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FOOD AS ART

Elizabeth Telfer

FOOD AS ART

Might food and drink sometimes constitute an art form? Philosophers who have dealt with this topic tend to say that whereas food and drink can of course produce aesthetic reactions, it cannot be an art form or produce works of art. I shall therefore begin by examining the concept of aesthetic reactions, in general and as applied to food. I shall then consider the concepts of a work of art and an art form, and show how these concepts might be applied in the sphere of food. I shall go on to discuss the reasons which philosophers have produced for rejecting the idea of an art of food, and consider how they may be countered. Finally, I shall briefly discuss the social significance of regarding food as an art and some reasons for concluding that it is a minor rather than a major art.

AESTHETIC REACTIONS

What makes us call a reaction an aesthetic one? We naturally associate the word "aesthetic" with the arts, but we can also speak of an aesthetic reaction to natural things such as a beautiful landscape, or to man-made, non-art objects such as pieces of machinery. J.O. Urmson, in a well-known article (Urmson 1962), takes for granted that an aesthetic reaction is not a neutral reaction, but a species of pleasure. He suggests that we can best distinguish an aesthetic reaction from other kinds of reaction on the basis of the grounds for it. For example, if we react favourably to a play because it will earn a lot of money for us, because it teaches a fine moral lesson or because it is a successful venture for a playwright we know, our reaction is not aesthetic. Our reaction is aesthetic, in many simple cases, if it is based solely on how the object appears to the senses.

This appreciation of a thing for its own sake is sometimes characterised as disinterested. The use of this word is misleading: my favourable reaction to the play because

I am pleased by my friend's success might be called disinterested, but it is still not an aesthetic reaction. The point is better made by calling the reaction non-instrumental: I appreciate the thing's look or sound for its own sake, not for any benefit it brings to me or others.

Now, as Urmson himself says, it is not at all clear how this account can be made to apply to aesthetic reactions in more complex cases. For example, our appreciation of a novel does not seem to be sensual; still less our appreciation of the beauty of a logical proof (which Urmson allows as an example of an aesthetic reaction). However, his account fits those reactions which are likely to be most nearly like our reactions to food. If I admire some factory chimneys because they make a marvellous pattern, my admiration is aesthetic, whereas if I admire them because they show the factory to be powerful, it is not. Similarly, if I like the way cottage cheese contrasts in flavour and texture with rye bread, my reaction is aesthetic, whereas if I am pleased with the combination because it is low-calorie and high-fibre, it is not.

Are all cases of non-instrumental liking of a sensual phenomenon aesthetic reactions? We think of aesthetic reactions as needing also to have intensity: vaguely saying 'that's nice' without really taking something in does not seem to deserve the name. But the requirement of intensity does not imply that aesthetic reactions always involve actively paying attention to or concentrating on something. This is true of deliberate aesthetic activity, but some of the most powerful aesthetic reactions involve being impressed by some unexpected or short-lived phenomenon – perhaps something too quick to pay attention to, such as a flash of forked lightning. Nor need there be any analysis of what is seen or heard. Often analysis does take place, as when I see the fields in a landscape as forming a pattern. But suppose I lie on my back in the grass on a cloudless summer's day and gaze up into the sky, as if wallowing in the blueness. There is nothing to analyse, but surely this is an aesthetic reaction.

So far I have not challenged Urmson's assumption that an aesthetic reaction is a pleasant reaction to something. But it will not do as it stands. An aesthetic reaction need not be a favourable one, and even where it is, pleasure may not be the right characterisation of it. For example, we might speak of being interested or intrigued by a pattern of clouds, excited or exhilarated by lightning, moved by a panorama, awed by a natural wonder such as Niagara Falls, and so on. In none of these cases is "pleasure" the right description of our feeling, though sometimes "joy" would be appropriate.

Often we claim a kind of objectivity for our aesthetic reactions. We can say of both man-made and natural objects not only "I am excited, moved, awed by this", but also "This is sublime, beautiful, elegant, intriguing", as if attributing a quality to the object. Sometimes the second way of speaking may be only another way of expressing our own reactions, as when I say "This is nice" as I get into a hot bath. But at other times we think of the object of our aesthetic attention as in some way warranting or meriting a particular reaction, because it has qualities which other people also would appreciate

or come to appreciate in it. In other words, there is often a sense of objective judgment in our reaction. This sense of objectivity need not entail a belief that some things are beautiful, graceful or awe-inspiring in themselves, regardless of how human beings see them; perhaps aesthetic qualities are capacities which some things have to arouse reactions of a certain kind in us. But it does mean that the realm of the aesthetic is not all "just a matter of what you like". We think that there can be judgments in this sphere which claim to be in some sense valid or well-founded, and that it makes sense to argue about them, even if the arguments often cannot be resolved.

It might be objected that the word "judgment" is scarcely appropriate to describe a sudden reaction to a flash of lightning. However, I did not claim that there is an element of judgment in every single aesthetic reaction. My wallowing in the blueness of the sky need not be accompanied by the thought that everyone ought to feel as I do about it, any more than my reaction to the lightning need be. But in each case judgment is possible: one might say to oneself immediately afterwards, "How beautiful!" and think of the sight as deserving one's feeling of joy.

