricably relies on a confluence of the senses (smell in particular), its decipherability is always already relational. Moreover, for Sutton, sense is 'a communicative and creative channel between self and world' (471). Central to Sutton's work is the entanglement of taste in culture and social life, captured in his 'gustemological approach',¹ which recognizes the potential for tasting beyond the standard five gustatory taste sensations and the synaesthetic experience of food (his argument specifically considers the potential of memory as a sense) (470). The complex and multifarious nature of taste, then, points to its potential absence and impossibility in

¹ Sutton defines gustemology as 'a gustomic way of knowing, living interacting' (Korsmeyer and Sutton 2011: 469).

terms of our ability to capture and quantify the taste- encounter.

Two performance-meals that take place at the artist's table will provide focus for discussion in triangulation with Rogan's Tasting Menu. The first is Anglo-Belgian theatre company, Reckless Sleepers' *The Last Supper* (touring since 2002), which I saw on 8th October 2015 in the De Grey Rooms Ballroom, York Theatre Royal. The second is UK-based artist, Leo Burtin's intimate performance-meal, *The Midnight Soup* (first performed 2014), which I saw on Friday 16th October 2015 at Café Lux in Pudsey as part of the Love Arts Festival.

Michel Serres, in his exploration of taste and smell in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (2008), deploys the concept of mixture to demonstrate the synthetic and relational nature of cooked food, which 'invents coalescences' (167), and leads, ultimately, to knowledge^[SEP] and culture. Serres argues that historically philosophers have overlooked the 'mixture^[SEP] and chaos' and 'the fusion of one body into another' taking place every day in kitchens or while sharing wine with others (168). He writes of two mouths, the first is the speaking mouth (or 'golden mouth'), and the second the tasting mouth, which is killed by the first: speech, he claims, 'anaesthetizes' taste (153),

Oppressed, too close to language, too much its twin or competitor, taste is rarely conveyed well, is often expressed in language that provokes mirth^[SEP]— our mouth laughs at it – as though in this place language allowed it no voice. (153)

We are reminded that tasting, not consuming, is what distinguishes humans from animals (154). Using the example of wine, Serres explains how we acquire our second mouth by the act of tasting rather than merely drinking (he warns against inebriation, as, like language, it destroys the ability to taste, and so careful choices need to be made) (155). Taste, then, is dormant, absent to us until actively awakened, a process summarized by Tucker expounding Serresian philosophy as 'attunement to sense' (2011: 158). Importantly for Serres, taste and smell result in 'sapience and sagacity' respectively (2008: 163). This alternative philosophy of active tasting is a useful starting point for examining the possibility of a transformative taste-encounter, and, more specifically, the construction of taste in socio- aesthetic contexts that extend the potentiality of taste and the ways it might be experienced and understood.

I argue that the three dining events positioned taste as an active experience and the result of a complex set of ‘coalescences’ and relational encounters between bodies; between the body and food; and between diners/audiences and performers/characters (real and imagined) represented in the socio-dramatic experiences of dining. I consider how extensions of taste resulted in different modes of being and performing with others through food, which invited a questioning of what constitutes taste and a reconsideration of its potential in participatory performance practice and culinary experiences. The particulars of my argument ‘coalesce’ around the following articulations of taste:

i. the distasteful

ii. agency (of tasting and tasted bodies)

iii. culinary and cultural catachresis (whereby food,

animal species and human margins are mixed

through gastronomic hybridization)

iv. synaesthesia

LIFE, DEATH AND DINING

The relationship between life and death is a central thread in the culinary performances considered here. Etiquette historically prohibits the discussion of taboo topics at the dinner table, particularly pertaining to the corporeal, and death is perhaps the epitome of the distasteful. Historically, there has been a biblical, literary and theatrical conflation of death, eating and dining. The murder mystery dinner phenomenon, although playful, facilitates both a macabre connection between life (through eating) and death, and a fascination and tension between the visceral body and the ‘mannered’ body. In different ways, all three dining experiences exploited and pushed at those boundaries, constructing active taste-experiences that embraced distaste as a culinary aesthetic strategy, and developed potential to collapse the distinction between the grotesque and the culturally acceptable in relation to taste. For instance,

