Signature (and) Dishes: Spontaneity and Imperfection in Cooking and Graffiti Writing

Andrea Baldini[†]
baldini_and@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Can there be improvised recipes? This paper argues that improvised recipes are possible. I call them *instantaneous-recipes*. They emerge at the same instant where a dish is also prepared. The improvisational freedom of instantaneous-recipes is displayed in the spontaneity of using what is available in terms of ingredients, tools, utensils, and techniques. Similar to what graffiti writers do while tagging – that is, leaving their signatures on – a wall or the side of a train car, in creating their signature dishes, improvisers of the kitchen are forced to adapt on the spot to changing contextual conditions just like a missing or newly available ingredient, a technical failure, or a mistake. Analogously to tags, improvised recipes are formally imperfect: they do not comply with established ones and are often rough, unpolished, broken, and disordered. But their imperfections are not aesthetic flaws, but merits. Imperfectionism in cooking, as I call the view rejecting the idea that only perfect instantiations of pre-existing recipes afford positive aesthetic experiences, is linked with three values: aesthetic, humanistic, and sustainable. By bringing imperfect features within the domain of gastronomic appreciation, instantaneous-recipes broaden the range of our aesthetic palette, while also reminding us of our finitude as humans. By encouraging creative uses of available ingredients and leftovers, improvisation in the kitchen also embodies a more sustainable approach to food waste.

1. Introduction

"We're doing something else: This is improvising!" With these words, Alexa Bottura – daughter of legendary 3 Michelin star chef Massimo Bottura – highlights her father's sudden change in cooking plans (Bottura, 2020). Instead of adding broccoli and potatoes to "aglio, olio e peperoncino" (*garlic, oil and chili peppers*), the chef turned home-cook decides to mix them with lentils and seaweeds from the night before. We are in the seventh episode of *Kitchen*

[†] Nanjing University, China.

Quarantine, which was originally released on Instagram during the time of Italy's lockdown (Marikar, 2020).

Entitled "Leftovers, feat. Grilled Cheese and Sautéed Spinach," this episode is Bottura's homage to spontaneity and improvisation in the kitchen. For the 25th anniversary of the opening of his signature restaurant, Osteria Francescana, the Italian chef decided to make his new creations by using food prepared during previous episodes. Instead of aiming at realizing one of his signature dishes, he opted for the opposite approach: Coming up, while cooking, with an innovative recipe starting from what he had. "Leftovers should not be just heated up," Bottura said in the video, "they have the potential of becoming something new and delicious."

The spontaneity that Bottura is here exercising in the kitchen reveals something philosophically interesting but generally overlooked about recipes: They need not precede the preparation of a dish. On the contrary, one can invent a recipe while cooking. This claim of course clashes with common understanding of recipes as instructions fixing in advance a dishes' features. In this paper, I argue that spontaneity is not only possible in the kitchen, but is also something valuable. Improvised recipes are not only metaphysically feasible, but also carry a distinct positivity that we should encourage and sponsor.

In examining spontaneity in the kitchen and improvised dishes, my goal is to bring a corrective to the recent obsession with established or historic recipes – that is, recipes invented by modern chefs or coming from a particular tradition – and with perfectly prepared dishes. In contemporary discussions about food, in effect, everyday cooking seems just "dull and repetitive," as a practice aiming at instantiating in the most accurate way a certain recipe (McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015, p. 50). And good dishes, that is, dishes affording positive aesthetic experiences, are those that perfectly realize recipes to the finest details, or that exclusively present perfect features. This view informs what is generally regarded as the fine-dining bible, *The Michelin Guide*, whose 3 stars are considered in popular cultural the highest praise in the culinary world (Dowling, 2010; Hosie, 2018; Mount, 2014).[1] I call this view *perfectionism in cooking*. This approach and its normalization reduce cooking – especially in

[1] The Wikipedia entry on "Restaurant rating" confirms the popularity of the Michelin approach as benchmark of quality: "One of the best known guides is the Michelin series which award one to three stars to restaurants they perceive to be of high culinary merit" ("Restaurant Rating," 2020).

everyday settings – to an attempt at recreating pre-given recipes.[2] But there is much more to cooking than that.

As the above example suggests, we can cook without following pre-ordered plans to a tee. We can come up with our own recipes (or variations of recipes) in the very act of cooking. And there is a distinct joy that accompanies this form of everyday creativity, often forced by the practical constraints that, for instance, home-cooks generally face for reasons of time limitations, availability of ingredients, and lack of tools. Of course, these creations may present many imperfections. But, they need not be aesthetic flaws, but rather merits, showing us our limits as humans. And, as Bottura has also been recently championing, this approach to cooking is more sustainable. I call the view grounding such an approach *imperfectionism in cooking*. Overall, this paper is a defense of such a take on preparing food.

In order to illuminate my perspective, I introduce a comparison between recipes and tags in graffiti writing. Though writers have very specific blueprints of their tags, which they have rehearsed thousands of times, executions of their signatures always show endless variations, which include traces of imperfection. That feature is due to the spontaneity of their gestures. For the illegality of their actions, taggers are forced to make what I call *on the spot adaptations*, that is, on-the-fly decisions about important aspects of the tag. Similarly, the temporal irreversibility of cooking as well as unforeseen circumstances such as the lack of an ingredient or a utensil may very well require improvisational adjustments of a recipe. The spontaneity displayed in on the spot adaptations is significantly related to the joy of creation in both these cases. Section 2 introduces the distinction between prior-, after-, and instantaneous-recipes. This last variety includes recipes that spontaneously emerge while preparing a dish. By discussing tags, section 3 characterizes improvisation as a function of spontaneous on the spot adaptations, whereby graffiti writers respond to contingencies. Section 4 brings the idea of on the spot adaptations to the cooking domain: Instantaneous-recipes are improvisational insofar as they use spontaneously what is available in terms of ingredients, tools, and utensils. Section 5 shows that the imperfections of instantaneous-recipes carry distinct values: They extend our gastronomic aesthetic palette, teach us about human finitude, and embody a more sustainable approach to food waste.