Aesthetic judgments can sometimes be made in the absence of the non-neutral reaction which normally accompanies them. In some states of mind I can look at a landscape which would normally delight me and feel quite indifferent to it, but still see it as beautiful – meaning, perhaps, that it is the kind of thing which ought to delight people, and would normally delight me too.

The account which I have given of aesthetic reaction will not suit all cases. But I hope I have succeeded in suggesting a range of sense-experiences which fall under the description of "aesthetic reactions", and which may be characterised as non-neutral, non-instrumental, having a certain intensity and often accompanied by judgments for which the judgers claim a kind of objectivity.

How does all this apply to food and drink? Urmson is rather grudging on the matter: "It is at least reasonable to allow an aesthetic satisfaction to the connoisseur of wines and to the gourmet" (Urmson 1962: 14). There are, however, some more specific points that one would want to make.

First, it is generally agreed that there can be aesthetic reactions to tastes and smells. (There can also, of course, be visual aesthetic experiences connected with foodstuffs, as when one admires a rosy apple, but these raise no questions peculiar to food and drink.)

Second, as with the other examples of aesthetic reaction, we can distinguish liking the taste and smell of food from approving of it instrumentally on the grounds that it is nourishing, fashionable or produced by politically respectable regimes. Likewise we can distinguish the person who "enjoys his food" but does not notice what he eats, from the person whose awareness is more vivid – the latter reaction being the only one which is characteristically aesthetic.

And third, as with the other senses, the non-neutral, vivid and non-instrumental reaction to tastes and smells can be combined with a judgment for which the judger

claims objectivity. I can not only like a food myself but also believe that the taste is a fine one which people ought to like, even if some of them at present do not. For example, I may not only prefer fresh grapefruit without sugar myself, but also think this preference is justified and hope to convince others of this. It is also possible for the judgment to become detached from the non-neutral reaction, as with other kinds of aesthetic reaction: I can say "These sandwiches are good" when I am aware that they deserve to be enjoyed but I am so tired that I am quite indifferent to them myself.

WORKS OF ART

As I said earlier, many philosophers argue that although food and drink can give rise to aesthetic reactions, they cannot constitute works of art. In order to examine this claim, we first need to consider what is meant by saying that something is a work of art.

Not all objects that can give rise to aesthetic reactions are works of art. A work of art is by definition a man-made thing, even if the human involvement need consist of no more than putting a natural object in a gallery and giving it a title. This much is clear, but beyond this point there are considerable complexities. One problem is that the phrase "work of art" can be used in either a classifying or an evaluative way. To use it in a classifying way is to say something about how the object is regarded, whereas to use it in an evaluative way is to say something about the extent to which it merits the label "work of art".

Urmson's definition of a work of art takes the phrase in a classifying sense: for him a work of art is "an artefact primarily intended for aesthetic consideration" (Urmson 1962: 22). Since we know from our discussion in the previous section what is meant by "aesthetic consideration", we can now expand this definition: if something is a work of art, then its maker or exhibitor intended it to be looked at or listened to with intensity, for its own sake. So if I go into a gallery of modern art, see a pile of metal pipes in a corner and wonder whether it is a work of art or some materials left behind by the central heating engineers, I am employing Urmson's sense of the phrase, wondering whether the pile is intended to be looked at with intensity. However, Urmson's use of the word "primarily" allows for the possibility that a work of art might be made for use as well as ornament. So a chair can count as a work of art if the maker intends it primarily to be looked at in the way one would look at a picture, even if he also intends it to be sat upon.

The classifying sense of the term "work of art", in the way Urmson uses it, takes the maker's or exhibitor's intentions as the criterion for deciding whether something is a work of art or not. There are, however, objects such as ethnological objects, or religious buildings, which were not intended by their makers as works of art but which are now treated as such. So we have a second classifying sense of "work of art": a thing is a

work of art for a society if it is treated by that society as primarily an object of aesthetic consideration.

To grasp the evaluative use of the phrase "work of art", consider again the pile of metal pipes in the gallery. Suppose I look at it more closely, and find a notice on it saying "Modern Times" or "Metallic Three" (or even "Metal Pipes"); I may now say "That's not a work of art, that's just a pile of junk." I know perfectly well that the pile is a work of art in the first sense: that is, I know that the artist and the gallery owner intend us to gaze at it with intensity and that the public will probably oblige. But I am claiming that this object is not worth gazing at in this way, that it does not merit or repay aesthetic consideration.

People who use the phrase "work of art" in this evaluative way are from one point of view commending the things that they call works of art, but it does not follow that they consider all works of art to be good ones. Thus the person who refuses to call a collection of pipes a work of art might also say of a not very good conventional sculpture, "That is a work of art, even if it's not very good", meaning that it deserves to be appraised aesthetically, even though it may then be found wanting.

The distinction between the classifying and the evaluative senses of the phrase "work of art" is relevant to food. I shall claim that some dishes clearly constitute works of art in the classifying sense. But I shall also discuss arguments purporting to show that food does not merit aesthetic attention: in other words, that dishes cannot constitute works of art in the evaluative sense.

