

# Stefan Wiesner's Practice of Cooking. A Contribution to Culinary Aesthetics

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the culinary practice of the Swiss avantgarde chef Stefan Wiesner. Starting with some biographical notes (part 1), the article focusses on the gourmet menu “The Elementary” (part 2). The investigation opens with a thick description of the eight-course menu and its aesthetic experience, including Wiesner’s comments along the four-hour dinner. Hence, four analytical dimensions transpire: Menu description according to the menu card (1), performances, with an emphasis on the chef’s speech acts (2), the pictorial value of the plate (3), and the gustatory aesthetic experience (4). Within this framework and with reference to a phenomenological approach, I argue that Wiesner aims to discover a “primordial experience” of nature by unfolding the gustatory dimensions of a single product. The third part sheds light on the prior conceptual design process of the menu. Wiesner has developed a “key” as a design tool to frame his practices of observing, collecting, combining, and transforming with several knowledge fields. Wiesner’s culinary design, my hypothesis, unfolds in a process between the utterable and the non-utterable. Looking over Wiesner’s drafts, sketches, and notations finally leads me to the question, what remains when the menu is over. Can the extant notes of “Elementary” be called a recipe? Here, I opt for the “open ended” character of recipes. The recipe of “Elementary” was “ready to use”, already before the menu was cooked. Due to its complexity, the leftover recipe is the notation of a menu, which will probably never be cooked, again.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Culinary Aesthetics are still widely unexplored. Beyond the question, if and to what extent the culinary arts belong to art or artistic practices (Andina/Barbero,

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2018), it seems to be relevant to better understand how we experience food from an aesthetic perspective and how the preparation of food is related to us and the world around us (Lemke, 2007; Sweeney, 2012; Wenzler 2013; Sweeney, 2017; Kaplan, 2020). Apparently, food and its preparation affect us in a unique manner. Recent studies have explored the aesthetics of food with a merely general, or let's say, deductive approach, by investigating, for instance, how we eat (Därmann/Lemke 2007), by exploring its performative implications (Hunt 2018), the aesthetic value of local food (Adams, 2018), its temporal dimension with regard to flavour perception (Todd, 2018), the sensory experience of food (Korsmeyer, 2002; Brady, 2012), or the relation of food to landscape (Ravasio, 2018). In contrast, or in addition to this, the present article chooses a very tight framework by analysing one menu inductively. The goal is to understand the different aesthetic levels of the menu and how the dish on the table is related to its previous conception and its remaining notes.

A few years ago, the leading taste theoretician and food critic in German-speaking countries, Jürgen Dollase, noted that a meal at Stefan Wiesner's restaurant is "one of the most extreme and, at the same time, profound culinary experiences that central Europe has to offer presently", and goes on to list the Swiss cook based in the Entlebuch "UNESCO biosphere" in the canton of Lucerne as one of the most creative cooks in the world, in the same league as Ferran Adrià, Olivier Roellinger, Nadia Santini, René Redzepi, Massimo Bottura and Harald Wohlfahrt (Dollase, 2015: 194). Even though this description is certainly justified, Wiesner holds a special position among these exceptional protagonists. His menus are a source of experience that helps to understand how food can capture and represent the world through the use of specific combinatory techniques and cooking methods, thus rendering taste a means of expression. Wiesner explores the world by taking taste as his principal device and applies a questioning, fathoming, almost philosophical approach when developing new menus.

In turn with the seasons, Wiesner has been cooking gourmet menus with such enigmatic names as "Paracelsus" (2010), "Alexander Nikolai Skrijabin/Mystic Chord (Mystischer Akkord)" (2013), "Joseph Beuys" (2015), "Neurogastronomie" (2015), "Eat Art" (2015), "Construction Site (Baustelle)" (2017), "Natur speaks (Natur spricht)" (2016), "Pleiades (Plejaden)" (2016) or "Landrover" (2018) for roughly twenty-five years. By relying on exploration and experimentation as his principal work methods, he has extended the world of taste and the realm of the eatable to include hitherto unfamiliar ingredients such

as bark, lichen, stone, metals, minerals, woods, even bitumen. The practice pattern that becomes discernible here has been described as “expanding the eatable” (Feuls 2020: 162) which, however, does not yet take into consideration aesthetic implications. Apart from his understanding of nature and its inherent healing powers, Wiesner draws on knowledge from spagyric, mysticism, neurogastronomy, and cultural history. In this way he lends his meals an expressiveness of high complexity and stunning clarity. Wiesner himself speaks of the “power of cooking” (Talk, May 2020).

The menu “Elementary” (2020), which I am going to explore in more detail below, is the result of Wiesner’s longstanding interest in and concern with nature and cooking. After a few, preliminary biographical remarks, I apply a phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty) to the menu in the form of a “thick description” (Geertz), adding to it Wiesner’s own comments on each course. Following that I explain how the menu develops a specific taste picture. To attain this, Wiesner relies on two aesthetic procedures which he calls “monotype” and “modification”. While monotype means focusing on one specific element or natural resource in each course, modification breaks down the taste facets of each ingredient, thus creating sensory harmonies whose cascade-like sequences unfold multiple spatial and temporal references. Finally, I wish to describe how the three aspects of action (*praxis*), ability (*techné*), and creation (*poesis*) interlock when Wiesner drafts a new menu. He does it on the foundation of a concept and work mode which he has been developing since 2013 and which merges relevant, to some extent heterogenous knowledge and practice fields. The “key”, as I hope to show, can be described as a kind of “schema”, which underpins the creation of new menus and recipes.

## 2. Part 1. Some biographical remarks

Turning from the menus to their creator, it shows that his life circumstances also shed light on the conditions under which Wiesner developed his cooking philosophy (Wiesner 2011). He developed his cooking concept over several decades, drawing inspiration from his natural environment and home, the Entlebuch, a rural landscape lodged between Lucerne and Berne that features sparkling streams, fresh meadows, pastures, and moorlands, and which was awarded the label “UNESCO Nature Reserve” in 2001. Escholzmatt, the village where Stefan Wiesner was born (1961), lives and works, has 3,100 inhabitants and is situated in the heart of the Entlebuch, 858 metres above sea level. Originally, Wiesner planned to study arts, but his parents talked him out of his

dream, so instead he trained as a cook at various addresses in Lucerne, including the Chateau Gütsch under Josef Häfliger and Le Manoir under Roman Stübinger. During his apprenticeship he created masterly sculptures from butter, revealing his skill for three-dimensional representation already then. In 1989, he took over with his wife Monica Wiesner-Auretto (whom he married in the same year) the restaurant Rössli from his parents which they had purchased back in 1958. From the start, it was Wiesner's dream to run a restaurant in which all the food was "homemade" and sourced from the region (Wiesner 2001: 8). For his cuisine, which did without ready-made products altogether and was exclusively regionally based, Wiesner received 12 Gault & Millau points in 1994, in particular for his famous cutlet (Klingbacher 2020). It was also in this period that Wiesner rediscovered an old dish which, as late as the early 20th century, still had been quite common in various mountain regions: hay soup. Originally, this simply involved cooking hay in water or in a vegetable stock. Wiesner, however, carried it a step further and began refining the dish. The idea of using aftergrass and cooking it in cream (and a number of other ingredients), thus blending the cattle's fodder with the animals' produce, already shows nascent signs of his "monotypical" approach to cooking, with its hallmarks of simplicity, regionality, reduction, and purism. For Wiesner, these guiding principles have nothing to do with economizing, it is all about concentrating and unfolding the taste inwards.

It was more by chance than design that Wiesner also began experimenting with wood chips around 1994/95. At a barn party he had organized, he became fascinated by the smell of the wood chips he had spread across the floor: "The smell was so incredibly good that I thought to myself, why not take a handful of these and cook them, it's bound to taste savoury. In fact, it was even better than savoury." (Wiesner 2003: 26). In the following, Wiesner, who today uses a wide range of woods such as common spruce, oak, birch, walnut, or tulipwood in his cooking, became a trend-setting pioneer of "wood cuisine" (Diem 2016; Cisar-Erlach 2019). Today he skilfully relies on woods as background flavours, or selects a certain tree as leitmotif for a complete menu, thus capturing a holistic view of the tree in question. The recent philosophical interest in trees (Coccia 2018) has a predecessor in Stefan Wiesner, although he himself does not stop there.