Rogan's menu was evocative of the fragility of life and drew attention to the tasting body; its position in the food chain; and the life cycle of the produce (animal and vegetable) being consumed for culinary and cultural capital. Course five was presented to look like a garden, with the principal ingredient – artichoke – hidden among a bed of malt powder 'soil'. Engagement with the dish required a theatrical game of discovery whereby the diner 'digs' up (or forages) an array of artichokes (globe, Jerusalem and Chinese), shaking off the 'soil' to investigate what lay beneath, and tasting – cautiously – to confirm the identity of the food. The dish elegantly restaged the life/death narrative of the artichoke from earth to mouth on the diners' plates (Jerusalem and Chinese artichokes grow underground) and highlighted the diner's role in its transition from the raw to the cooked. A goat's cheese mousse, artichoke purée and artichoke crisp added further bitter and sour flavours, which intensified the potent 'earthy' taste beyond the familiarly pleasurable, and heightened the playful scenario evocative of eating dirt. As a result, the dish was challenging for both eyes and tongue and offered a conceptual and sensory manipulation of the distasteful.

Reckless Sleepers' and Burtin's performances both explored the last supper as aesthetic context and cultural concept, in which an entanglement between life, death and food is paramount. Variations of 'the last supper' have been signified in biblical history, social ritual and aesthetic representation. The promise of the last meal and the foods chosen by the individual (also a common dinner party game) are motivated by taste, pleasure, comfort and symbolic meaning. In this way, the notion of the last supper paradoxically offers futile physical nourishment, and last meal requests can be deeply personal and potentially transcend common gustatory tastes (bitter, sweet, salty, sour, umami).

In Reckless Sleepers' performance, thirty-nine audience members sat at dining tables and witnessed three performers speak the last words (real and fictional) of the famous, the infamous, the forgotten and the unknown, such as, Franz Kafka, Ernesto Guevara, Eva Braun, Bobby Sands, Marilyn Monroe and Jesus Christ. The final words, written on rice paper, were 'eaten' by the performers. Additionally, thirteen of the audience members were served the last meal requests of Texan inmates on death row. The performance engaged the audience in a philosophical space of transition – a purgatorial

space – between life and death, as they witnessed an enduring list of both moving and unremarkable final utterances and the sombre roll-call of prisoner numbers and their last meal choices. Some requests appealed particularly to personal taste, such as a jar of ^[L]_[SEP]dill pickles; others specified that their meal be prepared according to taste, such as ‘two bacon cheese burgers, all the way, without onions’ (Reckless Sleepers 13); and some requests were purely symbolic, ‘love, truth, peace and freedom’ (20). The last suppers were served to select audience members by a performer and revealed by removing a cloche. This formal presentation of the food gave gravitas to the moment – part performative, part symbolic, part homage and part provocation. Yet the food was unsophisticated in design and lacked a culinary finesse suggested by the service. As more plates accumulated on the table, half-eaten or unclaimed by the audience, they became sad reminders of the absent, no-longer living inmates, which debunked the significance and promise of a last supper and exposed the impotence of a last meal request in marking a life lived.^[L]_[SEP]

The Midnight Soup offered a different last supper experience in which dining and the distasteful collided around the issue of suicide. Fourteen dinner guests were invited to share the preparation and eating of the soup while Burtin narrated the events surrounding his grandmother’s suicide. Burtin outlined his motivation to stimulate conversation about the complexity of suicide, and ‘*un dîner*’ provides an intimate and warm ‘space to share’ (Geraghty in Burtin 46). Although we dined with strangers, Burtin encouraged a sense of openness and sharing throughout: he asked the audience to remember an elderly relative and share with those nearby; to contribute to the preparation of the soup by completing simple tasks with selected diners – chopping vegetables (splitting half a pepper with the person opposite); and to share in the collective eating of the soup, ‘the eleventh hour broth, the last supper’ (Burtin 41) as homage to, and in memory of, Josette Burtin. Through the ritualized and symbolic restaging of this unique last meal in a theatrical context, eating and tasting became a communal reflective practice and a route to conversations about the agency of individuals – and specifically the elderly – to choose their own death and about audience members’ experiences of suicide. An aesthetic sensibility of distaste was exploited in all three dining events in ways that transcended expected gustatory taste sensations.