So far I have written as though there is no problem about what philosophers call the "ontological status" of a work of art: what kind of a thing it is, what kind of existence it has. But in fact there are many problems. Perhaps buildings, pictures and sculpture are unproblematic (though even here there are difficulties about the case of many identical etchings taken from one plate). But a piece of music is not a tangible object at all: for example, the Moonlight Sonata is not the piece of paper on which Beethoven wrote it, since there is still such a thing as the Moonlight Sonata even if that paper is destroyed. On the other hand, we do not want to identify the sonata with its performances, not only because it is one thing and they are many, but also because it would exist as a work of art even if it had never been performed. The same sort of thing can be said of plays. We therefore have to see this kind of work of art, a piece of music or a play, as an abstract thing, a kind of blueprint for performance. This point has relevance to food, as we shall see.

We can now begin to consider whether it makes sense to say that food and drink can sometimes be works of art. First I must clarify the question. It is obvious that foodstuffs can be made into visual objects which are works of art. The great pastrycook Carême – who was famous for the immensely elaborate models (known as *pièces montées*) which he made out of sugar and other foodstuffs – once said of confectionery that it was the principal branch of architecture (Quinet 1981: 164–5). It could be argued that these

objects are not food, since they were not intended to be eaten, but food properly so called is likewise often arranged or decorated in creative and attractive ways which constitute a visual work of art. However, the taste of food and drink as well as the look of it can give rise to aesthetic reactions, and I therefore wish to ask whether food and drink can sometimes constitute works of art of a kind peculiar to themselves, appealing mostly to the senses of taste and smell.

Our definition of a work of art, in the classifying sense, was: "a thing intended or used wholly or largely for aesthetic consideration". This is not true of run-of-the-mill food. But many meals are intended by their cooks to be considered largely in this way – to be savoured, appraised, thought about, discussed – and many eaters consider them in this way. Such meals also serve the functions of relieving hunger and providing nourishment, but they are of a kind which shows that this is not the main point of them. A meal that claims to be a work of art is too complex and long-drawn-out to be understandable in terms simply of feeding, and a cook who has cooked a work of art is not satisfied if the eaters do not notice what they eat. Such a cook aims to produce a particular kind of pleasure, one which depends upon a discerning appreciation of the flavours and how they combine and succeed one another.

To illustrate the approach of the cook who prepares a work of art, I quote from *The Good Food Guide Dinner Party Book* (Fawcett and Strang 1971). This is a book of recipes collected from some of the restaurants recommended in *The Good Food Guide* and assembled by its authors into suggested dinner-party menus.

Guests who are particularly interested in food and cooking would enjoy this meal with a savoury beginning and fruity finale . . . The deep-fried croquettes are made of haddock and creamed potato. Serve them with sauce tartare . . . since its cold sharpness is a foil for the smoked haddock's savoury richness . . .

(p. 62)

With all this richness [roast duck with port and orange sauce or pickled pineapple or prune and Beaujolais sauce] try a green salad and the rather bland puree of potatoes and chestnuts . . .

(p. 101)

. . . the result is a homely rather than an elegant sweet, with the sharpness of the cherries contrasting with the mildness of the filling.

(p. 101)

The Jaegermeister pâté is a forceful one, with venison and liver as the basic ingredients, seasoned with mushrooms, herbs and brandy. The salad served with it is an agreeable contrast of crisp apples, celery and walnuts in mayonnaise.

(p. 106)

Instead of muffling the scampi in a coating of crumbs, this recipe prescribes a delicate cream sauce, flavoured with mushrooms and brandy, which complements their flavour perfectly.

(p. 106)

These passages and many others like them illustrate the authors' desire to design dishes, courses and whole meals which present patterns of harmonious or contrasting flavours and textures. This is the approach of the cook who is designing a work of art.

ART, CRAFT, CREATION, INTERPRETATION

I have so far discussed cookery as an art, but perhaps cookery is really a craft. So we need to know what the difference is between art and craft.

Some commentators draw the distinction on the basis of the purpose to which the artefact is to be put: if it is intended for contemplation it is a work of art, if for use it is a work of craftsmanship. This distinction employs the notion of a work of art in what I called the classifying sense. But this way of drawing the distinction is not satisfactory. As we have already seen, something which is incidentally useful may be primarily intended for contemplation, and things not intended for contemplation by their makers are sometimes treated as works of art by others.

There is another possible distinction between art and craft: art is original creation, whereas craft is carrying out an instruction, following a convention or employing a technique (Whittick 1984: 47-52). This distinction is between kinds of work, rather than between the products of the work. We can apply the distinction without difficulty to some cases: for example the architect who designs the church is an artist, whereas the masons and woodcarvers who carry out his instructions are craftsmen. But other cases are less clear-cut. Painting and composing are normally thought of as original creation, but painters and composers often follow a convention: they create in accordance with a set of rules which defines a genre, such as sonata form or the conventional iconography of paintings of the Virgin Mary. If following a convention is the mark of a craftsman, then painters and composers are often craftsmen in that respect. But unlike the exact instructions of the mason, such conventions leave room for choice, so the painter's or composer's use of them is both craft and a part of the creative process. The same feature of craft in art is seen if we consider technique. Technique is a mark of craft, but the creative artist requires technique: we can distinguish creativity from skill in brushwork in painting, and creativity from mastery of orchestration in composition. Again, the painter's use of technique is both craftsmanship and part of the creative process.