Lichen, stones, and metals have also found their way into Wiesner's cuisine. A visit to a whisky workshop inspired him to try cooking with peat (SRF TV Documentation «10vor10», 2003). In 1997 he received the Gault & Millau

award “German-speaking Switzerland’s Discovery of the Year”. At the same time, he came up with his first theme-based menus and recipes. One of these early dishes, around 1999, was “Tintello Tonnato”, inspired by a holiday in Tuscany (Wiesner 2003: 102-103), in which he conjured up on the plate a metaphorical flirt between a squid and a dove.<sup>2</sup> The recipe also reveals his special sense of humour, a trait we come across in many of his later dishes.

A dish like “Tintello Tonnato” was certainly important for Wiesner in terms of the development of his theme-based menus, but excursions into areas such as the Mediterranean cuisine remained an exception. His main focus is on the narrow and confined region of the Entlebuch, albeit he extends this narrowness with his broad culinary, cultural, and ecological knowledge (Wiesner 2003: 12). Wiesner’s inquisitive, humorous, and cooperative nature opens many doors for him, although he is by no means what one would call a “networker”. His interest in high-quality products, his curiosity for other knowledge fields always also includes people who are passionate about their profession. Wiesner likes to change his perspective and view his own work field through the eyes of other professionals; this often leads to new, enduring relationships, with a positive impact on his own culinary knowledge. Among these friends are the forester Peter Friedli, the charcoal burner Willy Renggli, the wilderness gardener Verena Groenveld, the carpenter Franz Stadelmann, the pharmacist Markus Zehnder, the perfumer Anton Studer, and the organic farmer Franz-Josef Wicki who are all portrayed in Wiesner’s publications (Wiesner 2011: 7; Wiesner 2011: 9). Wiesner’s first book *Gold, Holz, Stein* (2003, Gold, Stone, Wood) was a great success. Apart from a portrait of Wiesner as a cook and his culinary practice, it includes a portrayal of his social network and the landscape he works in, but the centrepiece is focused on communicating the recipes that emerged during the first ten years of his career.

The art of perfumery, in particular, which he learnt about from the perfumer Anton Studer (Wiesner 2011: 35 – 39), among others, became a key element in Wiesner’s culinary practice although he had already begun gathering knowledge about perfume making before that, around 2004/05; he, for instance, took the accord of “Le Male” by Jean-Paul Gaultier for an ice cream, using lavender, cinnamon, vanilla and tonka bean, amber oil, and number of other ethereal oils (Recipe: Wiesner 2012: 202). From around 2008, and in consultation with

<sup>2</sup> Tintello Tonnato (after the popular dish “vitello tonnato”), 1999/2000: black tortellini filled with braised dove and squid, served with a tunny-fish sauce, balsamico-honey-butter sauce and Moscardini. The dish was originally called “Bikini-bum”.

Anton Studer, Wiesner began applying the term “modifiers” to his cuisine, an expression otherwise used in perfumery to describe substances that intensify a fragrance or guide it in a certain direction (Studer 2017).<sup>3</sup> Earlier than other representatives of the haute cuisine, Wiesner integrated perfumes and music in his menus, adding them to elements from spagyric, alchemy, philosophy, cultural history which he had already discovered before.

Long before that, back in the mid-nineties, Wiesner succeeded in making the gradual transition from a regional to a site-specific, situational culinary practice (Crimp 1986) and mindset.<sup>4</sup> Now space is no longer explored in its regional, landscape-based horizontal dimension, instead it is complemented by a vertical perspective that pays special attention to what goes on below the earth’s skyline and, above all, what grows from it. This means that other aspects such as historical and biological rootedness, germination, growth, change, decay, and rotting, in other words, phenomena of temporality, gain significance. What also feeds into the development of new dishes is the “situational constitution” of the cook himself. Wiesner himself describes it as cooking in the “fourth dimension” which relies on new and archaic methods of cooking such as tanning, fomentation, fermentation, distillation, and calcination. By applying such cooking techniques, Wiesner is able to cook natural elements that used to be considered not cookable, or at least inappropriate in culinary terms.

Success was not long in waiting, but whether, in the long run, his avantgarde cuisine would gain broad social acceptance, remained to be seen. Time and again the media came up with graphic labels such as “mad genius” or “cooking wizard” (see AT Verlag.ch), and in 2006, Swiss television produced a documentary directed by Eric Bergkraut under the title of “The Wizard from the Entlebuch” (Der Hexer aus dem Entlebuch). Tags like “wizard” or “alchemist” proved to be highly media-effective.

The final breakthrough came in 2007/2008, when Wiesner was awarded 17 points by Gault & Millau (2008), a Guide Michelin star (2008), the accolade “Innovative Trendsetter” at the International Chef Days Award, along with “Two+ cooking spoons” in the Schlemmer Atlas (2009). In their appraisal, Gault & Millau commented that Wiesner had “looked neither to the right nor to left, and developed his style of cuisine all on his own” (Wiesner 2011: 11) which

<sup>3</sup> A similar meeting is said to have taken place between the British chef Heston Blumenthal and the French perfumer François Benzi in 1992.

<sup>4</sup> See here also the investigation of Matthew Adams (Adams, 2018) on the aesthetic value of local food based on engagement.

is only partly true, to be fair; it may apply to his culinary aesthetics but overlooks his ongoing dialogue and exchange with specialists from other knowledge fields. Moreover, he also concerns himself with other leading chefs such as Ferran Adrià, Michel Bras, Juan Mari Arzak, Massimo Bottura, René Redzepi, Heston Blumenthal, and Oskar Marti, although, in his eyes, they do not all necessarily rank as role models. In 2013, Stefan Wiesner took part in the “Madridfusión” where he cooked an interpretation of “Haiku” consisting of Japanese *masu* salmon and cherry tree components (blossom, wood, fruit) for which he received international acclaim. Two years later, at “Chefsache” in Cologne, he prepared the dish “Eat Art” for which he created a culinary cycle consisting of a deer and a spruce and taking the four elements into account (Chefsache 2015). In 2018, he took part at the “Chefs Revolution” in Zwolle (NL) with Paul Pairet, Jordi Roca, Nobelhart & Schmutzig where he cooked with stones.

Despite the recognition he enjoys, especially in German-speaking countries, Stefan Wiesner's work does not seem to be fully appreciated yet at the international level. One of the reasons for this might lie in his career history. Wiesner developed his “avantgarde natural cuisine” parallel to the rise of so-called “Spanish Modernity” and “Molecular Gastronomy”, respectively, in the 1990s (Adrià, Blumenthal and Keller 2006) whose embrace of natural science, synthesis, and illusionism was contrary to Wiesner's philosophical, “monotypical”, and holistic ideas about food. The “simplicity”, “purity”, and “regionality” advanced by the New Nordic Cuisine in the new millennium and its offshoots Nova Regio (Dollase 2015) and Locavore (Land 2014) whose manifest was published in 2004 (Norden 2004; Feuls 2020: 96) were trends that Wiesner had anticipated in his work long before, in the mid to late nineties, but the epithet “Nordic cuisine” somehow seemed to shut out the conceivability of hailing a Swiss cook, Stefan Wiesner, as its intellectual forbear. Wiesner is not a man to cater to “fiery theatricality” or staged “coolness” and “absorption” in his cooking (Fried 1998; Hunt 2018). Although Wiesner's cuisine could be made the subject of medialization in a similar way as the labels “molecular” and “New Nordic”, his dishes are not really suitable for recipe cooking, owing to the specific ingredients that are required and the complexity of the cooking procedure.<sup>5</sup> Above all, it would imply engaging with Stefan Wiesner's specific understanding of nature. For the time being, it remains open whether Wiesner's “Nova Regio” approach will actually have a “noticeable impact on everyday life”

<sup>5</sup> Wiesner's publications 2003 and 2012 have received multiple awards.

(Feuls 2020: 164) or whether it is not rather Wiesner's philosophical-culinary way of thinking as a whole that will develop a broad influence.

Wiesner's understanding of the term "avantgarde natural cuisine" requires a "thinking tasting" of nature. It demands focusing nature, exploring its facets and forces, and assessing the taste and sensory potential inherent in all its possible transformations. Wiesner is well aware of the complexity of this task: "It is extremely complex. We give everything back [to nature] after [first] extracting it and preparing out of it [a dish]" (Chefsache 2015: 16'40"). The moment of transformation after the natural material has been disassembled into its components, then broken down into its individual sensory features through various methods of preparation and cooking, before rearranging it into something new on the plate, denotes a taste sensation in the true sense of the term. Despite the close natural reference, Wiesner creates on the plate an autonomous "nature" in its own right. This requires concentrating on a single theme, on the elements' sensory potential, and on thinking in transformative terms. The experience commonly eludes all form of description. Wiesner's menus are founded on an extensive study of nature, on knowing when and where to find the necessary ingredients and on how they can be combined taste-wise. But it also demands intense practice and training in culinary transformation processes. Engaging with the raw materials also entails abandoning standard conventions that dictate what a "savoury dish" looks like (for instance, a seemingly side dish). A phrase Wiesner frequently uses is: "In the end, it is the guest who decides whether it's tasty or not." Ultimately, the entire art and all the intricate thoughts must stand up to the scrutiny of his guests. This also indicates a high respect towards those for whom he is cooking. At the same time, Wiesner's idea of cooking challenges the guest to perceive nature and its elements from a new angle.