[2] After receiving one Michelin star, chef Julio Bosca thought that he received that award for recipes he didn't like and that restricted his creativity (Mount, 2014; Verdú, 2014)

2. Dishes, recipes, and the temporality of origin

In order to better clarify matters at hand, let me introduce a few conceptual distinctions. A first important distinction is one between dishes and recipes. In the literature (Borghini, 2015a), dishes generally indicate the tangible outcome of a cooking process. For instance, the slice of pizza that I just ate is, according to this characterization, a dish, consisting of a series of ingredients combined in determinate proportions according to specific techniques. Dishes are material entities occupying a certain spatio-temporal region, and they are what we can eat or, more generally, consume.[3]

Recipes, on the contrary, are intangible entities that generally inform or guide at least some processes of cooking.[4] A recipe, in this sense, is an idea, which may be instantiated by some particular dishes. When thinking about pizza, for example, we could have in mind the list of ingredients, their proportions, and the various techniques of combining them as to obtain the famous Italian dish. The set of these repeatable abstract aspects of pizza identifies its recipe. In general, formulas that lead us to the production of some edible stuff, that is, of some dish, are therefore recipes.

But how do dishes and recipes relate? The question is potentially ambiguous, and one can interpret it at least in two senses. The first sense understands what is asked in distinctly metaphysical terms. That is, when asking about the relationship between a dish and a recipe, one is interested in knowing something about their ontology. Borghini (2015a, p. 723) recasts this version of the original question as follows: "Suppose you have mapped out all the dishes that there are; how many recipes do those dishes instantiate?" Call this question the *metaphysical question*.

A second interpretation is concerned with issues of temporality, and in particular with matters of temporal origin. From this perspective, when considering the relationship between a dish and a recipe, one wants to know something about the temporality of their coming into being. The recipe and dish, which one came first? The focus here is about discovering whether there are determinate temporal patterns connecting, for instance, the intangible idea guiding the preparation of a pizza with its tangible realization, which one can

[3] I opt here for a permissive understanding of dish, which does not distinguish, for instance, between solid foods and drinks.

[4] Very simple instances of cooking such as warming up a cup of water or milk seem not realization of recipes. I am not interested in further airing this concern.

eat. It is possible to express this concern as follows: What is the temporal relationship between the recipe and the dish? Call this the *temporality question*.

Most scholars interested in the debate on recipes focus on the metaphysical question (Boorstin, 1964; Borghini, 2012, 2015a; Germann Molz, 2004; Jackson, 1999; Scruton, 2009; Sims, 2009; Wang, 1999). In the literature, one can find 4 main approaches to the ontology of recipes: realism, constructivism, existentialism, and naivism (Borghini, 2015a). Realism characterizes recipes as essentially unchanging lists of ingredients and procedures, recurring in all their instantiations (Boorstin, 1964). Constructivists, on their part, see recipes as entities established by human fiat (Baldini & Borghini, 2013; Borghini, 2012, 2015a; Germann Molz, 2004; Jackson, 1999; Sims, 2009). Existentialism also sees recipes as human-made, though it largely overlooks the social dimension emphasized by constructivists, while highlighting the relevance of an individual's decision (Sims, 2009, pp. 324–325; Wang, 1999). Naivists hold instead that recipes are mere labels arbitrarily and inconsistently applied to some dishes by consumers (Cohen, 2002; Coombe, 2009).

In this section, on the contrary, I am not directly concerned with the metaphysical question. My focus here is the temporality question. In effect, clarifying the temporal relationship of origins of recipes with respect to dishes allows us to cast light on matters of spontaneity and improvisation in cooking. Though I remain as neutral as possible to metaphysical concerns, this does not prevent my view from having important consequences at the level of the ontology of recipes. In particular, my discussion raises important issues for realist positions, which seem incapable of easily accommodating the possibility of spontaneous or improvised recipes.

Borghini (2015b) offers passingly a suitable starting point for answering the temporality question. "A recipe may exist before having been instantiated into a dish.... Other times, the dish and the recipe come to be simultaneously – as the chef makes a dish, she is also (perhaps even accidentally) discovering the recipe. Other times still, the recipe is derived after a few trials and errors"(Borghini, 2015b, p. 723). Here, we find three varieties of temporal connection between recipes and dishes: a recipe preceding a dish, a dish preceding a recipe, and a recipe coming at the same time of a dish. Let me consider them in turn.

First, we have what I shall call *prior-recipes*. These recipes are those that temporally pre-exist the act of cooking a particular dish for the first time. Most obvious cases of prior-recipes are those where someone imagines a recipe in its

details before realizing it, and then she creates a dish based on such a recipe. We can arguably find in the history of the origin of the Negroni cocktail an example of prior-recipes. In 1919, count Camillo Negroni asked Fosco Scarselli, barman at Casoni Café in Florence, to prepare an Americano made with gin instead of soda water (Picchi, 2015). More than 100 years later, the recipe of the Negroni – imagined by his creator even before its first realization – has arrived to us virtually unaltered.

