A Fork in the Road? Rethinking Culinary Genius, Power Dynamics, and the Impact of Social Movements on U.S. Food Media and Popular Culture

¿Una encrucijada? Repensando el genio culinario, las dinámicas de poder y el impacto de los movimientos sociales en los medios de comunicación gastronómicos y la cultura popular de Estados Unidos

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Abstract

This article aims to enrich our understanding of the political significance of U.S. food media and the evolving dynamics of authority and power within this field. It does so by identifying and describing a sense of fatigue with the paradigm of the genius-chef in U.S. journalism and popular culture, which resonates with wider discussions on sustainability and justice in the restaurant industry. After a brief overview of the conditions that enabled the ascent of chefs to eminence, the article elaborates on how social movements that advocate for systemic analyses of abuse of power (#MeToo and Black Lives Matter) inform the current rejection of the "toxic" chef. Critiques of this figure center on how its cultural appeal has been used to rationalize workplace abuse in the name of culinary perfection. This argument is supported by a discussion of various sources that consider recent events and the wider arc of the "rise and fall" of culinary geniuses —opinion articles, a chapter from a non-fiction book on post-pandemic restaurants, and the television series The Bear, all published or aired between 2020 and 2023.
Key words: chefs, food media, abuse of power, accountability, professional cooking

Resumen

El presente artículo busca ampliar nuestra comprensión de la relevancia política de los medios gastronómicos estadounidenses, así como de las cambiantes dinámicas de autoridad y poder en ese campo. Para ello, se identifica y describe una sensación de fatiga con el paradigma del chef-genio en el periodismo y la cultura popular estadounidenses, la cual se conecta con discusiones más amplias acerca de la sostenibilidad y la justicia en la industria restaurantera. Tras presentar un breve panorama de las condiciones que permitieron el ascenso de los chefs a un estatus eminente, el artículo expone cómo los movimientos sociales que promueven análisis sistémicos del abuso de poder (#MeToo y Black Lives Matter) informan el rechazo actual hacia

el chef "tóxico". Las críticas hacia esta figura se concentran en cómo su atractivo cultural ha sido usado para justificar el abuso en el ámbito laboral en nombre de la perfección culinaria. Este argumento se sustenta mediante el comentario de un libro de no ficción sobre los restaurantes después de la pandemia, artículos de opinión, y una serie de televisión, *The Bear*, todos ellos publicados o emitidos entre 2020 y 2023.

Palabras clave: chefs, medios de comunicación gastronómicos, abuso de poder, responsabilidad, cocina profesional.

The television documentary *Chef's Table*, created by David Gelb, premiered on Netflix in 2015. Throughout the six seasons that have since been released, the series has come to represent a prime example of the glamorous portrayal of chefs[1] as heroes, philosophers, or visionary artists who manage to overcome personal challenges and agitate the status quo, astounding a close-minded public with their edible innovations. At the time of its release, one television critic quoted the following remark by Dan Barber, one of the two American chefs featured in the first season: "Because of the drudgery and the hours and the exhaustion that this kind of work demands, it does attract people who are attracted to a certain kind of abuse . . . It's exhilarating, and the challenge is sort of 'How much of it can you stand?'" (Genzlinger, 2015: par. 9). This statement is not framed or further commented on by the critic. From the current perspective, Barber's words may elicit alarm because of their perceived justification for workplace abuse. In 2022, one of Barber's restaurants, Blue Hill at Stone Barns in the Hudson Valley, was at the center of an investigation by *Eater* (McCarron, 2022). Former staff members spoke of being mistreated and belittled in addition to working long shifts for low pay, conditions which are typical in high-end kitchens. One former employee spoke of the management's poor handling of a report of sexual assault. This investigation is but one example of what I read as a necessary reckoning in U.S. restaurant culture, a movement in which charismatic, formerly media-adored figures, are deemed responsible for misusing power and playing down abuse in their field.

Disclosures of abuses of power have played an important part in U.S. journalism in the last decade, notably since the #MeToo movement invigorated discussions

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[1] "Chef" is the shorter form of Chef de cuisine, and is typically understood as the highest rank in a professional kitchen, which entails both creative and administrative duties (Piper, 2013: 40; Harris and Giuffre, 2015: 2). The umbrella term "celebrity chef" is commonly used in the media to "classify people with a public profile that is primarily associated with cooking", even if they do not strictly serve as restaurant chefs (Hollows, 2022: 3).

about workplace violence. #MeToo demonstrated the pervasiveness of men at the top of workplace hierarchies whose sense of entitlement allowed them to harass and degrade women and people with less power, often without being held accountable for their actions. Women from backgrounds as different as film and farm work spoke of "a common experience of being preyed upon by individuals who have the power to hire, fire, blacklist and otherwise threaten our economic, physical and emotional security" (quoted in Jaffe, 2018: 86). The movement reached the restaurant industry when cooks and servers made public their accounts of the abuse and trauma they suffered at the hands of prominent, powerful chefs such as Mario Batali, Ken Friedman, John Besh, and Charlie Hallowell. However, from an early stage, feminist activists and scholars warned that the movement should not stop at naming offenders, but instead center survivors' needs and work towards the aim of restoration and transformative justice (Jaffe, 2018).