In a way, the history of culinary art runs counter to the development of modern visual art. Whilst visual art gradually detached itself from nature and developed a pictorial autonomy in its own right, culinary art has established a new proximity with nature and has ditched many of the cultural conventions with regard to food preparation and convivial table manners. In the process of this "natural turn", Wiesner has played the role of a trailblazer.

### 3. Part 2. Prelude to "Elementary"

Presently, the gourmet menu served at the restaurant "Rössli" changes four times a year. Each menu is cooked roughly 240 times. For Wiesner, the menu



“Elementary” captures the essence of his work over the last few years. The aesthetic objective is to focus more intently on the dishes’ individual elements and do without additional ingredients, side dishes, and spices.

Essentially, the menu consists of eight courses. It is preceded by a prelude consisting of “fruit” (elderberry kombucha), “vegetable” (beetroot) “grain” (wheat bread) and “tree” (spruce). It is followed by the salsify course. The eighth course “stone” is succeeded by an epilogue that plays on the themes of metal (ferrous ice cream), soil (soil ganache), moss (glacé moor moss), and herb (sage leaves).<sup>6</sup> The rhapsody of regional cuisine whose main reference point for many years was Michael Bras’ menu “Cargouillou” (Bras 1980), an entrée course consisting of forty to fifty assorted seasonal elements, experiences a radical reversal, but at the same time a continuation, forty years later in Wiesner’s menu “Elementary”.

To describe his concept of cooking, Wiesner has for some years already used the term “monotype”, according to a semantic understanding that takes its cue from biology rather than from the world of typesetting. He states: “Monotype is when I think in very narrow terms and try extract everything I can from a carrot, a cucumber, or a tree [...], not more and not less. That is [...] what monotype cooking is all about” (Chefsache 2015: 18’50”). The taste chords of each course are developed from one single element: “I always move within one product only, and never go beyond that specific product” (Interview 27 May 2020). Following his performance “Eat Art” in Cologne in 2015, in which he created a dish exclusively from venison and spruce, “Elementary” represents the continuation of the monotype concept in its most consistent form. With regard to “Elementary”, Wiesner says: “I’m really onto something here. Sure, you still need salt and some acid, but that’s all. You become totally immersed in the taste. That’s a beautiful experience” (Interview 25 May 2020). In his draft for the menu, Wiesner jotted down synonyms for the term “elementary”, including “basic”, “decisive”, “primary”, “sparse”, “essential”, “very plain”, “paradigmatic”, “in close touch with nature”, “natural”, “according to nature” (Wiesner 2020). The terms are whispered to the guest via motion detectors when they enter the restaurant. But what understanding of “Elementary” is the menu actually targeting? Is it about honouring some self-formulated principles

<sup>6</sup> Although the “prelude” and the “epilogue” are vital parts of the gourmet menu, I cannot elaborate on them here for space reasons.

of food preparation? Is it about preserving the elements in their natural condition?

In search of answers to these questions, I have chosen two approaches. One follows the menu itself and how it is perceived, the other looks at the design process and its underlying criteria. I shall mainly focus on the menu itself and deal less comprehensively with how it is designed, simply for space reasons. The space between creating the menu and the way it is appreciated by the guest is taken up by a series of “allographic” prescriptions, which allow the menu to be reproduced. How the menu and the design process are related to what we call recipe, is a point I will outline at the end. Is “Elementary” the outcome of a designed recipe, or is it a prerequisite for the design of a recipe?

The investigation of the menu that follows oscillates across four interconnected levels: (1) The first level, which we could call the *informative* level, relates to a *description of the menu* according to a menu card. The sheet containing the full gourmet menu is not handed to the “Rössli” guests before they have reached the end of their meal. For this medium, Wiesner has developed a digital font which comes very close to his own handwriting. The menu cards are always densely scripted and highly complex. They contain information about the gourmet menu, its components, and the way they are prepared. (2) The second level refers to the *performative acts* with an emphasis on speech, that is, the *comments* on the dish offered by the cook himself. The *comments* are made before each course and constitute a key element of the gourmet menu. For Wiesner, his presence at every gourmet menu is paramount. He announces each course personally. For this he places himself, dressed in cap and apron, at the table so that all the guests have him in clear sight. This type of commentary has two objectives: for one thing, it serves as a performative act of authentication, permitting him to claim authorship for his creation. For the other, it allows him to unfold a narrative that merges the individual courses and the places where their ingredients originate from with the composed menu the guests are about to be served. (3) The third level, which I would like to call the *pictorial or iconic* level, refers to the plating (with the aid of the photographs). As I have argued elsewhere, the prepared dish on a plate can be described as a special form of image (van der Meulen, 2014). By reason of culinary intentions and specific views on nature, habits, and desires, the plate *presents* more than just itself. To show “something as something” is a basic condition of an image (Mitchell 1994). The way how a chicken wing, for example, is prepared and presented, reveals the intentions of the cook and how we should eat it. Wiesner’s platings do not follow any generalizable pattern

(Deroy & Spence et al. 2014; Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman 2014). Even though here no representational concepts of visual art are being transferred to the plates, it makes sense to view the plate arrangements according to aesthetic criteria. Wiesner's platings are in no way seeking anticipatory "approval", rather they raise questions and arouse curiosity. (4) The fourth level involves the *taste pattern* which I shall review from a phenomenological perspective. This is not so much about critiquing the taste (and the standardization that often comes with it), rather it is about describing an aesthetic experience. Although taste might be the main focus here, it is not treated exclusively.

#### 4. The menu

Following a prelude of fruit (elderberry kombucha), vegetable (fired beetroot) grain (bread) and tree (elements from a spruce), the way is open for the main menu which is served in eight courses based on the motifs roots (1), fish (2), egg/chicken (3), mushroom (4), venison (5), milk (6), berries (7), and stone (8). The menu finishes with earthy-metallic elements which takes us back to the roots, that is, the start.

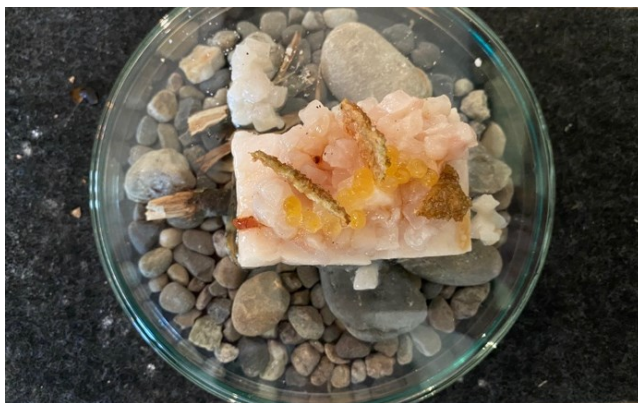


*1st course: Salsify*

salsify cooked; salsify braised, salsify pureed; salsify sweet-sour; salsify-milk and salsify baked; salsify leaves pesto; salsify leaves fermented; salsify seeds roasted; salsify-seed oil; salsify pomace.

*Stefan Wiesner:* “The theme is roots and we use salsify. We cook the salsify, then we braise it, it is pureed, we have salsify sweet-sour, and we press the salsify which gives us a juice, which we call salsify milk. The stem of the salsify is baked. From the salsify leaves we make a pesto, others we ferment. Then we have the salsify seeds which we either roast or press which gives us salsify-seed oil. The pomace is also added again. What I’m trying to do from a technical point of view is to change the salsify’s various textures. This means we have ever-changing tastes from a single product. That is what I call a chord. Other, normal cooks might say, the chord consists of mint, strawberry, and balsamic vinegar; what I am actually trying to do is developing a chord from nothing else but the strawberry, so to speak. So, enjoy your meal.”

*Description and experience:* I find the smallest units that merge taste and the visual rather challenging. I see and taste the salsify’s crisp gratings, their soft, earthy, nuttiness which keeps coming back in different variations. Just as I’ve grasped its earthy, ashy taste, I move on to the creamy texture of the salsify milk. The fermented leaves create a vague impression of freshness, of herb aromas, which however usher in again that typical earthiness. The nutty-earthy taste provides the bowl’s keynote into which I delve deeper and deeper with every spoonful.