Many readers may have the impression that prior-recipes are the norm in cooking. However, that is far from obvious. Actually, it seems that they are the exception rather than the rule. Coming up imaginatively with a successful recipe is a rare event: It requires both great talent and luck. Being able to imagine something like a Negroni without appealing to the senses is atypical. By drawing on a musical analogy, envision a prior-recipe is just like imagining a *whole* musical composition without the aid of a piano or other instruments (Katz & Gardner, 2012). If possible, it is an uncanny skill.

Second, there are also what I call *after-recipes*. Here we have recipes that have emerged after some dishes were originally prepared. Many traditional recipes from long-standing culinary practices are after-recipes. Certainly, this is the case for many products from Italian gastronomic history. Consider, for instance, the Parmigiano Reggiano, the famous hard cheese produced in the region of Emilia-Romagna.[5] Though its history dates back to a thousand years ago, the recipe that producers follow today has been released only in 2018.[6] And only cheeses following those indications can legitimately be called Parmigiano Reggiano.

Perhaps surprisingly to some, after-recipes are arguably the norm among recipes, that is, most *recognized* recipes are of this variety. After-recipes certainly question the usual ways in which we understand and use recipes in everyday cooking. Most of us look for instructions on how to prepare a certain dish in repositories collecting recipes. This in turn may very well suggest that recipes are usually prior-recipes. But, as already mentioned, this is far from obvious. The notion of after-recipe reintroduces humanity in how we conceptualize cooking. It emphasizes that cooking is contextually situated: It historically unfolds in unpredictable ways. Cooking, as virtually any other

[5] https://www.parmigianoreggiano.com/product-history/

[6] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1596301975261&uri=CELEX:520 18XC0413(01)

human practice, is primarily a history of trial and error, which is later reconstructed through some form of generalization.

Finally, we have also what I call *instantaneous-recipes*. This variety of recipes includes those that have emerged at the same instant where a dish is also prepared. In everyday home cooking, that is, in practices where individuals prepare meals for daily consumption as part of their schedule in the absence of a specific festivity, many recipes are instantaneous-recipes. As research on contemporary practices of home cooking in the US shows, for instance, "mothers typically change the recipe to suit the tastes of family members" (McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015, p. 54). Within those changes, they can sometimes create instantaneous-recipes.[7] Something similar can happen when a home cook prepare some dish with what is available in the fridge, just like Bottura did in the example discussed in the introduction.

Insofar as everyday cooking is something that many individuals across the globe practice regularly, it is plausible to assume that – at least in principle – instantaneous-recipes are an exponentially growing number. It is certainly the case that most of these recipes would have an ephemeral existence, being forgotten and never replicated. However, perhaps many readers would be surprised in realizing how many iconic and popular recipes are instantaneous-recipes – often outcomes of mistakes. In haute cuisine, Bottura's "Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart" offers a perfect example.[8] This recipe was born when Osteria Francescana's pastry chef Taka Kondo dropped a tart. Bottura suddenly realized that there was something visually impressive in the result, and decided in the moment that the accident had determined the emergence of a new recipe. Though of course the original instance was thrown away, this tart is still today Osteria Francescana's signature dessert.[9] Similarly, also tart tatin, chocolate-chip cookies, and crepes-suzette seem instantaneous-recipes invented by

[7] Of course, in some cases, mothers may invent prior- or after-recipes. I am just suggesting that in creatively changing recipes, they may come up with an instantaneous-recipe while cooking.

[8] https://www.cntraveller.in/story/6-dishes-define-massimo-bottura/

[9] Bottura's "Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart" illuminates the repeatability of instantaneous-recipes. Though the original tart was never served, its subsequent renditions are still instantaneous-recipes and not after-recipes. My discussion is in effect about the conditions of origin of a recipe. This is independent from matters of repeatability. "Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart" originated immediately when Kondo dropped the tart, and did not involve deliberation, but simply Bottura's performative utterance identifying the recipe as such.

mistake (Fig. 1).[10] And Pati Jinich – award winning Mexican chef – recalls inventing a recipe in response to a technical failure, when her oven shut off at the moment of cooking 120 duck breasts: She slow cooked them wrapped in aluminum foil to save the day.[11]

Figure 1: Chocolate-chip cookies were invented by accident. File available under CC0 1.0

Instantaneous-recipes reveal important possibilities about creativity in the kitchen, while at the same time telling us something interesting about the nature of recipes. They need not be something formulated in advance or retrospectively reconstructed. Recipes can emerge in the moment, spontaneously created while cooking a dish. This in turn reveals how we can improvise – *in a qualified sense* – in the kitchen. In the following sections, I specify how instantaneous recipes

[10] https://www.thedailymeal.com/eat/foods-invented-by-mistake-gallery/slide-14. All the cases mentioned did not involve further experimentation, deliberation, or adjustment after a cooking accident. Inventors recognized the existence of the new recipe on the spot. Of course, one can concede that instantaneous-recipes might go through some form of adjustment when replicated, thus suggesting some continuity with after-recipes.

[11] https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/11/26/457380229/kitchen-disasters-top-chefs-recall-dinner-gone-wrong?t=1597250228975

are improvisational by drawing an analogy between cooking and a particular style of graffiti writing: tagging.