THE AGENCY OF TASTE

The agency of the tasting/eating bodies^[1] and the bodies consumed in each meal^[2] was manipulated through various levels of participation. In participatory performance audience members are required to decode the rules of engagement and collude in the formation of new social contracts. Reckless Sleepers' dinner was formal, with performers issuing audience members a number on entering the space that corresponded with a table place; Burtin's approach was personal, anticipating the arrival of his guests with^[3] place names already distributed. These moments set an appropriate tone for each performance but also signalled that there were rules surrounding – and limits to – audience engagement; we were not in control of our placement at either table. However, the acquiescence of choice was part of the novel experience of unexpected collisions between the theatrical and social narratives of dining. The anticipation and excitement I felt when taking my seat at the table in both performance-meals was similar to my experience at L'Enclume. Rogan's 'Tasting Menu' showcased a multitude of techniques and creative flair, but prevented diners from selecting food according to personal tastes and enabled the chef to construct their social identity through his food. Food descriptions were brief and evasive such as 'New Hot Pot', removing the promise of familiarity with common dishes and ingredients. Each course was attributed special crockery, aesthetic arrangement, order of service, and instructions for tasting and eating. Acquiescence of social and culinary taste to an abstract food-experience was a pleasurable part of the novelty, as I willingly relinquished agency over my tasting body. The precise orchestration of the meal dictated how diners physically engaged with their food and impacted on the arrangement of the bodies and the interactions between them. The game of unconventionality united guests and encouraged spontaneous communication across tables and the breaking of social barriers; we shared smiles with other diners and 'debriefed' our taste-experiences together.

This scratch *communitas* evolved in all three meals, but whereas Rogan and Burtin enabled positive shared experiences, the offering^[4] of food in *The Last Supper*, neither solely^[5] social gesture nor theatrical prop, created uncertainty as to whether we were 'supposed' to eat or not. Although the participation was orchestrated sensitively, in an

aesthetic context the commonplace practice of food service became a loaded gesture that implicated the audience in a rehearsed dilemma of complying with the death of an unknown other. The palpable anxiety and cautious behaviour I observed over the decision to taste became^[SEP]the focus of the theatrical spectacle and was potentially uncomfortable and exposing for^[SEP]the audience member. The weight of this decision left a pungent aftertaste that revealed the problematic potential of food as symbolic^[SEP]of the transition between life and death. The manipulation of theatrical participation worked by appealing to familiar social etiquette over food and thus united audience members in the socio-theatrical dilemma to taste, or not to taste.

I was one of the (un)lucky thirteen to be served a last supper. I received a plate of liver and onions, cottage cheese and tomatoes, as requested by prisoner 640, Larry White. The meal evoked disgust and horror as liver instantly reminded me of painful childhood memories^[SEP]of forcing down the repugnant meat. I was pregnant at the time of the performance and acutely aware of its prohibition in pregnancy and the potentially harmful impact of liver on my unborn baby. I could not eat or even taste this food. Yet I felt obliged to engage somehow with the offering, and again relinquished agency over my body and tentatively nibbled at the cheese and tomatoes. Aside from the personal dilemma faced when offered food publicly, there was an additional pressure to conform to convention and fulfil my part of the socio-aesthetic contract as both a diner and a willing theatre participant.

Guests were sat in close proximity and my neighbour was compelled to comment on the repulsive, strong smell of the liver, which has been aptly described by Lyn Gardner in her review of an earlier performance as 'taint[ing] the air like death itself' (2004). As receiver of the dish I was responsible for this assault on the senses. Elspeth Probyn considers the 'social operations of extreme distaste' (2000: 131) and, via Weiss, concludes that manifestations of disgust demand 'public recognition' (131), or, in other words, an audience. I found myself discreetly performing my distaste to people nearby, and we united over our shared aversion to the dish, which confirms Probyn's claim that 'we seek reassurance that we are not alone in our relation to the disgusting object' (131). These physical and verbal exchanges between, and reactions to, bodies at the table

revealed the social politics of taste and distaste. We were intimately connected to one another and to the ghosts of the prisoners by proxy of the last meals served.