*2nd course: Fish*

Alpine char confit in fish oil; Alpine char bone salt; Alpine char tartare; Alpine char roe; Alpine char garum and baked Alpine char skin.

*Stefan Wiesner:* “We now are going to serve you Alpine char from Schwandalp which is towards Glaubenberg, and that’s where Jakob is [...], he says he has surge pool that gives two hundred litres of spring water per minute, straight from the ground [...]. And this is how we prepare the fish: we slow-cook the filet in fish oil; then we roast the fishbones, grind them and mix them with salt, and this bone salt we then use as a condiment. From the tail of the fish we make a tartare and add roe to it. Then we take the left-over section and ferment it with honey; this gives us what is called garum, a sauce used by the ancient Romans. They served it with everything, a bit like soya sauce today. A fish sauce mixed with honey. Finally, we bake the skin to be served with it.”

Description and experience: To open the second course, we first receive a Petri dish containing pebbles, small twigs, and lichen, followed shortly afterwards by an alpine char dismembered into single components and served on the lid of the Petri dish. The cube-shaped, spherical, and angular components come in different hues, ranging from pinkish-white to ochre to brown. The served fish is swimming over the bed of the stream from where it once came, so to speak. That’s the principal association. Pursuing this idea further, one could say that the fish is presented in a *site-specific* or *situational* manner, first carved up, and then returned to its original surroundings. The dominant flavour is surprisingly smooth and reserved, then a little salty, a wee “soapy” or umami. The roe and the meat offer different textures. The slow-cooking has also brought out a slightly sweet and fatty note. The crispy, occasionally slightly bitter skin faintly intimates that the prevailing basic taste is a different one. The slightly salty, slightly sweet basic taste seems to glide or swim past palate and tongue. What remains is a soft salty-sweet imprint. The density of the image is contrasted by the lightness of taste. The dish comes with no components such herbs, condiments, or side dishes (bread, fruit), and features no buttery flavours that suggest that the fish was prepared “specially for us”. In a certain sense, the fish draws its taste from itself; in sensory terms it is self-referential.



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### *3rd course: Egg/chicken*

Chicken breast poached in chicken fat and with clucked alpine salt; egg yolk cooked in chicken broth; egg white meringue, chicken jus sprinkled with chicken crunch and egg crunch.

*Stefan Wiesner:* “So, we come to the next course. It is called “egg/chicken” or “chicken/egg”, all depending on what came first. Some people say, the egg came first. First, I offer you chicken breast poached in its own fat. To this we add “cluck salt”. That’s one of my crazy little ideas; it basically does not make much sense ... no, it actually does make sense, but in a way you can’t taste. I’ve “sounded” the salt with chicken clucks. Salt is, as you know, a crystal, and crystals have the ability to absorb sound. That’s scientifically proven. This means, the salt is covered by the chicken’s soundscape, but, as I mentioned, that doesn’t make it taste any better. You now hear the sound from the coop (clucking sounds over a loudspeaker). I will then serve an egg yolk cooked in chicken broth; it comes with an egg white meringue. We also have chicken jus and a crunch made from skin and eggshell with a little bread. It is served in a concrete bowl to which I have added a bit of chicken feed. That’s it.”

*Description and experience:* The colour composition of the preceding alpine char is continued in the chicken course. The gently sweet-soft chicken breast is complemented by the slightly bitter taste of the egg white in the meringue and backgrounded by the sweetish creaminess of the egg yolk next to it. The clucking sound coming from the loudspeaker translocates the guest straight to

the coop. Nothing has been added to the components' inherent flavour, so one could in a way say that the chicken puts its own taste on display. The chicken has been carved up, recomposed, and is now back in its nest. Its taste appears absolutely genuine, a flavour *statu nascendi*, so to speak. No longer egg and not yet chicken, instead a biological special condition created culinarily.



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#### *4th course: Mushroom*

Porcini strudel made of fermented porcini and pickled porcini; porcini cream; porcini oil; porcini crumbs and porcini froth

*Stefan Wiesner:* "And now I will serve porcini strudel. Some of the mushrooms, I may add, we collected ourselves. We fermented, pickled, and then dried them. This is what I am about to serve, a strudel made of fermented and pickled porcini, complemented by a porcini cream with porcini oil, porcini crumbs, and porcini froth.

*Description and experience:* An intensive taste of earthiness, slightly bitter and acidy is wrapped in a crisp rind. How does the taste of the mushroom express itself? According to John Dewey (1934: 162), "Form is a thing that creates relationships." The lightness of the porcini froth and the heavy density of the strudel act as two forces of a type of taste which, in terms of aesthetic experience, brings forth a situation. From the loudspeaker, we hear a loud clap of thunder. The mushroom's heavy earthiness in the sliced strudel contrasts with the froth that appears to be lingering in the air, like the smell of earth in the forest after a

rain. It calls to mind the salsify's earthiness of before. Here two situations are intertwined, just as colour links this course with the preceding one.



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#### *5th course: Venison*

Venison stew marinated and cooked with roasted deer bones; saddle of venison; antler salt and venison tongue in vinegar

*Stefan Wiesner.* “The next course on the menu is “venison”. A local deer. We have deer all year round, but the usual time for hunting deer is the autumn. The difference between an autumn hunt and hunting in summer is that, in summer, a sole hunter appointed by a hunting society is given permission to shoot one small deer. In this case, the hunter uses a precision rifle with a single bullet, usually early in the morning or in the evening when a deer leaves the forest after grazing and steps out into the open field. For a cook, this is the best meat. The other method is the autumn hunt, when the animals are driven and hunters use buckshot, with the result that the animals’ bodies are full of adrenaline; this is something completely different. [...] We make our marinated venison stew from a summer deer and produce a sauce out of the bones. Then we carve out the saddle of venison and cut the meat into very thin slices, like a carpaccio. For me personally, the best way to eat a saddle of venison is raw because, otherwise, the meat often has a livery taste. Raw is by far the best. This means, we place the raw slices on top of stew, then we grind the antler and mix it with salt. This gives us



a deer antler salt with which we flavour the meat. Finally, we put the tongue in a vinaigrette sauce and place it on top of the composition. Enjoy your meal!

*Description and experience:* This course takes us to the heart of the menu. The opposite forces encountered here refer to the categories “warm” and “cold” and “raw” and “cooked”, respectively. The contrast between warm and cold offers a special taste experience. A morsel of warm, sweet-earthy stew combined with the smooth acidity of cold carpaccio creates a sensory contrast which is difficult to describe. It is as if someone had placed us in the middle between the wild and the tame. With the aid of his idea of the culinary triangle, Levi Strauss saw in the transition from raw to cooked (by means of a controlled cooking process) a decisive step in the development of human civilization, and, in contrast to Richard Wrangham and Michael Pollan, made a point of the double reference to the domains “raw” and the “cooked”. According to Lévi Strauss, the cuisine “partakes of both domains [raw and cooked] and projects this duality on each of its manifestations” (Lévi Strauss 1973: 34f). And there is more to it: like the “rabbit-duck” image, this course offers a culinary change of aspect (Wittgenstein 1953: 194) that allows us to appreciate the venison as either “raw” or “cooked”. The main referent, the deer itself, remains the same, but the split into “raw” and “cooked” guides us into a culinary paradox (see also the chicken-egg course).



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*6th course: Milk*

Buffalo burrata filled with buffalo milk yoghurt; buffalo butter egg white cream; buffalo brûlée; buffalo milk sugar; buffalo egg white; buffalo egg white roasted sprinkled with sounded buffalo-bell salt.

*Stefan Wiesner:* “Next on the menu is local buffalo. Here we have a burrata which we fill with buffalo milk yoghurt, followed by buffalo butter egg white cream added with buffalo brûlée. Roasted buffalo milk powder, buffalo milk sugar, and buffalo egg white flakes. If we cook up the milk, we get milk flakes. And then we “sound” the salt with a buffalo bell. Their bells are lighter than those of cows. And, of course, this is all served on a horn.”