The conclusion that emerges from this discussion is that the distinction between art and craft is basically not between people but between different aspects of their work,

which may be blended in different proportions; if the work contains a good deal of creativity it will be thought of as art, if it contains a modest amount it will be thought of as craft, but there is no sharp distinction. The extreme case of the mason leaves no room for creativity, and so the mason is a craftsman who is not an artist at all; we might class him as a technician. But many so-called crafts, such as pottery and furniture making, leave plenty of room for creativity alongside the following of a convention and the employment of technical skill.

This blend of creation and craft applies also to interpretation. People tend to speak of composing and writing plays as creative, playing music and acting as interpretative. This way of speaking suggests that interpretation is not creative and is therefore not art. But the interpreter is in a position rather like that of a composer or writer writing in a genre with a strict convention. The music or drama that is being interpreted does not provide an exact plan of what is to be done; so interpretative artists have to make choices, have to be creative, and within an interpretative art we can distinguish between creativity and technique. In a sense, then, each performance is a work of art. If we do not use the phrase "work of art" in this context, it is perhaps because we have a sense that a work of art must be something durable – an idea to which I shall return.

So is cookery an art or a craft? It is true that it is often thought of as a craft. One reason for this is that its products are useful. But as we have seen, the usefulness of a thing does not prevent its being a work of art, so this criterion does not prevent cookery from being an art. And if the distinction between craft and art is based on the degree of creativeness, some cookery can still qualify as an art. As we saw from *The Good Food Guide Dinner Party Book*, recipes are sometimes treated as works of art, of a kind analogous to musical compositions. The cook who creates such a recipe is a creative artist. A cook can also create recipes by producing variations on someone else's recipe or on a traditional one, like a jazz composer arranging a standard tune or a classical composer arranging a folk song; cooks who do this are also creative artists.

Those who actually produce the dishes may or may not be artists. If a chef who creates such a dish gives exact orders for its preparation to his team of assistants, the assistants are technicians rather than artists, and the relationship between chef and technicians is like that between the architect and the masons. But most cooks are like neither architects nor masons. A cook following a recipe (a recipe that is a work of art, that is, like those in *The Good Food Guide Dinner Party Book*) is normally a performing artist rather than a technician, because recipes are usually vague ("season to taste", "add a pinch of ginger if desired" and so on) and need interpretation. So a particular cook's version of a recipe is an interpretative work of art, like a particular musician's performance of a piece of music. The same applies if the creator of a recipe cooks his own dish; he is an interpreter as well as a creator, like a composer playing his own compositions. (Both will of course need technique as well as interpretative artistry, such as the ability to make a white sauce without lumps, and pastry which remains in one

piece.) It might seem as though the cook following recipes rather than creating them has room for artistry only when the recipes are vague. But even the cook who follows precise recipes has to make choices about the combination and sequence of dishes in a meal, and so to that degree is an artist.

DISHES AS WORKS OF ART

If cookery is an art form, what exactly is the work of art?

I said that both an original recipe and an actual dish (a particular performance of a recipe, as it were) are works of art if they are regarded aesthetically. However, sometimes there are problems about this scheme. Suppose a chef working for Marks and Spencer creates a superb pie, which is then turned out by the thousand. Are all the pies works of art, or is the abstract recipe the only work of art? The nearest analogy in the standard fine arts is probably with engraving and other forms of print-making, where the essence of the process is that it enables an artist to produce many copies of one work. Since we can call each engraving a work of art, we can call each Marks and Spencer pie a work of art, at least in the classifying sense.

There is another problem of quite a different kind about the status of dishes as works of art. Because people have to eat them to appreciate them, and because each person necessarily eats a different part of the dish, it might seem that in the sphere of food no one can appreciate a complete work of art, and no two people can appreciate the same one. I am not referring to the common thought that all viewers and listeners approach works of art from their own points of view and with their own preconceptions, and so in a sense each sees a different work of art. The present problem, if there is one, belongs particularly to food, and is more like a situation where each viewer of a picture sees only one section of it.

In fact, however, a dish of food is normally more homogeneous than this, or should be. All those who partake of it are presented with roughly the same thing. What they smell and taste is tangible stuff. But it is not a structure with parts, even if the dish is a structure with parts, like a pie, because one cannot smell or taste a structure. Admittedly there may be problems where a dish is not homogeneous enough: one diner's experience of the strength and blend of flavours may not match another's. These accidents are comparable to having a seat in a concert hall from which some of the instruments in the orchestra are inaudible: the recipe is not at fault, but the performance is.

Another apparent difficulty about treating dishes of food as works of art is this: how can there be works of art which are destroyed by the very activity, eating, which is necessary for contemplating them? This difficulty too depends on the mistaken idea that what is appreciated is a structure. As before, the answer to the difficulty is that even where a dish is a structure such as a pie, the aspect of it which is relevant to aesthetic

appraisal is not the structure, which is destroyed as soon as the dish is started, but the combination of flavours, which runs right through the eating like letters through a stick of rock (Prall 1958: 185).