Both Reckless Sleepers and Burtin served^[SEP] up personal death narratives belonging^[SEP] to the auto/biographical protagonists for metaphorical and vicarious consumption alongside the service of their actual last suppers. These double offerings simultaneously constructed intimate dining relations between audience members that unfolded through tasting, eating and drinking as acts of violence and violation; and invited an ethical questioning of the agency of the consumed in each event. The deceased death row victims and Josette Burtin lost ownership of their last suppers as a consequence of the performances; and by choosing to taste, the audience become implicated in those violent death narratives and the potential violation of personal last suppers and final life moments.

Whereas the prisoners, robbed of natural/ biological autonomy over their death, saturated the experience of tasting (or not) in *The Last Supper*, in contrast, taste in *The Midnight Soup* led to discussion among audience members^[SEP] and engagement with the notion of death as an individual choice, and, ultimately, a celebration. Carefully orchestrated moments of participation invited nostalgic self-reflection, such as writing onto the paper table cloth the answer to questions such as, ‘What is your greatest fear?’ and, ‘What would be unacceptable to you?’ (Burtin 42). Burtin narrates Josette’s answer:

Not having a choice. I know she had said it a few times. ‘I will know when it’s time, and I will drink the Midnight Soup.’ (41)

The soup served at Burtin’s table was of humble composition – a simple broth filled with nourishing vegetables and pulses. The difficult notion of suicide was in part alleviated by the experience of eating the markedly healthy soup, which, for me, appealed to connotations of life rather than death and led to non-gustatory taste-sensations, such as cleansing and healing, the kind of effect often associated with detoxification and evocative of purification.^[SEP] The broth also provided a worthy economy to the meta *Midnight Soup* experience, as a touring show reproduced in various contexts, by feeding and sustaining the performer and his audience (and, we are told, the production team outside the theatrical event). Examples of active taste, together with ritual, in these

performances worked in a transformative way to create unique philosophical taste-encounters that invited contemplation of the agency of the tasting/ eating body and the body consumed.

AFTERLIFE/AFTERTASTE

I consider the mixing of foods, bodies and foodstuffs with bodies (living and dead) across the dining experiences as culinary and cultural catachresis. Mixing was central to the composition of the soup eaten by Burtin's grandmother. Burtin described his grandmother's soup, which originated from Germany and is commonly served during nights of festivity, as a 'Chinese whisper', explaining how she 'put together and mixed up her German *Mitternachtsuppe* and her French *bouillon de onze heures* (41). The soup's layered history seeped into the audience experience as we tasted the commensality promised by^[SEP]the *Mitternachtsuppe*, while acutely aware of^[SEP]its purpose as Josette Burtin's eleventh hour broth. In contrast, the combination of foods^[SEP]in the death row last supper I received in Reckless Sleepers' performance seemed unusual and incoherent. Citing Weiss again, Probyn recounts his experience of distaste or 'shock of categorical incongruity' when presented with a strange food combination (2000: 132). The mellow taste of the cottage cheese opposed the strong smell of liver – two foods I imagine are rarely consumed together. Probyn questions whether disgust is a consequence of 'the mixing of categories, the incongruity of bodies and food out of place' (130), and there was something deeply unsettling about ingesting a dish designed according to another's personal taste. The sensation was discombobulating and, perhaps, more intimate than walking in a dead person's shoes; eating an other's last meal felt like trespassing in their mouths, displacing their tongues, their body, their flesh. To taste, in this moment, was to 'coalesce' (to return to Serres) with another (dead) body.

Yet unconventional taste sensations and^[SEP]food combinations are a defining feature of experimental dining, in which taste sits on^[SEP]the edge of the appetizing and the grotesque. Rogan's seventh course, 'Chic O' Hake' comprised a Hake fillet fused with a chicken skin. The two flavours were so entangled it^[SEP]was impossible to decipher their individual contribution to the taste sensation. Grotesque in its conception, the dish performed^[SEP]a

catachresis that mixed margins as well as categories through gastronomic hybridization, replacing one animal skin with another, for^[SEP]the purposes of consumption and novelty. This intimate tasting experience induced a ‘feeling of incongruous proximity’ (Probyn 2000: 132), as my mouth and tongue came into close contact with an unidentifiable foodstuff and flavour combination. The absence of Chicken meat and Hake skin brought my attention to the double ‘death’ of the once living beings and stimulated contemplation as to when the Hake and the Chicken ceased to exist. The resulting taste-encounter transcended a finite understanding of taste, as the mouth became an incubator birthing a new active taste sensation that intimately bound my body to the Hake-Chicken hybrid in its afterlife.