*Description and experience:* The course takes us back to the menu’s ochroid keynote and we leave behind the slightly bloody acidity of the venison carpaccio. Our first contact is with the caramel and vanilla-like sweetness of the buffalo brûlée which soon gives way to the creamy sweet-sour taste within the sphere. The sphere is backgrounded by the geometrical acuteness and blackness of the cloven buffalo horn, thus reverberating a motif from the second course: the buffalo burrata is placed in the cavity of the horn and so returned to its origins.<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> A foreign labourer from Romania introduced buffalo breeding to the Entlebuch in 1996. The Renggli family, from whom this buffalo was purchased, is one of four enterprises that breed buffalo in Switzerland. (<https://www.biosphaere.ch/de/highlights/blog-geschichten-aus-dem-entlebuch/bueffel-marbach/>)

*7th course: Berries*

Blueberry ice cream fermented; blueberry compote; blueberries freeze-dried; blueberries distilled; blueberry ash; blueberry leaves; and blueberry wood smoke salt.

*Stefan Wiesner:* "Next we have berries. And for this we take, of course, blueberries from the Tellenmoos [...]. First, we ferment our berries from which we then produce a water. We also have blueberries in the form of a compote. We freeze-dry blueberries, we have distilled blueberries, and they also come in the form of ash. Not to forget, we also use blueberry leaves. And, typical for the Tellenmoos, we have blueberry bushes that grow to a height of up to one metre; this means that they lignify at the bottom, so we also have blueberry wood. We use the wood to smoke the salt which we then add. So, that's that course. If you look carefully, you will see that my cooking follows the principles of spagyric. That's the body, spirit, and soul in cooking, in other words the berry, the distillate, and the ash.

*Description and experience:* The blueberry ice cream's shades of violet-blue and the dark purple of the dried blueberry contrast with the green-yellow complementary hues of the moss and the blueberry leaves. The cool fruity keynote of the blueberry ice cream soon gives way to the sweetish-bitter notes of the dried berries and the lemony flavour of the blueberry leaves. The texture of the dried berries forms a contrast with the ice cream's juicy freshness. Over time, the slightly salty taste in the ice cream prevails. If the berry's spirit dwells in the distillate and its soul in the ashes strewn across the floor of the plate, it not only opens up a holistic view of the berry's becoming and passing, one also realizes that the soul in the ash avoids being incorporated. The blueberry ice cream presents itself as an enlarged berry embedded in its local environment, between leaves and mosses. The remains of the berries in the shape of the ash evoke the impression of ephemerality and withdrawal.



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### *8th course: Stone*

Cream of black slate; black slate stones; black slate fizzy sugar; black slate salt; and black slate aerial pastry

*Stefan Wiesner:* “For this course, I grind stone so finely that it becomes edible. So, here I present you with a black slate cream. We make a sort of cream from black slate which we mix with fizzy sugar and add black slate salt, and make from it an aerial pastry, served on a slab of slate.”

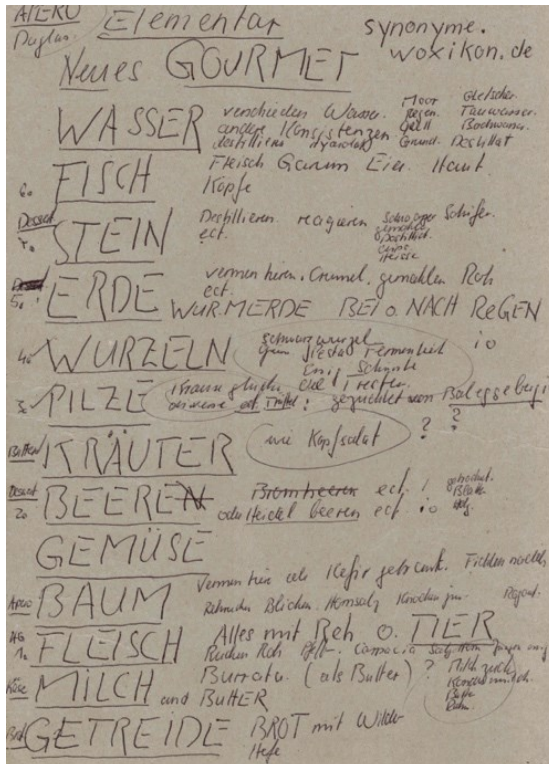
*Description and experience:* The first impression suggests that this greyish-black course is probably not edible. It looks like a casually thrown, cracked stone, a so-called Dalmatian stone, on a slate. You approach its components with cautious curiosity. The boundary between edible and unpalatable seems fluid. The course is made of the stone on which it is presented. The fact that the boundaries of edibility are tested once more in the desert course, underlines the menu’s basic message. The combination of fruity, sour, and mineral calls to mind the taste of a rich and full red wine. The keynote is mineral in taste. Occasionally, you feel the fizzy sugar in the crumbs sparkling on the tongue. Then one is spoiled with the bountiful sweetness in the cream; moreover, again one is surprised that the stone contains so much sweetness within.

### *Drawing things together*

Wiesner’s “Elementary” is straightforward, almost ascetic in nature with a radical focus on very few elements that help to develop a certain understanding of taste: Roots, fish, egg/chicken, mushroom, venison, milk, berries, stone –

green vegetables, salads, beef, or pork are nowhere to be found. Instead, the guest is confronted with archaic sounding products and earthy, mineral flavours. Drawing together the various threads of information from the diverse sources, allows us to draw the following conclusions.

(1) *Menu description ("menu card")*. The menu description cannot really be called a menu card because the guest only receives a copy towards the end of the meal. In Wiesner's case, the menu description is a means of expression geared towards explaining the complexity of the "monotype" cooking procedure. At the same time, it serves as script for his performative commentary (2) and is part of the later documentation.



© SW Menu "Elementary" (draft)

<b>Elementar</b>	
<b>Frucht</b>	Schwarzer Holunder-Kembucha mit schwarzem Holunder
<b>Gemüse</b>	Randen aus dem Feuer mit Randensalz
<b>Getreide</b>	Sauerteig "Werner", Weizenbrot mit Weizenröhrsalz, Weizenmehl, Weizen-Altbrot geröstet, auf Weizenstroh gelagert und gebacken, auf Weizenstroh geflämt serviert.
<b>Baum</b>	Rottannen-Essig und Rottannen-Öl rechts und links einen Tropfen auf die Hände. Rottannenholz-Peste, Rottannenholz-Mise, Rottannenzapfen-Salz, Rottannenflechten und Rottannensamen geröstet <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fenchelsterne, Klamersalzen-Resonanz, Wind in Fichtenwald, Fichte von innen, Holzwindspitz</li> </ul>
<b>Wurzel</b>	Schwarzwurzel-Gezack, Schwarzwurzel geschmort, Schwarzwurzel pariert, Schwarzwurzel süß-sauer, Schwarzwurzel-Milch und Schwarzwurzel gebacken. Schwarzwurzelblätter-Peste, Schwarzwurzelblätter fermentiert, Schwarzwurzelkörner geröstet, Schwarzwurzelkörner-Öl, Schwarzwurzel-T restler <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Er de temp, Stam de Chastais 2018, Janet und Janet, Valis, Freiburg</li> </ul>
<b>Fisch</b>	Alpensalzig im Fischöl konfekt, Alpsalzig-Knechensalz, Alpsalzig-Tatar, Alpsalzig-Regen, Alpsalzig-Garum und Alpsalzig-haut gebacken <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Adams (Annam) 2017, (Annam), Adams Wein gut, Oberflach, Aar-gau</li> <li>■ Er gleich, Brunen mit zwei klingenden Affläusen</li> </ul>
<b>Ei/Huhn</b>	Hühnerbrust im Hühnerfett gebackt und mit gegacktem Alpsalz gesalzen, Ei-gelb im Hühnerfond ge-gart, Eiweissbaiser, Hühner jus, mit Huhnknusper und Eiknusper bestrahlt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Invention 2015, Dorefelder und Zwei-gut, Wein-gut (Frlinger, Zürichsee, Wangen, Schwyz)</li> <li>■ Jüngste Hühner im Weltall mit Sausagen Intermezzo</li> </ul>
<b>Pilz</b>	Steinpilzstrudel aus Steinpilz fermentiert und Steinpilz eingelegt, Steinpilzcrème, Steinpilzöl, Steinpilzbrühe und Steinpilzschaum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Seifler-Pilz Near AG 2015, Pilz-Nair, Weinhausgenossenschaft Saffelgarten, Altmir, Luzern</li> <li>■ Regen trifft von den Blättern im Wald, Gemittersturm, feine Regentropfen</li> </ul>
<b>Wild</b>	Rehfleischragout gebeizt, mit gerösteten Rehknochen ge-gart, Rehfleischrücken Rehkernsalz und Rehsän-gel im Essig <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Purvis AG 2016/17, Purvis, Silber-Titter, Fady, Wallis</li> <li>■ Rollende Rabe im Wald – Grillen in den Nabe, Schritte von Menschen</li> </ul>
<b>Milch</b>	Büffelburrata gefüllt mit Büffelmilch-joghurt, Büffelbuttereisschokolade, Büffelbrühe, Büffelmilchpulver geröstet, Büffelmilchzucker, Büffelmilchweiss geröstet und mit beklaugtem Büffelkohlschensalz bestrahlt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Per Nat 2019, Garamer, Berger-Weinbau, Ottenberg, Faur-gau</li> <li>■ Büffelbrühe (mit Kuhglasch), Heu verteilten und kauen</li> </ul>
<b>Beeren</b>	Heidelbeereis ge-goren, Heidelbeerkompott, Heidelbeeren gefrier getrocknet, Heidelbeeren desilliert, Heidelbeeresche, Heidelbeereblätter (wenn es hat) und Heidelbeerholzrauchsalz <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Irma in Zinn 2018, Riesing-Sydney, Aaga Familie Gysit, Klatt-gau, Schaffhausen</li> <li>■ Amaranthofen (Vig) in Hütten-gemald, (Kunster), Steine (in Wein-geländ), Libellen in Windspitz, Schritte in Heidelbeertald</li> </ul>
<b>Stein</b>	Schwarzer Schiefer-crème, schwarzer Schiefer-Steine, schwarzer Schiefer-Sprudelzucker, schwarzer Schiefer-Salz und schwarzer Schiefer-Luft Gebäck <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Irma in Zinn 2018, Riesing-Sydney, Aaga Familie Gysit, Klatt-gau, Schaffhausen</li> <li>■ Schieferplatten, die den Berg hinterfallen, Palawind, Wind mit orchestralen Resonanzen</li> </ul>
<b>Metall</b>	Eisen-Glacé aus Rest
<b>Erde</b>	Erd-Ganache, Erd-Crumble, Erd-Staub und Erd-Sauce
<b>MooS</b>	Moor-MooS kandiert
<b>Kraut</b>	Salbeiblätter gebacken <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Heilmoo-Ambrose mit Rieper, Linn aus Hawaii (flüssige Erde), Transponierter Vegetation, Palawind Metall gestrichen, Eisuchen</li> </ul>