SHOULD FOOD BE AN ART FORM?

So far I have not mentioned art forms. An art form is a type of work of art, a class to which works of art in a similar medium belong. For example, sculpture is an art form, the class to which the particular works of art that are sculptures belong. So if dishes of food are works of art, then food is an art form. The term "art form" has the same two senses, classifying and evaluative, as the term "work of art".

It would be implausible to maintain that food and drink never constitute works of art in the classifying sense. People sometimes treat them as works of art, and I have argued that we can compare the creator of a recipe to a composer, and the cook who follows one to a performer. But some philosophers are willing to go further than this and claim that food deserves to be treated as art. D.W. Prall seems to be claiming this when he says:

Like all sense presentations, smells and tastes can be pleasant to perception, can be dwelt on in contemplation, have specific and interesting character, recognizable and rememberable and objective. They offer an object, that is, for sustained discriminatory attention.

(Prall 1958: 187)

But others have claimed that there cannot be such a thing as an art of food as there is of painting or poetry. Since food is in point of fact sometimes treated as an art, these philosophers should be construed as saying that food and drink do not repay being treated as works of art: in other words, that food is not an art form in the evaluative sense. Of course, we can agree that much food is not. But I shall argue that the reasons for dismissing the whole sphere of food from being an art form in the evaluative sense are unconvincing, although I shall eventually conclude that, as an art form, food and drink are a minor one.

The first argument against food and drink as works of art in the evaluative sense concerns the usefulness of food and drink: it might be claimed that nothing useful deserves to count as a work of art, because, as Oscar Wilde said, "All art is quite useless" (Wilde 1948: 17). This argument must be fallacious: of the traditional fine arts (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry) one, namely architecture, is concerned with useful objects. The proper point to make about the uselessness of art, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, is not that works of art must be useless things, but that

to appraise an object aesthetically is to consider it in abstraction from its usefulness. Whether a thing, useful or not, can be a work of art in the evaluative sense depends on whether it is worth appraising in this way.

However, perhaps those who say that food should not be treated as art because it is useful are really claiming that abstracting from usefulness is particularly difficult in the case of eating and drinking. One might reply that, on the contrary, it is all too easy to forget about usefulness (that is, nutritional value) when eating, and what is difficult to forget is the urge to simply munch away without thought. Either way, what these points would show is that it is difficult to treat food as an art form, not that it never merits being treated in that way.

Or perhaps the argument about usefulness is really that it is inappropriate to look at food aesthetically because this is treating a means as an end, and assuming food to be positively good when it is merely necessary. This argument is similar to those used to demote the physical pleasures. But it will not do. It is food as nourishment which is necessary, but the aesthetic value of food depends not on its nourishing properties but on its taste and smell. What we are valuing aesthetically is in effect a different thing from food as nourishment.

A second reason for refusing to count food as a work of art in the evaluative sense relates to the physicality of the way we appreciate food. Whereas we can see and hear at a distance, we taste something only if it actually touches the relevant parts of the body. Isn't this (it might be said) too crude to be art? We might retort that sight and hearing also require a physical link between thing perceived and the organ of perception: light waves, in the one case, sound waves in the other. It remains true that the contact between the thing tasted and the taste-organ is direct in the case of food – but why should this matter? The question, surely, is not whether the way we taste things is crude but whether tastes themselves are crude. One might as well say that music played on a violin is cruder than music played on an organ because the violin is a simpler instrument.

As we shall see shortly, some philosophers do wish to argue that tastes are too crude to sustain art. But the argument from physicality, if I may so call it, might have a different origin: it might stem from a sense that the body taints what it is associated with, and that the freer we are of it the better we are. Sight and hearing, on this view are nobler senses because they are less physical, and to cultivate the more physical kinds of perception is to concentrate on unworthy objects. And of course taste is not only physical in the sense of being dependent on physical contact: normally (except at a wine-tasting or similar) we taste things in the course of making them part of our bodies. So anyone who thinks that we should as far as possible ignore the body might well feel that to dwell on any element of the processes by which it is renewed is in some way disgusting.

As was shown in Chapter 2 of my *Food for Thought* this hostility to the body is found in Plato, Aristotle in his Platonic moods and some strands of Christianity. I argued

there that their arguments should be rejected. If we do this, we will reject along with them the argument that the physical nature of the sense of taste makes it unworthy.

But can combinations of flavours be sufficiently complex to constitute works of art in the evaluative sense of the phrase? Many writers think they cannot. One set of claims is that the eye and the ear are capable of finer discriminations than the senses of taste and smell; that the eye and the ear have more powers of recuperation; and that it is difficult to remember tastes (Gurney 1880: 10–11). These claims depict the limitations as being in us. Another set of claims is that tastes cannot be arranged in regular patterns, and that they do not possess form. These claims depict the limitations as being in tastes themselves.

The distinction between limitations in us and limitations in tastes is itself problematic. How can we be sure that a limitation is in the tastes and not in our perception of them? Does this distinction even make sense? But even if we accept the distinction for the sake of argument, what these considerations show is not that food cannot constitute works of art, but a much weaker thesis: that works of art based on food must be relatively simple. It is instructive that Monroe Beardsley, when discussing the possibility of works of art in food, asks why there are no “taste symphonies and smell sonatas” (Beardsley 1958, 1981: 99). Symphonies and sonatas are exceedingly complex works of art. He should have asked whether there can be taste-and-smell preludes, and the answer is by no means so obvious.