3. Tagging, imperfection, and forced spontaneity

Tagging is one of the main styles of graffiti writing as firstly developed in North American cities starting from the late 1960s. Tags are monochrome signatures usually realized with spray-paint or markers (Fig. 2). They are the most basic form of graffiti. Throws-ups and pieces are instead more elaborated: They require the application of more colors and the creation of more complex designs. Throw-ups are in effect "bubble letters" filled-in with one or two colors, and pieces are intricate forms of lettering using three or more colors.

Figure 2: A tag by Fra32. Photo courtesy of the artist.[12]

[12] For ethical reasons, when referring to pictures of illegal graffiti I omit all potentially sensitive information.

At least some – if not many – would find my choice to clarify the improvisational nature of instantaneous-recipes by drawing an analogy between cooking and tagging surprising. And yet, I do believe that there are at least three reasons why this uncanny comparison is useful. First, most conceptualizations of tags – and graffiti in general – focus on the final product, that is, the visual artifact that a writer creates. Similarly, when talking about cooking and recipes, most accounts emphasize the object that is the result of the procedure. However, I believe that both tagging and cooking possess a distinct performative nature.[13] And placing emphasis on the performative element helps us clarify the spontaneity of instantaneous-recipes.

Second, as a consequence of its performative nature, tagging unfolds following a very specific form of temporality: Tags are realized without the possibility of revising and retouching the result. This happens primarily for two reasons: first, the technical gesture requires a continuous flow. In its absence – just like in Chinese calligraphy – the result appears visually incoherent. Second, tags have been primarily developed to leave marks on urban surfaces while being undetected. Retouching would likely expose the writer to legal consequences. Cooking possesses a similar temporality: there is no revising and retouching while preparing food in at least two senses. First, you cannot un-cook some food: Panfrying a sole fillet, for instance, is an irreversible procedure. Second, especially in everyday settings, cooking follows specific time constraints related to eating hours: Though there is certainly variability in terms of meal times, they are also somewhat fixed. This is in turn is crucial for understanding improvisation in instantaneous-recipes.

And third, tagging is characterized by a high level of spontaneity, which is often overlooked. Such a spontaneity is of a skilled kind. That is, writers do not create tags in the absence of training and a prior understanding of what they are going to do. Quite the contrary, good taggers have rehearsed hundreds if not thousands of times their signatures. However, the particular conditions of creations force writers to be spontaneous in creating a tag. Cooking – as we shall see – is spontaneous and improvisational in a similar sense, where skills are acquired beforehand and often dishes are rehearsed. However, in some cases, conditions of forced spontaneity may very well obtain in the kitchen (and in practice, they often do) offering grounds for a new instantaneous-recipe to

[13] I defend a performance-center ontology of street art. See, in particular, Baldini, forthcoming, 2017, 2018, p. 18.

emerge. But let us go with order and clarify more in details the improvisational nature of tagging. In the following section then I will show how this discussion of tags illuminates our understanding of the spontaneity of instantaneous-recipes.

The idea that tagging is spontaneous may surprise some. In effect, as mentioned, writers practice their tags constantly, rehearsing the gestures that go into creating their signatures hundreds if not thousands of times. Writers of fame, generally called "kings," would have carefully studied every aspect of their tags to the smallest details. This is "a practice that demands the highest of calligraphic skills [developed through] the mass handcrafted repetition of the very same sign, like a gestural karate kata" (Chastanet, 2015, p. 3). When looking at tags from this perspective, one may very well have the impression that they leave no space for improvisation.

However, such a dismissal of the spontaneity of tags is grounded in a understanding of improvisation that is simultaneously naïve and too radical: It seems to require that, when improvising, one is performing actions that are fully unprepared and unrehearsed. But this is far from obvious. Actually, activities that we consider improvisational often demand years of training to be mastered: Think about jazz or any other genre of improvised music such as flamenco. Their performances are filled with skillful spontaneity developed during long periods of rigorous education.

Generally, we do not improvise *ex nihilo*. More modestly, improvised activities are not those that are fully unrehearsed, but rather those where at least some of the fundamental aspects are decided on the spot (Alperson, 1984, 2010). Of course, according to this characterization, most of our daily deeds are improvisational to some extent – even mundane tasks such as grocery shopping and riding one's bike to work. *Bona fide* improvised activities, one could plausibly add, are in effect those characterized by a *significant* degree of spontaneity and freedom (Alperson, 2010: 274).

In jazz improvisation, for instance, a performer's freedom is on display in the spontaneity of creating a musical passage on the fly. But where is such a spontaneity revealed when tagging? I (Baldini, forthcoming) have argued that it is to be found in its freely using public spaces. In other words, by means of their tags, writers appropriate urban surfaces spontaneously therefore displaying their freedom. In effect, tags are generally done illegally and without authorization, defying the control that politics of decorum are increasingly

exercising on possibilities to express ourselves in the city (Baldini, 2020; Iveson, 2007; Young, 2014).[14]

The spontaneous use of public spaces forces taggers to improvise significant aspects of their activities, which are importantly shaped on the fly in response to the changing context. As mentioned before, their spontaneity does not imply that no detail has been planned in advance. In normal cases, the tag's design has been rehearsed beforehand. Moreover, probably the location has been previously decided – though this may be less probable when compared to other styles of graffiti, for tags' rapid execution allows for less premeditation and deliberation. And the writer would have accumulated geographical knowledge of the city and developed effective techniques of evasion and technologies of counter-surveillance (Iveson, 2010, p. 129).

However, no preparation – not even the most well-thought through plan – can account for all contingencies when working illegally in public spaces: the train is unexpectedly moving, a guard or a passerby are approaching, or the chosen bench has just been repainted today and is still wet. These are just some of the unforeseeable changes in contextual circumstances that a tagger may very well encounter. Those deviations from the plan force writers to perform what I call "on the spot adaptations" (Baldini, forthcoming, sec. 3).