© SW Menu "Elementary"

While the left column lists the basic element, or motif, the thematic element is set forth in minimal terms in the right column and varied with the aid of different culinary practices (salsify cooked, salsify braised, salsify pureed, salsify sweet-sour, etc.). The menu card is the "allographic" component of an "autographic" work (Goodman in Borghini 2015). It represents the node between the preceding draft, the instructions for the kitchen, the food on the plate (3,4), the cook's commentaries, and a potential, simplified recipe development as included in Wiesner's publications.

(2) *The cook's performative act.* Wiesner's presentations before and after each menu as well as between the courses can be seen as acts. As Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, the performative act (in an aesthetic sense) do not only establish reality, but also transform everyday life by evoking a liminal experience (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, pp. 113-133). Wearing a billycock hat, waistcoat, oversized necklace, and wristwatch, Wiesner enters the dining room as if it were a stage, but without a

barrier or ramp between himself and his audience. His utterances are not merely descriptions, they're also *performative actions*, *literally opening a door to another world*. Apart from describing where the elements originate from and how they are prepared, the presence of the cook at the table also underpins the menu's authenticity in a performative act. This is important because in terms of design process, product selection, and food preparation, the menu is at odds with the conventional canons of gourmet cooking.

The descriptions, reiterated ritually before each course, follow the logic of what Victor Turner described as "critical transformation" to emphasize that what is happening at the moment is different to the habitual and, thus, deserves the epithet "authentic". The cook's performative commentary signals and embodies the unity of idea (authorship), design, element, preparation, and plating. Absent spaces (provenance of products, preparation in the kitchen) are brought to the fore and rendered present through the act of speaking. In his commentaries before each course, Wiesner either addresses the menu's basic theme ("I will now give you a guideline to 'Elementary'"), the main ingredient of a specific course ("we have cooked salsify"), where it's from ("in the *Tellenmoos*...we have these blueberry bushes") or the method of preparation applied ("I grind stone so finely that it becomes edible; we prepare the fish by slow-cooking it in fish oil"). The guest is able to experience the menu's site and situation-specific nature because the process of iterative contextualization invokes the unity of element, origin, and preparation. In this sense, Wiesner's presence is critical not least because the guest interprets it as a special act of attention on the part of the host. The historical roots of the terms "authentikós" and "authenticus" (in the sense of genuine, original) and "auctoritas" (authority, author) have long been established in linguistic research. Authority and authorship, respectively, is granted to those who are able to cite the sources and thus prove the genuineness of their words. "The creator is therefore also the authority, the author" (Knaller 2007). In Wiesner's performative act with an emphasis on speech, authenticity is substantiated by the presence of the author.

(3) *The pictorial character of plating*. There are some cogent arguments, expounded on already elsewhere (van der Meulen 2017), for applying key categories of pictorial thinking – such as the relationship between figure and ground, theories of representation – to plating. Here, the plate itself serves, canvas like, as the background against which the edible elements are arranged openly or closed, deep or flat, linear or painterly (Heinrich Wölfflin). Apart from taste, plating is the pivotal component of the "culinary language" (Lévi-

Strauss 1973: 35). Unlike “Gargouillou” (Michel Bras), the platings of “Elementary” are ordered in a compact and dense manner with spatial depth. On the one hand, the impression of spatiality, or depth, is created by the nested components, on the other, by the background motifs. In “Elementary”, the platings are distinguished by an energy-laden tension in which the figurations (the edible elements) are intertwined with the ground they are served on in a remarkable manner. The ground has no actual influence on the taste of the food, but it constitutes the figuration’s visual grounding. When perceiving the “figure”, be it in the shape of the char, the buffalo burrata, or the blueberry ice cream, etc., the guest registers that the main thematic element is broken down into components that reference each other by means of their colour shadings or contrasts. Courses with an emphasis on beige, ochre, and brown (fish, egg/chicken, mushroom, burrata) alternate with courses in which the colours dark red and purple (kombucha, beetroot, venison, blueberry) dominate, thus creating a colour dyad as the keynote and putting it through constant variations. The changing backgrounds (horn, stone, moss) are an essential part of these variations. We cannot view the char on our plate without noticing the gravel bed it rests on. The edible components, which are constructed so densely that it takes the beholder some time to sort them out, enter into a playful relationship with the non-edible grounding. The interplay of gravel bed and cube of char hinges on an *inversion* of figure and ground. While under normal conditions of visual representation, the figure stands as the clearly defined, definite element, and the background as the undefined visual field, Wiesner’s “Elementary” keeps on turning things around and inverting the relationship: here the undefined figure is intertwined with the defined ground in such a manner, that the “char”, the “burrata”, etc. are perceived as site-specific.

(4) *Flavour*. Around 2008, Wiesner, in dialogue with the perfumer Anton Studer, introduced the term “modifiers” to gourmet cooking in order to express how a flavour can be complemented or amplified by adding a second one (Wiesner 2011: 222). Building on this, he developed the concept of “monotype” together with Roberto Koch by directing the flavours inwards by means of differentiation and not outwards with the help of additions, as is usually the case.

“Elementary” is founded on eight interrelated basic sensory chords supplemented by a sensory framework of fruit, beetroot, grain (as a starter) as well as iron, soil, moss, and sage (as a finish). The taste chords of the key tones salsify, fish, egg/chicken, mushroom, venison, milk, blueberry, and stone are prescribed by the basic taste of the respective element. For instance, Wiesner



does not supplement his salsify with a state-of-the-art, lemony béchamel sauce, instead he unfolds the salsify's different taste features inwards. Starting from the salsify's earthy-nutty flavour, he teases out all the tuber's natural taste dimensions through various methods of preparation. Wiesner goes even further and speculatively develops the acidy (vinegar) or salty dimensions from the basic element. This forms the basis of his practice of "sounding" and salt smoking. The few supplementary ingredients are only added when a family resemblance with the basic element has been established (Buffalo bell salt, slate fizzy sugar, deer antler salt, blueberry smoke salt).