Let us start with the arguments that depict the limitations as being in us, and more particularly the claim that in taste and smell we cannot discriminate finely. It is true that our sense of smell, at any rate, is less highly developed than that of many animals. But we can still recognise a huge range of different smells and tastes. Moreover, these capacities can be developed and trained: we have only to think of the skills of the wine-taster or tea-taster. If our culture laid more stress on the importance of discrimination in food, more people would cultivate a palate, in the same way as musicians train the musical ear. The results might still be cruder than the discernments which can be made in sights and sounds, but this would not show that an art of food could not be worthy of the name. An artist can deliberately restrict his range of colours and shapes, or sounds and timbres, and still produce beautiful works.

The effect of the alleged limitations in our powers of recuperation is this: after tasting something very bitter or strongly spiced, say, we cannot for a while taste anything more subtly flavoured. But there are analogous problems in other arts. After loud ringing chords, the ear finds difficulty in focusing on small sounds; if we look too hard at a bright red shape in a picture, we find that shape, in green, floating about in front of our eyes as we look at the rest of the picture, and so on. In all these cases, artist and audience each have to make allowances. We learn not to stare at one part of a picture, and the conductor or pianist learns to leave a pause after loud chords. Similarly the chef serves a sorbet, or the diner eats a piece of bread, “to cleanse the palate” after the goulash.

There seems to be no difference in principle here, even though there may be a greater limit to the abruptness of possible contrasts in the realm of food. What these limitations suggest, if they exist, is not that there cannot be an art of food, but that such an art must be simple.

As far as our allegedly limited memory is concerned, it is not clear what the limitation is supposed to mean. If the claim is that memory is needed to enable us to appreciate the food as we eat it, we can reply that the art of food is not an art with that degree of complexity: its works of art are not as complex as a complex piece of music, such as a symphony, in which the composer may introduce into the last movement references to themes played in earlier movements. We might also make the point that, whatever may be said about food, most people's memory for music is in any case limited; the average listener – unless he has heard the work several times – cannot pick up references to the beginning of a work at the end of it. And if some feature requiring memory for its appreciation was untypically introduced into a work of art based on food, it seems likely that the expert would be as aware of it as the expert music listener would be of a reference in music – for example, the discerning diner would, like the expert listener, pick up the reference if a flavour in the savoury recalled a note, as people say, in the *hors d'œuvres*.

If, on the other hand, the claim is that memory is needed for subsequent analysis, the observation would show not that there can be no food art, but that there can be no food criticism. In fact those who write critically about food, such as food correspondents in newspapers or *Good Food Guide* inspectors, seem to be able to recall the food with as much precision as the subject-matter requires – aided no doubt by written notes, as any kind of critic might be.

I turn now to the arguments about the limitations of tastes themselves. The tenor of my reply is similar to that concerning our limitations. As before, I would say both that the claims are exaggerated and that the kinds of art which are used as the touchstone are particularly complex.

First, the regular patterns: it is said that tastes do not have an inherent sequence as colours or musical pitches do, so they cannot be arranged in "systematic, repeatable, regular combinations" (Beardsley 1958, 1981: 99). But it is not true that there are no sequences in tastes. We can arrange them in sequence from sweet to sour, for example, or from least salty to most salty. And not all art forms have "systematic, repeatable, regular combinations": this is true of music and architecture, but not of representative painting or sculpture. In any case, food does allow of systematic, repeatable, regular combinations: the cook creates the possibility for them, which the eater then realises. Suppose a diner eats in rotation mouthfuls of: duck in orange sauce; new potatoes with cream and garlic; broccoli. Is this not a systematic, repeatable, regular combination? It will be varied now and again by the introduction of mouthfuls of wine, but this does not make it indiscernible.

The second argument, the one concerning form, is that food does not allow a combination of features, as in a face or a tune; that such a combination is necessary for form (meaning something like "structure"); and that form is necessary for beauty. It is said that a chord in music, for example, is unlike a combination of flavours. A chord in music has both form (in the spacing of the pitch of the notes) and timbre (the characteristic quality of the sounds produced by the musical instrument or instruments), but flavours have only something analogous to timbre (Gurney 1880: 243-4).

This argument is puzzling. First of all, it does not seem to be true that form is required for beauty: we can say that the blue of the sky or the sound of one note on an oboe is beautiful. Perhaps the claim should be that form is required for the complexity which is involved in an art. Second, it is not clear why we may not say that some combinations of tastes have form. Take, for example, a salty biscuit, spread with unsalted butter, and topped by a very bland cheese with an anchovy or olive. Here the four elements can be arranged in order of saltiness, somewhat like a chord with notes of four different pitches. And since each of these four elements tastes of more than just salt, there is another dimension of variation, analogous to the timbre which is also present in a chord. We could also arrange the four elements according to the solidity of their texture, from the butter to the biscuit. I would not claim that form in food can be as complex as in music - for one thing the dimension of time has nothing like the impact that it has in music. But it would be a mistake to say that form is lacking altogether.