These adaptations are a significant way whereby writers show the spontaneity of their creations. I here intend spontaneity "as a disruption within the world insofar as the world is a system of determinate events and objects existing in accord with enduring patterns" (Hausman, 1975: 117). A spontaneous act introduces a discontinuity in the anticipated flow of events contradicting or baffling the expectations of both the agent and the spectator. While walking, for instance, a writer may suddenly realize that the area is clear, and decides – in spite of her previous plan and that of her crew – to tag a door.

One should notice that on the spot adaptations are virtually inevitable in real life conditions for the specific temporality characterizing the creation of tags. Tagging is essentially done in one take, without the possibility of modifying, altering, or correcting the tag. In an important sense, this style of graffiti is the closest analogue to Asian school of ink paintings, where the nature of the medium does not allow for corrections or deliberation (Hamilton, 2000, p. 178). Similarly, a well-executed tag requires a continuous gestural flow.

[14] Here, I am not interested in discussing the issue of legal tags and graffiti. For an analysis of this issue, see Baldini (forthcoming, sec. 4).

Moreover, the precarious conditions under which tagging is performed prevents going back for revising the signature just executed (Baldini, forthcoming, sec. 4). These circumstances impose spontaneity on writers.

This forced spontaneity has important implications at the level of tags' aesthetics, which is distinctly one of an *imperfectionist* kind. In saying so, I intend what follows: for the specific temporality of their creation, tags show a "greater incidence of 'formal imperfection'" (Hamilton, 1990, p. 336). In effect, those are works that present features that are irregular, disordered, incomplete, etc. For instance, rapidly executing a tag with spray-paint without the possibility of polishing the work results in unintended dripping, partially filled lines, and unfinished elements (Fig. 3). Something similar happens when using markers or other media. And these imperfections also make each instance of the same tag different from any other (Schacter, 2014, p. 153).

Figure 3: A tag by Fra32 showing distinct aesthetic imperfections. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In mentioning tags' aesthetics of imperfection, I should emphasize an important point, which will help us better capture the value of instantaneous-recipes and, more generally, of improvisation in everyday cooking. When thinking about

aesthetic practices, which arguably include both graffiti and cooking, most accounts of their value are forms of perfectionism. According to this view, an aesthetic merit is generally an absence of a defect (Hamilton, 1990, 2000; Saito, 2017). Imperfectionists reject this idea and argue that, sometimes, features that are generally construed as defects are sources of aesthetic worth.

In general, appreciating imperfections enriches our aesthetic lives by expanding the range of features for appreciation (Saito, 2017, sec. 2.1). Imperfectionism frees aesthetic enjoyment from perfectionist constraints, and allows us to acknowledge the positivity, for instance, of the irregular, disordered, and rough elements of a wild garden. Moreover, "the pleasure of the imagination" is often an outcome of the uncommon and the deviant (Addison, 1975, p. 142; Saito, 2017, sec. 2.2). Aesthetic imperfections, in this sense, can effectively stimulate our mind in constantly new and interesting ways.

In this section, I have showed that tags' spontaneous and improvisational nature is not grounded in a lack of preparation and training. It is rather put in display in writers' free use of public space. In the following section, I use this discussion of spontaneity to illuminate the improvisational nature of instantaneous-recipes.

4. Cooking, on the spot adaptations, and instantaneous-recipes

Instantaneous-recipes are the quintessential expression of spontaneity and improvisation in the kitchen. But why and how are instantaneous-recipes improvisational? When talking about improvisation in this context, just like in graffiti writing, I do not want to suggest that spontaneity has to do with someone cooking without any preparation or plan. Generally – and hopefully! – those approaching a stove or any other cooking tool would have received years of training in some techniques – ranging from handling, beating, whisking, butchering and cutting, to various forms of heating food – that are necessary to prepare a dish. Of course, training need not be done formally, and typically it is not insofar as cooking is learned in families and communities. So, a person that wants to cook some kind of pasta may very well have received training and actually tried out before. In this sense, instantaneous-recipes are *not* improvisations because they are the outcome of a lack of preparation or skill.

Moreover, one always cooks with a given set of available ingredients, tools, and utensils. In everyday contexts, these practical limitations are obvious. However, they are also present – at least to some degree – even in professional settings: Most ingredients are only available seasonally. In this sense,

improvisational freedom of instantaneous-recipes is not displayed in the spontaneity of using whatever ingredient, tool, or utensil to cook a dish. Just like writers use urban surfaces such as walls, trains, and shutters that are already available, those who improvise in the kitchen cannot decide without constraints what they are going to use to prepare a dish.

Where is then the freedom of instantaneous-recipes displayed? It is displayed in the spontaneity of using what is available in terms of ingredients, tools, and utensils, and of cooking dishes without following a pre-established plan. In other words, the spontaneity characterizing instantaneous-recipes is a function of on the spot adaptations that cooks have implemented while preparing a particular dish. As tags, instantaneous recipes are generally an outcome of forced spontaneity, which is imposed as a consequence of the contextual conditions wherein which one is cooking.