Burtin also speaks of a process of catachresis whereby his soup continues to ‘whisper’ and evolve into a blend of ingredients and flavours ‘from the leftovers in your fridge ... combined with ... Eastern European Spice; paprika and chopped tomatoes’ (40). Burtin ended the meal by offering his audience leftover soup to take home, and the taste lived on, permeating a new context, incorporated into the daily rituals of my life. I was connected to Josette Burtin, and to other diners’ stories, from inside my own kitchen as I mixed the soup once more into a stew (adding more (smoked) paprika). The soup, in its afterlife, found a new aftertaste by continuing to flow, resonating with Serres’ two tongues of taste and smell that ‘follow blended, fluidic, liquid pathways, flowing in knotted confluences’ (2008: 160). The taste-encounters available across the three culinary performances worked aesthetically to embroil the tasting body in a complex web of aftertastes, constructing a relational sense-experience resonant with a beyond of taste.

Serres weaves together a complex narrative^[SEP]of a metaphorical banquet that recalls and entangles echoes from Plato’s Symposium, The (biblical) Last Supper and the banquet scene from Don Giovanni. In Serres’ text, the statue (appropriated from Don Giovanni) signifies language and death. Void of the senses, the statue can only ‘eat’ the menu by memorizing the list of dishes rather than experiencing^[SEP]the meal (193). The lesson here (also an appropriated catachresis) is that ‘When the word is made flesh, grace abandons our body’ (201). We are close to death when we lose our senses and subsequently sapience. Reckless Sleepers played with the speaking and eating^[SEP]of words in metaphor

and actuality. The densely layered text in *The Last Supper*, rich with tangled echoes of voices from history and imagination, was twice consumed – received by the audience and embodied by the performers who swallowed last words on rice paper after each utterance. Speech was constructed as infinite and ephemeral; I struggled to remember specific last words, as one voice soon displaced another resulting in one spiralling narrative of endings. The performance recalls Serres’ battle of speaking and tasting mouths; the simple cycle of speaking and then eating words enacted the ‘reign of language over lips and tongue’ (Serres 2008: 153). The performers embodied the death of taste; like the statue, they only ate words on paper, which, combined with my inability to taste Larry White’s last supper, led to a reading of the work as a rumination on the death of taste and the loss of sapience: A banquet for the death of humankind. This was acutely captured in the ironic gluttonous list of ‘anesthetizing’ (to echo Serres’ anti-capitalist consumption politics) fast foods and drugs consumed by iconic superstar, Elvis, who died with (in Reckless Sleepers’ version) ‘an enlarged and blocked intestine, constipated struggling sweating, overweight, over rated, unable to walk, unable to sing, to dance, to move, to speak, to shit’ (Reckless Sleepers 13). Distaste for celebrity culture was pitted against the ‘last words’ from victims and perpetrators of human atrocities, such as the Hiroshima Bomb, the Northern Ireland Hunger Strikes and the Holocaust, alongside a banquet that problematized Texan capital punishment law. The humanity served up in *The Last Supper* was born of a world that had lost its ability to taste, a world without sapience, wisdom or culture (which, for Serres, comes after taste). Yet as an aesthetic experience, the performance frame provided focus and revealed both a gustatory and cultural absence of taste, which in turn invited both contemplation beyond the construction of a mourning of taste and a reimagining of its awakening.