It is also claimed that tastes do not allow such things as balance and climax. I can only suppose that those who say that balance and climax are not possible in food have never planned a menu for a dinner party. Certainly a cook planning a dinner, or indeed a discerning diner choosing his meal in a restaurant, thinks partly in terms of these things. For example, he does not put the most striking dish at the beginning, leaving the rest to be an anticlimax. He will accompany elaborate dishes with simpler ones, so that attention does not get dissipated, and so on. Margaret Visser, in *Much Depends on Dinner*, conveys this point well:

A meal is an artistic social construct, ordering the foodstuffs which comprise it into a complex dramatic whole, as a play organises actions and words into component parts such as acts, scenes, speeches, dialogues, entrances, and exits, all in the sequences designed for them. However humble it may be, a meal has a definite plot, the intention of which is to intrigue, stimulate, and satisfy.

(Visser 1989: 14-15)

I conclude that there are no limitations, in us or in the nature of tastes themselves, which prevent food from giving rise to works of art in the evaluative sense of that phrase, though these will be simpler than in the arts of sight and sound.

IMPLICATIONS OF FOOD AS AN ART FORM

Why does all this matter? If food at its best deserves to be treated as a simple art form, as I have suggested, what follows?

We think of the arts as an important part of our lives. In our society, this manifests itself in at least three ways. The state spends some of its resources on support for the arts; educationalists try to inculcate some knowledge of and concern for the arts into their pupils; and individuals cultivate the arts, and regard someone with no respect for them as defective, a philistine. Should the art of food find its place in all these activities?

There are certainly people who feel that one should cultivate the art of food, eat elegantly and discerningly, "take trouble" with one's food. They regard this as part of being civilised, and hold that a person who thinks that it does not matter what one eats is at best boorish. But even if we agree that everyone should cultivate the arts, does it follow that everyone should cultivate this particular art? There are at least two reasons why we should not conclude this. First, a person cannot appreciate any art form unless it means something to him or her. It may not therefore be possible for everyone to cultivate every art, and so we cannot prescribe that everyone must cultivate one particular art form. Second, given that time and resources are limited, an individual has to choose from among the art forms that he can appreciate, and the kind of art form that food is will affect that choice. I shall argue in the next section that food represents not only a simple but also a minor art form. If this conclusion is granted for the moment, others follow. For example, it would be reasonable for a person without much time or money to decide, while fully aware of the aesthetic claims of food, that for him major arts had to come first and that food could not be an art form in his life.

Whether such a decision is reasonable partly turns on how expensive good food is; and we can now see the relevance of state subsidy. If fine restaurants were subsidised sufficiently, no one would need to reject this art form merely on grounds of cost. In fact they are not subsidised at all. Is this misguided of the state? I think we can say that it is not, for two reasons, both depending on the fact that money is limited. First, given that a choice has to be made, it is appropriate to subsidise the major arts rather than the minor ones. And second, this particular art form will survive without subsidy. With some arts, such as opera, the point of subsidy in Britain seems to be not to enable everyone to afford to share in an art form, but to prevent it from disappearing altogether. On that criterion there is no need to subsidise good restaurants.

The third way in which the importance of the arts is recognised is in the role they have in education. Teachers try to initiate their pupils into at least the rudiments of an understanding of the major arts. This would not commonly be extended to the art of food, except perhaps for those in domestic science classes. Again the problem is one of priorities: given that time and resources are limited, it seems more important to tell children about the major arts. But this decision may be short-sighted. The advantage of

food from the teacher's point of view is precisely the feature which might seem to make it a disadvantage aesthetically speaking: namely, that everyone has to eat. With food, as with clothes, people have a chance to enhance an area of their everyday lives. So to that extent the aesthetic appreciation of food is not a separate, alien activity, but an aspect of what is done every day.

The universality of eating might make some argue that there cannot be an art of food: appreciation of the arts requires a cultivated understanding, but everyone eats, so there cannot be an art of food. It will by now be clear that this argument is confused. Not all eating is an aesthetic activity. Aesthetic eating, if I may call it this, is eating with attention and discernment food which repays attention and discernment. And to achieve attention and discernment may well take some practice and some instruction. On the other hand, the art of food is easier to appreciate than arts which require a lot of background information; the art of food is a possible people's art.

A MINOR ART

I must now make good my promise to show that the art of food is not only a simple art but also a minor one. At first I thought that a simple art was necessarily also minor: my argument was that something complex can support a more sustained aesthetic contemplation than something which is simple, and is therefore aesthetically more satisfying. This argument is sound if the contemplation is of an analytical kind. But there also seems to be a non-analytical kind of aesthetic contemplation, which can be sustained even when it has a simple object such as an abstract sculpture of simple shape. I therefore cannot assume that the art of food is a minor art merely on the ground that it is simple.

It might plausibly be claimed, however, that the art of food is minor because it is not only simple but also limited in three important ways: food is necessarily transient, it cannot have meaning and it cannot move us. I shall look briefly at each of these three claims.