So, here is how the parallel with tagging proves useful. One comes to the kitchen with substantial training and with a prior know-what and know-how of culinary matters – just like a writer would, for instance, approach a train car with skills and knowledge. However, not even the most meticulous preparation can account for all contingencies: the lack of an ingredient, a missing tool, a technical failure or a mistake. Or, on a more positive side, a relevant eventuality – just like in Bottura's story discussed above – is the presence of certain leftovers that if not used would be thrown away. These circumstances would require on the spot adaptations and, at least in some cases as I shall clarify later, the emergence of instantaneous-recipes. So, in this sense, instantaneous-recipes are those that come up in response to on the spot adaptations: They are what make those variety of recipes improvisational.

Let me emphasize an important point. On the spot adaptations are generally a direct consequence of the temporality of cooking. As already mentioned, most salient aspects of cooking follow a unidirectional temporal line. In other words, once you have, for instance, boiled an egg, you cannot make it raw again. Moreover, we cook under deadlines, which could be stricter or looser. In professional contexts, a chef cannot ask clients to come back tomorrow because the oven needs to be fixed – just like in Jinich's case. In everyday situations, one would not be able to defer indefinitely eating time.

Recipes that we can find, for instance, in cookbooks or food blogs report preparation times. But, of course, those are estimates reducing lived time into clock time. Even the best-intentioned practitioners – even the most professional among chefs – may find themselves short on time, and therefore forced to adapt

on the spot, substituting an ingredient for another one, changing the chosen variety of heating transfer, or even deciding to modify the type of dish that one wants to prepare. Or, in other cases, one could end up to have more time than expected – perhaps a snowstorm has come and guests are coming in just tomorrow – and therefore, for instance, the idea of serving a tender cut of beef filet as tartare seems suddenly a bad choice.

Even the unexpected availability of an ingredient – as already said – may very well encourage an on the spot adaptation, opening up the possibility for an instantaneous recipe to emerge. This might sound as an odd possibility to many for grocery shopping is highly deliberative, and, let's say, having arugula at home in most urban settings will not happen by chance. However, when thinking about circumstances for instance where one harvests or grows vegetables in the countryside, it is easy to imagine or encounter situations where cooks come in possession of some produce without planning and in a quantity that baffles their expectations and plans.

Consider the following real-life example. A couple of years ago, my parents planted some arugula in their vegetable garden. This vegetable grows so well in the area that, after a good harvest, many plants spontaneously grew the following season. My mother did not expect this second wave, and really did not know what to do with it. My parents had eaten so much arugula salad in the previous months that my mother started thinking about new ways to use it. One day, looking at an arugula-filled box, she suddenly came up with the idea of making arugula pesto by adapting the traditional Pesto Genovese recipe. While chopping the arugula, she decided to use nuts that were at home – a mix of pistachios, walnuts, and almonds – instead of buying expensive pine nuts. She had, in effect, no idea of how the instantaneous-recipe would have turned out to be: Why potentially waste something as precious as pine nuts? With a touch of local extra-virgin olive oil, pecorino, Parmigiano Reggiano, and garlic, this arugula pesto has become one of her signature dishes: an instantaneous-recipe (fig. 4).

Figure 4: My mom's signature instantaneous-recipe: arugula pesto. Photo by the author.

At this point, one might object that my mom's arugula pesto is merely a variation of the classic Pesto Genovese, a definitely nobler version using primarily basil and pine nuts to create the world-renowned creamy green sauce. Of course, whether a dish instantiating a recipe that has gone through on the spot adaptations may count as a legitimate new instantaneous-recipe or, one might say, an instantaneous-variation of a prior- or after-recipe, would depend on the criteria of identification and re-identification that one favors. Stricter approaches may raise the bar and require higher degrees of originality. Disagreement may very well occur when evaluating particular cases.

However, here I am simply interested in making room for instantaneous-recipes as possibilities within the larger spectrum of recipes. Even if one wants to reject that my mom's arugula pesto is a new instantaneous-recipe, but rather a mere variation of the arguably after-recipe Pesto Genovese, it appears way too extreme to deny that at least some recipes are instantaneous-recipes. One would have to exclude all the examples that I have listed so far, including Bottura's "Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart" or the crepes-suzette. Such a denial appears implausible: It is too much to swallow!

The threshold for new recipes has been historically very low. In Italian cooking, many varieties of pasta differ simply for details about shapes. Consider penne rigate and penne lisce: their difference lies in the fact that the former has a rough surface, the latter a smooth one. Are they different recipes or just variations of the same recipe? To think that they are simply a variation of the same recipe seems to be at odds not only with how we think and speak about pasta, but it also seems to also fail a pragmatic test: Italians do not buy indifferently one or the other kind, but they systematically avoid the smooth kind even while raiding supermarkets during a pandemic (Zanola, 2020).

It is my view that more relaxed approaches to identifying new recipes bring both theoretical and practical advantages. First, they would allow us to come up with a better understanding of how people generally conceptualize and think about recipes. Different communities often consider similar dishes as instantiations of different recipes, and not merely as variations of the same genus. The point here is not merely linguistic or semantic, but the different categorization would generally tie into different local histories, identities, and values. To ignore this proliferation of recipes is to profoundly misconstrue how recipes are entangled with cultures.

Second, tolerance in identifying new recipes promotes and rewards creativity in the kitchen. Stricter models arguably require originality as a necessary condition for a new recipe. Here, I intend originality as historical creativity or "H-creativity": Something is H-creative if "has risen for the first time in human history" (Boden, 2010, p. 30). However, this is a special case of creativity. In a more basic sense, creativity "involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that's new *to the person who comes up with it*," which can be called psychological creativity or P-creativity (Boden, 2010, p. 30). Many instantaneous-recipes arguably would be P-creative. However, this aspect does not make them less valuable nor less creative. Not only great chefs inventing cutting-edge recipes can be inventive: Also a person coming up with an instantaneous-recipe that is not so innovative may very well be so. In the following section, I further discuss the connection between instantaneous-recipes, creativity, and value.