Whereas *The Last Supper* served up a cautionary tale of a world without taste, *The Midnight Soup* presented an opportunity to appreciate the grace, ‘which penetrates the fissures of an open body, flooding it with sapience’ when we remain open to the senses (Serres 1998: 200). Recalling memories of time shared with his grandmother, Burtin describes the sensory pleasures of making *pain azyme*, unleavened bread, which connected them to the world and relational beings. They learn that

It is the bread that travels through time, space and cultures. Together, and without a time-machine, we become time travelling explorers, we become historians and linguists, we become storytellers and chefs. Together, we fold the water into the flour, flour a sprinkling of locally mined salt, far from the deep sea, sea salt that the Ancient Romans, the early Jews would have used. Together we invent, we interpret, we experiment and try again. Together, we eagerly await the arrival of our guests, so they may try it, so we may share it, so we may break it. (Burtin 30)

Serres' exposition on mixture moves through *le temps* (time and weather), temperance and travel. He illustrates how the wine he references throughout is laced with traces of the earth, the vine, the weather, 'the map of its temperament will be traced on your tongue' (2008: 159). In this way, the bread broken at Burtin's table offered a synaesthetic experience that connected audience members with his memory (through its afterlife) of discovering the sapient wisdom located in the bread, the site of rich and varied interrelations that keep on flowing, and invited an appreciation of the life-giving sensibilities that can arise from eating together.

If Rogan's 'Chic O' Hake' was a culinary exposition on death, his second course, 'Grown Up Yolk From the Golden Egg', playfully enacted the causality dilemma of life and birth. The dish appeared as a perfect poached (golden) egg yolk when it was actually chicken mousse frozen in a mould and dipped in golden vegetable gelatine in order to look like an egg yolk. It even behaved like a yolk, oozing when broken. Despite a priori knowledge and the chicken flavour, visually, texturally and culturally I believed I was eating an egg. The chicken was performing an egg – *not an egg, but not not an egg, or not a chicken, but not not a chicken*² (and goodness knows which came first). This theatrical blurring or tricking of my (common) senses impacted upon my ability to taste and decipher the dish in relation to common order. Korsmeyer argues that sight plays a significant role in the taste-experience when identifying food, yet she also acknowledges that the appearance of food can mislead the tongue and that both art and experimental cuisine have exploited the unreliable sight–taste relationship (2011). Although Rogan

² To reappropriate Richard Schechner's well known thesis on theatrical role playing and the liminal, 'not me ... but not not me' space of the performer (2002: 72).

enjoys such culinary chicanery, I propose that his manipulation of the senses required that the mouth work harder at tasting, and so brought into ‘focus’ (to borrow Korsmeyer’s term) the process of taste, enabling an appreciation of flavours and ingredients; an example of complexity and confusion leading to joyful simplicity. The synaesthetic experience of breaking the ‘chicken-yolk’ but seeing, feeling, remembering the taste of ‘egg yolk’ while at the same time actually tasting chicken, resulted in a cyclical taste-encounter that required an intermingling of senses and memories of previous sense-perceptions.

TASTING BEYOND

Close analysis of taste across performance^[1] and culinary-performative practices can open up a discourse of a beyond of taste, which^[2] marks a crucial turn towards the culinary aesthetic in food and performance research.^[3] I conclude that distaste, agency, catachresis^[4] and synaesthesia are important culinary aesthetic strategies used in the dining examples discussed, which constructed transformative taste-encounters that invited an intimate^[5] and active engagement with food and bodies (human and animal, living and dead). The^[6] two last suppers demonstrated how eating^[7] binds us in an ongoing tussle between life and death, concepts also embraced by Rogan in the experimental and aesthetic design of his menu. Reckless Sleepers’ and Burtin’s performances were uneasy and cathartic, respectively. The former resulted in a potential anxiety of taste, while both offered symbolic tastes of death^[8] in the liberating transitional space of a last supper. The relational encounters afforded through the three performances of taste enabled the perceived nebulosity of taste – and conceptions of the (sensing) body more widely as inaccessible or absent to us – to become manifest in new ways. By imagining a beyond^[9] of taste, the heightened sensory pleasures^[10] I encountered at each table confirmed the interconnectedness of taste, evocative of Serres’ description of taste as ‘a kiss that our mouth gives itself through the intermediary of tasty foods. Suddenly it recognizes itself, becomes conscious of itself, exists for itself’ (2008: 224). The concluding sapience: that ‘taste’ was both present and impossible, inextricably binding human, animal, vegetable and earth in an infinite cycle of (re)birth.

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