Wiesner's culinary aesthetics discloses how many taste dimensions are actually "folded" into a single element. In each course, he "unfolds" up to eleven taste dimensions from the respective basic element with the aid of different cooking methods. The relationship between the taste dimensions of one element and the elements of the other courses is not achieved through adding flavours, but on the basis of the relationships and overlays resulting from internal differentiation instead (for example, the earthy nature of the salsify and the mushroom, or the blueberry and stone's sparkling, mineral essence). In the process, Wiesner actually relies on a speculative schema similar to the Neoplatonic "explicatio" / "complicatio", unfolding-enfolding model. According to Nicolaus Cusanus, the world is "unfolded" from the oneness of its Divine Source into which it had previously been enfolded (Kues 1985: 244).<sup>8</sup> The world is just *one* possible explication so that for the Cusanus' successors (in particular for Leibniz) "explication" represents a poietic ability (*virtus fingendi*) which finds its paradigm in God's creative spirit. In Wiesner's case, the unfolding of taste could in itself be declared an aesthetic practice in so far as his culinary practice searches for the common origin of chicken *and* egg (3rd course). The different cooking techniques specifically serve the task of unfolding the taste sensations enfolded in each element. On his part, the guest experiences these taste sensations as being different and at the same time as mutually dependent.

Let me briefly summarize what we have elucidated with regard to the menu up till now: (1) *Menu description*: the menu description designates an allographic key element as the result of a design process which already holds the potential of recipe development. The iterative naming of the elements on the

<sup>8</sup> See also Deleuze on "Impossibility", in: Deleuze Gilles (1993) *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, London: Athlone.

menu card and the multi-variant denotation of the diverse methods of preparation are evidence of a focused dialogue between the element and its culinary development. (2) *The cook's commentaries*: the bracketing of design, product selection, and preparations by means of a performative speech act serves the purpose of creating authenticity and authorship to certify the unity of the element and its poietic transformation. The speech in present tense substantiates the presence of the non-present (product provenance, kitchen) at the table. (3) *Plating*: Through the compact visual intertwining of the “figure” (eatable elements) and the “ground” (non-edible elements), the elements are embedded in their site-specific, “natural” context. Aesthetic irony and irritation step to the fore when Wiesner works with extremes; this may refer to “contrast” (cooked char on gravel bed) or to “proximity” (edible lichen/non-edible mosses).<sup>9</sup> (4) *Flavour*: the menu seeks to unfold (explicatio) the enfolded (complicatio) flavours and textures in an element. Unfolding and enfolding are mutually dependent: the textures and flavours encapsulated in an element become unfolded in the culinary process. Conversely, the flavours and textures unfolded in cooking reference the pre-existing enfoldedness of the flavours and textures, in other words, the oneness of the element. The unfolding of flavours and textures is based on the strength of poietic ability in so far as cooking opens up a space of opportunity.

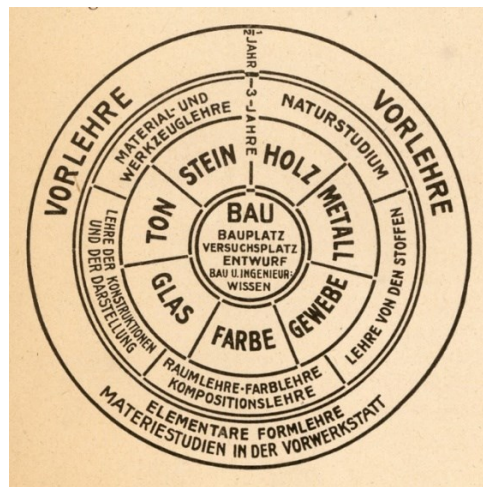
In our case, cooking does not necessarily refer to the sophisticated preparation of food for the satisfaction of the palate. Rather, cooking is understood as an aesthetic practice that opens up a new angle on nature. Wiesner goes in search of an element's taste and texture beyond its conventional appreciation. His rapport with nature is determined by an attempt to return to a “primordial experience of nature” and a “raw perception”, respectively (Orlikowsky 2006) by means of a special culinary practice. The “expression” (Foti 2013) of flavours and textures prised from the unity of an element serves the purpose of reconstructing taste prior to its cultivation and its embedding in the element. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explained, the reconstruction of primordial perception is ambivalent in nature, not least because it can only be communicated through aesthetic practice (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 5). The fish is not placed on the plate in its raw, natural state; beforehand it is transformed and unfolded in all its facets by means of a process of culinary aesthetics. It goes

<sup>9</sup> Authenticity is not a descriptive but a “regulative” ideal, because it cannot be anything other than ironic: Authenticity dissociates itself from a community, while at the same time being forced to make reference to it. See: Menke, C. (1996): *Tragödie im Sittlichen*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.



This already addresses an essential aspect of the process: The “key” does not so much underpin a specific thought edifice as it envisions various aspects and criteria of a culinary design process. The innermost circle features aspects that Wiesner considers whenever he designs a new menu: From “idea” follow “theme and inspiration”, “evaluation”, “improvisation”, and “variation” in form of an interconnected process. Around these are grouped keywords which Wiesner sees as essential components of any design process: the individual and situational circumstances, fates, and sentiments as well as the seasons. Under the core themes “perfume”, “ethics”, “cooking”, “nature”, “art”, “culture”, “history”, “healing art/magic”, and “trends”, we find radially arranged a plethora of thematic sub-divisions. It soon becomes apparent that the themes are not ordered along the lines of a conventional encyclopaedic system. Thus, for instance, “Eat Art” is listed under “new developments”, “elements” and “materials” under “history”, and “zoology” under “cooking”.

The “key” stands in a kin relationship to two historical forerunners. These, in turn, are temporally proximate but have little in common with each other, at least not initially. In fact, it is only Wiesner’s “key” that brings them together, so to speak.



Walter Gropius: *The Bauhaus educational schema, 1922*  
 from: <https://www.bruno-wickart.ch/blog/100-jahre-bauhaus/>

According to the ideal Bauhaus curriculum, which Gropius developed in 1922 in the wake of the Bauhaus Manifesto (1919), studies include a preliminary

course followed by the actual three-year training programme. What the Bauhaus schema and Wiesner's key have in common is that both are designed as temporal sequences leading from the outside to the inside and from inside to outside, respectively. In addition, in both cases, theory and practice, and reflection and action interlock. But while the Bauhaus schema (1922) places the "building" at the centre, Wiesner has at the core the subject ("I") instead. This divergence indicates that Wiesner is not primarily concerned with the work or the product as such but with a distinct way of relating the culinary design to the subject and the relationship of the subject to the world, respectively.



Robert Delaunay: *Disque simultané*, 1912/13, private collection From: <https://de.wikipedia.org>

Robert Delaunay's *Disques* probably rank among the most audacious pictorial inventions of the early 20th century. With the help of them, Delaunay developed a new concept of displaying colour contrasts which breaks away from Goethe, Runge, and Chevreul's colour wheels. The colours are arranged, in strong contrasts, in radial segments. The visual motion effect created thereby and the compactness of form make one perceive the "disques" as dynamic and quiescent at the same time. In the manner of an iconic motor, the disk is set in virtual motion, allowing the force of nature, especially the force of the sun, to shift to the centre of attention.

Wiesner's culinary "key" features a similar interplay of dynamics and serenity, representing his design processes and his mindset at one and the same time. He does not consider every thematic field in equal measure in his design processes. Rather, potential reference fields are grouped around culinary design processes and impact on the process to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the given situation and circumstances. What Wiesner does in his design practice of menu creation – observing nature, picking elements, talking to mountain farmers and herbalists, testing transformations, combining, sketching and noting – is, on an abstract level, scraped together in his "key".

Based on the European CORASON-Project, Maria Fonte (2007) and recently Moschitz/Oehen (2020) examined the dynamics of knowledge in the valorization of local food. They distinguished between an explicit or scientific (extra local) knowledge, an (unconsciously acquired and not codified) implicit knowledge and, finally, a lay knowledge. Lay knowledge is seen as a technical knowledge acquired through experience and learning, but in comparison to scientific knowledge much less standardized and formalized (Moschitz, 2020). Lay knowledge refers to the technical knowledge utilized by farmers, producers, and, here, cooks.

Lay knowledge plays an essential role in Wiesner's design practice, represented by the "Ich" ("I") in his key. It reveals his aim to integrate the knowledge of local farmers, producers, and druggists in his own practice of cooking. But the "key" is even more: It represents the dynamic transfer of knowledge within Wiesner's practice of cooking. As opposed to a static structural model, Wiesner's "key" schema incorporates a dynamic train of thought, which not only embodies his mindset (in the sense of a building) but also his culinary design method (in the sense of a process). In the design process, the "key" creates transitions, transfers, and transcendencies, and thus is able to mediate between practical-bodily and theoretical-terminological knowledge (Boehm 2014). This allows Wiesner to integrate knowledge (mysticism, spagyric, alchemy) into the culinary design practice which is classed as "precarious" by the haute cuisine tradition.<sup>11</sup> The "key" is in the Kantian sense a "schema" that merges perception and concept through imagination in the

<sup>11</sup> The fact that the power of imagination, where perception and concept become merged, can be localized in the body and why this explains that explicit and implicit knowledge do not exclude one another in the culinary design process, can only be stated here as a hypothesis and would need elaborating on elsewhere.