5. Instantaneous-recipes, creativity, and the value of imperfection

In examining the improvisational nature of tags, I emphasized how spontaneity, with its aesthetics of imperfection, carries value. Thanks to their imperfect elements, tags enlarge the features of the urban landscape that we can

appreciate, making room for the irregular, the disordered, and the incomplete – among others – as sources of everyday aesthetic enjoyment. Moreover, the uncommon and the deviant are particularly effective in eliciting one's intellectual receptivity: The unexpected forcefully shakes our minds in ways that facilitate the pleasures of the imagination.

A similar argument could be made also with regard to instantaneous-recipes. In effect, for their improvisational nature dishes that are instantiations of instantaneous-recipes are essentially characterized by imperfect features, in at least two senses. First, imperfections can be violations of features prescribed by pre-existing (both prior- and after-) recipes, which are perceived as culinary priors that instantaneous-recipes appropriate and modify. In spontaneously using ingredients, tools, utensils, and techniques this variety of recipes opens the door to imperfectionism in cooking.

In this first sense, then, imperfections in dishes are consequences of on the spot adaptations transforming a prior- or after-recipe into something different, that is, a new instantaneous-recipe. As already mentioned, circumstances such as the unexpected unavailability (or availability) of an ingredient may very well invite an on the spot adaption done without much deliberation or afterthought. This in turn, at least sometimes, can result in creating a novel instantaneous-recipe. For instance, it is plausible to regard my mother's arugula pesto as imperfect in this sense: A result of an on the spot adaptation of what we can consider a traditional after-recipe, that is, Pesto Genovese.

Instantaneous-recipes are also characterized by imperfect features in a second sense. Culinary on the spot adaptations can also introduce elements that we generally perceive as defective such as the rough, the unbalanced, the incomplete, the broken, and so on as constitutive of a particular instantaneous-recipe. Bottura's "Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart" offers again a very instructive example here. This instantaneous-recipe emerged as an on the spot adaptation responding to an accidentally broken cake (fig. 5). Bottura's signature dessert introduces an element of imperfection that is not merely a failure in following the after-recipe lemon tart, but it is generally regarded as imperfect: the broken.[15]

[15] For an instructive history of the lemon tart, see https://delistories.puratos.com/lemon-pie/.

Figure 5: "Massimo Bottura's 'Oops! I've dropped the lemon tart!'" by qcom. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

Common views about cooking see imperfections just like those described above as aesthetic flaws. This is of course in continuity with the general dismissal of

the defective in western thought, which is usually incapable of appreciating the unpolished. The recent public backlash against Bottura's breadcrumbs pesto provides evidence in favor of this idea (Roberts, 2017). Similarly to my mother's arugula pesto, this recipe is the outcome of on the spot adaptations that aim at modifying the original Pesto Genovese. One day, Bottura was cooking at the Refettorio Ambrosiano, his first community kitchen serving meals to the marginalized in Milan. The celebrity chef realized that he had not enough basil and pine nuts to prepare Pesto Genovese for everyone. He added mint, parsley, and breadcrumbs. In spite of his huge popularity and professional recognition, Bottura's on the spot pesto was harshly criticized – especially on social media – for failing to comply with the traditional recipe: A perfect example of perfectionism at play![16]

In this sense, the evaluative canon in cooking is arguably a form of perfectionism, where perfect compliance with prior- or after-recipes functions as a central evaluative criterion, together with the rejection of imperfect features. What we see in modern gastronomy – where perhaps Bottura is a rare exception, at least to some degree – is an obsessive search for perfection. This in turn has been driven by what one might call the politics of the Michelin Star. The economic consequences of being awarded one or more Michelin stars have pushed chefs to pay "obsessive attention to detail," as well documented in BBC2's *Michelin Stars: The Madness of Perfection* (Dowling, 2010).[17] The trend has influenced how we conceptualize and judge dishes and recipes: As I have already mentioned, in everyday discourse being awarded 3 Michelin stars represents the benchmark of culinary excellence. According to this view, the spontaneous and improvised should not have a seat at the table.

Here, I am interested in defending the values of imperfection as essentially linked to improvisation and imperfection in cooking, that is, the value of instantaneous-recipes. Similarly to what we see in tags, imperfection in the kitchen carries *aesthetic* value. On the one hand, it broadens the range of aesthetics features that we enjoy while cooking and eating. Instantaneous-recipes in effect bring to the table, for instance, new flavors, combinations of

[16] See, for instance, https://www.ilsecoloxix.it/cultura-e-spettacoli/2018/03/10/news/se-questo-e-pesto-lo-chef-bottura-e-la-ricetta-con-menta-e-briciole-1.31673980.

[17] Of course, I am aware that Bottura is praised by the Michelin guide and that there are ways to reconcile the broken shape of "Oops! I've dropped the lemon tart!" with perfectionism. This issue of how imperfections can turn into perfections is interesting, and I plan to return on the topic in the future.

ingredients, shapes, and new techniques and tools. On the other hand, the unusual stimulates our minds more forcefully, enhancing the pleasures of the imagination.