There are two reasons why transience might make a work of art less important. One is that it limits the contemplation that is possible – a work of food art will not be around very long to be contemplated. The other reason is that transient works of art cannot acquire the stature that a long-lived work of art can have. To be a great work of art, an object must have had the chance to “speak” to different generations, as for example the Taj Mahal and the *Odyssey* have. This limitation – the inability to speak to different generations – affects food in two ways.

We have seen that in the sphere of food there are two kinds of work of art: the recipe, analogous to a musical composition, and the dish as cooked on a particular occasion, analogous to a performance. Now a recipe is not transient, because it can be written

down, but despite its permanence, it may still not be able to speak to different generations, not because it is impossible to note down everything with sufficient precision – the cook can interpret, as we said – but because the nature of ingredients changes: for example, farmers breed leaner animals for meat nowadays in response to modern worries about cholesterol, and varieties of fruit and vegetables are constantly changing. Performances, however, are transient. It is true that we can now record most kinds of performance, and that some performances may as a result gather the stature of permanent works of art. But a dish of food is more transient than other kinds of performance, because we cannot reliably record the performance of a cook. I do not only mean that we do not yet have the technology, though that is true; food loses its taste eventually, whatever means we use to preserve it. I also mean that there is a highly relevant reason why we may not be able to record a genuine cookery performance, one intended for particular eaters: if the food is any good, they will eat it all!

We must conclude that works of art in food, whether creative or interpretative, cannot gain the same stature as those of greater permanence. This is one important reason why food must remain a relatively minor art. We might say the same, for the same reason, about any art of the short-lived kind – an art of fireworks, for example, or of flower arranging. The peculiar poignancy of fireworks and flowers depends on their evanescence, and such art cannot have immortality as well.

The second claim, that food cannot have meaning, needs a word of explanation, since I mentioned in Chapter 2 of *Food for Thought* many ways in which food does have meaning: for example, it can symbolise a nation's way of life and traditions. However, what I am about to show is that it does not have the same kinds of meaning as the major art forms have.

To begin with, food does not represent anything else, as most literature and much visual art does. We can see the representational arts – painting and literature – as telling us something about the world and ourselves, and we can see the world and ourselves in the light of ways in which they have been depicted in the representational arts. But we cannot do either of these things with food. This is an important way in which some of the arts have meanings which food cannot have.

However, it might be said with justice that an art does not need to be representational in order to be a major art. Music, for example, does not represent the world so much as create another world of its own. In that respect the art of food might be said to resemble music: it creates its own world of tastes and smells. But music, although it is not in general representational, seems to be able to carry another kind of meaning, one of which food is not capable: music can express emotion. There is a philosophical problem about what it means to say that music expresses emotion, as well as a problem about how music does it, but it is at any rate clear that it does, and that food does not. And it is important to us that music expresses emotion: it is one of the things that is meant by the claim that music is a kind of communication.

The inability of food to express emotion does not mean that cooks cannot express themselves in their work. For one thing, 'expressing oneself' need not mean expressing emotion. Since cooking gives scope for taste, inventiveness and discernment, cooks can express these qualities through their cookery. For another thing, cooking can in one sense be an expression of emotion. A cook can cook as an act of love, as we have seen, or out of the joy of living. But whereas in music the emotion is somehow expressed in the product itself – the music can be sad or joyful, angry or despairing – in food the emotion is only the motive behind the product.

Lastly, food cannot move us in the way that music and the other major arts can. This claim is different from the claim that food cannot express emotion. A great building, for example, can move us without itself expressing emotion; so can some kinds of music. But is it true that food cannot move us? Speaking for myself, I should say that good food can elate us, invigorate us, startle us, excite us, cheer us with a kind of warmth and joy, but cannot shake us fundamentally in that way of which the symptoms are tears or a sensation almost of fear. We are not in awe of good food, and we hesitate to ascribe the word "beauty" to it, however fine it is. (Of course, we often say that a dish is beautiful. But that means much less. All kinds of things can be called beautiful, but very few kinds of thing can be said to have beauty, still less great beauty.) If I am right about the absence of this earth-shaking quality in the art of food, it constitutes a limit to the significance it can have for us.

If food cannot be more than a minor art form, there is a danger of being precious about it – of treating it, that is, as though it had more aesthetic importance than it does. So although food may be an art form, we should not always treat it as such. For one thing, not all food constitutes a work of art. If we carefully contemplate every meal with an eye to balance and climax, harmony and contrast and so on, not only will we often be disappointed in our aesthetic aspirations, but also we will fail to get the pleasure that we could get, both from the food and from the other aspects of the occasion. And even on an occasion where the food repays aesthetic study, we may spoil its appeal by too close a scrutiny, like someone looking for Schubertian profundity in a folk song, and also pay so much attention to it that we miss other aspects of the occasion.

This is a subtle matter. Even with Schubert, we can spoil the experience by telling ourselves, "This is art", instead of letting the song speak for itself. With the art of food, we have two problems. We need to strike a balance between the aesthetic claims of the food on a particular occasion and the social claims of that occasion. We also need to find a middle way between two unsatisfactory attitudes to the aesthetic dimension of food: we must not be so heedless as to waste a satisfying kind of aesthetic experience, but not so precious as to expect more of it than it can give.

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For references other than those listed here, see the "Suggestions for further reading" at the end of this part.

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