“transcendental schema” (Kant A 338/B 177; A40/B179): “a schema is that ‘crucial third’ which connects the conceptual and the perceptual” (Katunar & Eterović 2018). It was recognized as central that Kant understood “schematism” as to represent a temporal process of synthesis of perceptual and conceptual reasoning (Guyer 1987: 167).<sup>12</sup>

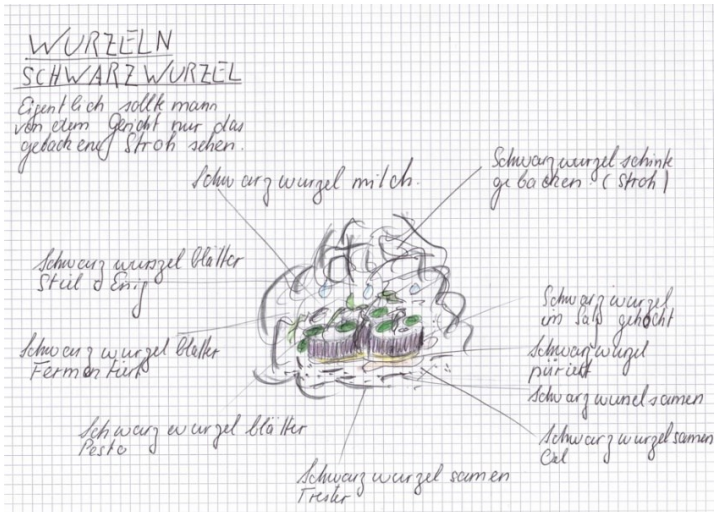
ELEMENTAR		
1. SYNONYME		
2. KLANG		
3. ZEICHNUNGEN		
4. HOLUNDE	}	EINKLANG (1)
5. RANDE		
6. WASSER		
7. WEIZEN		
8. FICHENBAUM		
9. SCHWARZWURZEL		KLANG (2)
10. ALPENSÄBLING		KLANG (3)
11. EI HUHN		KLANG (4)
12. STEINPILZ		KLANG (5)
13. REH		KLANG (6)
14. BÜFFEL		KLANG (7)
15. HEIDELBEEREN		KLANG (8)
16. SCHIFER SCHWARZ		KLANG (9)
17. EISEN	}	EINKLANG (10)
18. ERDE		
19. MOOS		
20. KRÄUTER		

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Stefan Wiesner: Draft of the menu “Elementary”, advanced stage in the design process, 2019

It is in this sense that the “key” schema merges perceptive and reflective activity in a single, culinary design process. The “key’s” imagination operates as a design generator.

<sup>12</sup> As is well known, this is a key argument of the embodiment thesis that states that knowledge is not, or at least not only, a product of the brain, but has to be seen as a process of embodiment (image schema) (Johnson 1987).



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Stefan Wiesner: Drawing for the menu “*Elementary*”, 1st course “*Salsify*”, 2019

How imagination impacts on the development of the design is also shown by Wiesner’s pictorial thinking that usually sets in at a later stage of the design process. The range of opportunities listed in the written notes is narrowed down and at the same time concretized through sketching, thus in a way heralding the preparation in the kitchen and further, right up to the plate. The *deictic* nature of the pictures points to something that has not yet been realized. The sketch indicates something specific; it draws out of the undefined pool of opportunities a substantiated essence, thus lending the process a direction that lets one thing lead to the next.

Allow me to venture a hypothesis at this point: culinary design unfolds in a process between the utterable and the non-utterable, between a language-based and an aesthetic side. The language-based (also recipe-based) side has recourse to explicated and transmitted knowledge. It follows documented rules, and usually knows what is to do and how to name it. The aesthetic side, on the other hand, “acts” within sensuous relations and non-predicative conjunctions (Felten 2004).<sup>13</sup> It fuses and transforms the material according to a “logic” that is guided by perception and aesthetic experience.

<sup>13</sup> “Unlike the truth, beauty is not definable by predicate. Judgement of something beautiful does not include a concept that extends the concept of the object being judged.” (Felten 2004: 49)



If the hypothesis is correct, the proposition should not be understood in the sense of an exclusionary dualism, at least not in the case examined here. In the design work for “Elementary”, imagination operates between nature observation, language, trial and error, and research, fusing the fields into an “experimental system” (Rheinberger 1997). Viewing the design process not merely from the perspective of the end product, as is usually the case (a building, painting, etc.), but from that of the schematism of the “key”, it shows that “poietic” ability is situated in the opening up of new possibilities as well as in restricting and making a choice. The line in a sketch exerts a defining, deictic force (Boehm 2007). In his study of Degas, published in 1935, Paul Valéry wrote: “It is not possible to create a clear image of something I perceive without drawing it in my mind”, and continues, “just as it is impossible to draw this thing without relying on a voluntary awareness that transforms the thing I perceived before and thought I knew well, in a peculiar way” (Valery 1996: 39).<sup>14</sup>

### *Traces and notations*

What remains when the dining is over? The experience is more comparable with an opera visit than with a usual visit to a restaurant. John Dewey would call this a real or holistic experience. Wiesner always stresses out that his dishes, some of which are published as recipes in his books, can later also be cooked by others. But the choice of the local products and tools, the performative act of presenting, and the design of the environment are so specifically focused on creating a unique experience that re-cooking the dish seems to be almost impossible, or at least doubtful. The question whether cooking a dish along a recipe intends to recreate a previous experience seems to be relevant, but cannot be answered so far (see also Borghini 2015).

The menu “Elementary” leaves behind traces in the form of sketches, notes, lists, written instructions, as well as comments and photographs made by the guests. After multiple tests with his team, the menu is written and documented in detail, including clear guidelines, ready for final execution. Is it appropriate to call these guidelines a “recipe” if the act of cooking the menu at a different place and at a different time by others seems hardly repeatable? Regarding a recipe from the perspective of its possible applications, Andrea Borghini argued with good reason that the identity of a recipe rests on three factors: 1. expertise (of the cook), 2. authenticity (according to fit and approval), and 3. its open-

<sup>14</sup> Quote translated by Nigel Stephenson.

ended character. With regard to the Wiesner's cooking style, we may assume that these three factors are possibly not *sine qua non* or equal in every recipe. I would argue, that the open-ended character is crucial for Wiesner's recipes, while – possibly surprising – in this case expertise is more a matter of understanding than possessing the technical skills. Wiesner's guideline-recipes are like modular systems that allow one to take out this or that module, or element, and transform it into something else. Hence, recipe here is a matrix for inspiration and a model for a certain way of thinking cookery.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study, which is to be understood as a contribution to culinary aesthetics (Sweeny, 2012, 2018; Brady, 2012; Wenzer, 2013), comes to multilayered conclusions, involving not only methodological aspects of a culinary practice but also a future-oriented concept of cooking as aesthetic practice. The exploration of "Elementary" can be seen as a contribution to the analysis of a menu which expands the critique of taste in the narrow sense, to include a critique of culinary aesthetics while, at the same time, integrating additional layers such as performative speech acts, written sources, plating, and the design process. Acoustic elements as well as the scenography of the dining room could be added as further constituents of a culinary aesthetics. A main desideratum refers to the exploration of the culinary design process.

Wiesner's way of thinking about cooking opens up a new way of viewing nature which, in the light of the current debates on nutrition and cooking, deserves attention. Wiesner does not set out from the question of which element or ingredient produces the most effective and glossy dish through his cooking. Rather, he approaches the elements of nature by recognizing that each one exists in its own form of being. Instead of an exploitive utility perspective ("food for us") he applies a "being perspective". As a result, labels such as "slow", "organic", "Nordic", or "regional" prove to be only secondary in relation to the basic recognition of food as an element of life. A responsible and forward-looking approach to food depends not on whether food is produced "slowly", "nationally" or "regionally", but on whether one succeeds in adopting an understanding of food and cooking in which the tree behind the apple and the pig behind the pork do not shift out of focus. With regard to the question of culinary aesthetics, a perspective becomes promising as soon as it grants food a "vitality" in its own right. Exploring the dimensions of such a vitality (space,

time, sociality, humour) lies not least in the hands of an aesthetic practice of cooking.

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