Imperfectionism in cooking also significantly connects to two other types of values. First, imperfectionism realizes a *humanistic* value. It reveals something profound about human life, which is essentially messy and faulty (Hamilton, 2020, p. 298). Appreciating imperfections is a way to reconceptualize "mistakes" (Hamilton, 2020, p. 290) and to accept our finitude, while at the same time recognizing the creativity expressed through on the spot adaptations. We should learn to treasure and praise these responses to gastronomic contingencies.

In line with the humanistic side of imperfection, Bottura defines creativity in the kitchen as "happy hindrance," which is "what allows you to get back up right after you slipped, capturing the light" (Bottura, 2016). As research shows, "creativity thrives on indeterminacy" (McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015, p. 55). The need to respond to the unexpected – what I have also called forced spontaneity – trains our capacity to improvise, to look for creative solutions, and to find meaning in the contingent (Lavie et al., 1993). In improvising instantaneous-recipes, we can experience that distinct joy of everyday creation that we generally overlook.

Arguably, perfectionism in cooking is holding back many from diving into the domain of happy hindrances, thus demoting creativity in the kitchen and its joy. Research shows that many do not enjoy cooking for time constraints, costs, and evaluative pressure (Bowen et al., 2014). However, while acknowledging that difficult socio-economic conditions of course make more difficult enjoying cooking (as basically any other activity), the inhibiting power of those factors – I believe – is exaggerated, at least in some respects. And such an exaggeration often follows from accepting perfectionist approaches to cooking as normative.

For instance, the necessity to plan ahead in order to have all ingredients on hand is cited as time consuming (Bowen et al., 2014, p. 22). However, for imperfectionism, this concern is virtually non-existent. Insofar as instantaneous-recipes emerge spontaneously as on the spot adaptations to contingencies, imperfectionists would simply cook by improvising with what they have. When thinking about costs, for instance, less affluent kitchens would surely lack tools (Bowen et al., 2014, p. 23). But coming up with ingenious solutions to compensate the lack, for instance, of a lid to flip a frittata (Fig. 6) is the bread and butter of imperfectionism.

Figure 6: A frittata flipped with spoon and fork as an on the spot adaptation to a missing lid. Photo by the author.

The pressure that some may experience when cooking for others depends, I believe, on an aspect that I have not yet mentioned, but that is arguably at the core of perfectionism. Perfectionists find value in the flawlessness of the product and the outcome, favoring a "backward" understanding of creativity: The making is praised not in itself, but in response to a result of a certain kind (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). This understanding of creativity tells us that some activity is worthy of appreciation insofar as its outcome is of a certain quality.

However, imperfectionism finds value in the activity itself, and embraces a "forward" reading of creativity (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). According to this view, one can adopt an evaluative stance where the conditions of production become the focus of one' judgments. When appreciating on the spot adaptations and the creativity that gives rise to them, the final result becomes secondary. This shift allows to take pleasure and find joy in and while performing creativity, in the capacity to find solutions to unforeseen problems, to come up with on the spot adaptations that are at the core of instantaneous-recipes.[18] When looking at cooking in this way, evaluative pressure may very well be reduced (McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015).

Second, imperfectionism in cooking also embodies a *sustainability* value. Instantaneous-recipes are in effect ways to creatively use what is available, contrasting in effective ways food waste. The numbers of "leftovers" that are not used are huge: in 2010, more than 40% of wasted food in the UK belong to this category, with an aggregate mass of 2.2 Mt (Parfitt et al., 2010). Though in developing and emerging countries large-scale investments at the structural, production, and distribution level are necessary to take this issue, the developed world must undergo a cultural shift to contrast food waste (Parfitt et al., 2010, p. 3079). The imperfectionist revolution is part of that change: Instantaneous-recipes – with their emphasis on using what is available – are perfect catalyzers of such a transformation.

Bottura, in particular with his project Food for Soul has been at the forefront of the battle against food waste.[19] The episode of *Kitchen Quarantine* that I discussed in the introduction is just a glamourous and socially-viral manifestation of that approach, which sees leftovers as resources rather than garbage. Hamilton argues that full-fledged imperfectionism is not a way to passively react to emergencies, but to actively search for such accidents: "imperfectionism is a constant striving for new contingencies to respond to" (Hamilton, 2020, p. 299). In this sense, the everyday challenge of leftovers offers unlimited opportunities for imperfectionists in cooking to challenge themselves. And, in this domain, imperfectionism becomes then colored with political and social meanings.

[18] Recently, some philosophers have emphasized the value of the process of creation (Nguyen, 2020; van der Berg, 2019).
[19] https://www.foodforsoul.it

6. Conclusion

Can there be spontaneous recipes? In this paper, my goal was to make room for the counterintuitive idea that recipes do not necessarily identify a pre-established set of instructions that one must follow in order prepare a dish. Contrary to prior- and after-recipes, instantaneous-recipes emerge in the very act of preparing a dish and are performatively established. If liberated temporally, just like the creative act of appropriating spontaneously an urban surface through a tag, recipes may very well unleash new possibilities. These in turn not only enhance our aesthetic enjoyment, but also provide us with humanistic and sustainability value. The strictures imposed by traditional and established recipes is eroding, I believe, the pleasures of cooking, while favoring environmentally harmful approaches to food. I have defended here an alternative approach: imperfectionism in cooking. Imperfectionists do not merely learn to appreciate the seemingly defective and to accept their finitude as humans, but also find pleasure in coming up with creative solutions to contingencies, possibly contrasting in this way food waste. Bottura writes that "You cannot improvise being a great chef, but great chefs do improvise" (Bottura, 2016). If that's true, then it seems that we have a moral imperative to all become just that. Imperfectionist cooks of the world, unite!

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