The political and cultural impact of #MeToo's revelation of the extent of unethical, even criminal acts, set the stage for a more profound reckoning with the culture of abuse in restaurants in 2020. As restaurants struggled to stay afloat amid mandatory lockdowns, the standstill in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic reactivated reflections on the industry's faults. The safety of cooks and servers became an urgent concern in a time in which 12.3 million restaurant workers in the United States only (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024) became frontline workers. 5.6 million of these lost their jobs in that year (ROC United, 2021). When restaurants faced economic pressure to reopen, their staffs were exposed to high sanitary risk and customers unwilling to comply with safety protocols. The subfield of fine dining, which employs a very small fraction of this workforce, seemed superfluous under these conditions; nevertheless, the precedent of #MeToo shows that there is a possibility of affinity and solidarity in the experiences of workers across all kinds of food establishments. At a moment in which it became possible to envision a fairer future for the industry, something changed. In sharp deviation from the media's glamorization of culinary geniuses, a growing number of restaurant workers, journalists and cultural commentators began identifying the cult of the volatile chef as one of the pillars of hostile work environments. Writing in 2022, labor activist Saru Jayaraman declared, "we're in a long-overdue moment of upheaval and evolution for the restaurant industry" (par. 5), while Meiser and Pantumsinchai (2022) observed that "[k]itchens absent of violence are not the norm but are becoming more common. This is due, in part, to recent industry responses to workplace violence and abusive food media personas, propelled by viral social movements related to gender equity" (NPI3947).

The Black Lives Matter movement provides an important template for thinking about abuses of power as systemic. In an article about intimidating, unethical editorial

leadership at the influential food magazine *Lucky* Peach, reporter Meghan McCarron (2020) locates the origin of the current era of accountability in June 2020, influenced by protests in reaction to the murder of George Floyd:

> [A] wave of protests broke out in newsrooms across the country, from the New York Times to Refinery29. The first of these were directly tied to issues of racism and anti-Blackness, but they have since expanded to the broader problem of toxic leadership in the industry, and the dominance of white men and women in positions of power. (par. 6)

Undoubtedly, U.S. food media display signs of fatigue with the genius-chef model, despite the former success and ubiquity of this archetype. In representations in popular culture, it is possible to detect a shift towards explicit portrayals of chefs as abusers, tormentors, or villains. In this article, I argue that this representational shift owes much to the ongoing debates on systemic abuses of power taking place in the public sphere.

The aim of this paper is to enrich our understanding of the political significance of U.S. food media, and the repositioning of authority and power within this field. Post-COVID reflections on food have been characterized by a renewed focus on justice and sustainability, and this analysis aspires to contribute to this ongoing conversation. In order to do this, this article pursues two complementary goals: to present a close analysis of a selection of journalistic texts, published in U.S. media outlets, that evidence a growing discomfort with the notion of a chef whose genius manifests as constant abuse in pursuit of perfection; and to discuss representations in popular culture that accompany this shift and also address the question of what a fair restaurant would look like. The focus is on recent transformations concerning chefs' cultural status and public image, since evaluating the economic consequences of the pandemic on their business endeavors would require different methods.

To accomplish the first goal, I have gathered sources that document two media events: reflections on the future of restaurants from the years 2020-2021, and the announcement of the closure of Noma, widely considered the best restaurant in the world, in January 2023. These stories primarily appeared in U.S.-based legacy media between 2020 and 2023. In this selection, I have prioritized writers who have worked in restaurants as cooks, sommeliers, servers, or managers. I acknowledge the bias in these sources given their disproportionate focus on fine dining, which is a small, rarefied part of the restaurant business. However, these are the establishments that claim to represent excellence in the quality of the food and in hospitality, and their cultural influence is considerable. Besides, auteur-chefs are intrinsic to this business model, adding to its symbolic value; less exclusive restaurants do not make

the chef's persona the core of their public image. Finally, reports centered on fine dining are useful for illuminating the multiple factors that enable specific forms of abuse in prestigious settings. Former chef Peter Hoffman (2021) notes that high-end restaurants are "often [the] worse places to work because they capitalize on the résumé-building value of their reputations, extracting even greater sacrifices from employees" (par. 4).

To achieve my second aim, I will center on the award-winning television series *The Bear* (FX, two seasons and a forthcoming third season, 2022-2024), a production that has been praised by industry professionals for its accurate portrayal of the tensions in professional kitchens. Meiser and Pantumsinchai (2022) claim that the glamorization of violent chefs in the media should not be overlooked when searching for the factors that influence kitchen workplace violence. Conversely, we might ask if the narrative of restoration that *The Bear* presents could help envision safer, more respectful workplaces and nurture positive change in real kitchens. Given that a majority of allegedly abusive chefs are men,[2] insights from men and masculinity studies are vital for understanding what made the ruthless chef so appealing and so harmful.

Background and Theoretical Framework

In U.S.-based food media, the coverage of chefs has shifted from an emphasis on their glamour and praise of their genius towards a deeper interrogation of the part played by this paradigm in sustaining a toxic work culture.[3] To understand this shift, it is worth reviewing briefly the conditions which elevated chefs to positions of authority, power and prestige. As for the theoretical bases, this article relies on the adaptations that food scholars have made of Pierre Bourdieu's notions of social fields and cultural and symbolic capital (e.g. Ferguson, 2004; Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). More generally, it draws on the premises of cultural studies, which regard cultural representations as agents in social reproduction (not as mere reflections of social realities) and as the site of struggle and competing meanings. These critical traditions are supplemented by works that historicize the production of authorship as a positionality and illuminate the effects of individualizing creativity in cuisine and in other arts. Finally, a general understanding of how the meanings attributed to

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[2] According to 2023 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 23.3 percent of head cooks and chefs are women (https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm).

[3] A work culture may be characterized as "toxic" when it tolerates and even fosters abuse, harassment, intimidation, and bullying; that is, "repeated actions and practices that are directed against one or more workers, that are unwanted by the target, that may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offense and distress, and that may interfere with work performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment" (Einarsen et al., 2020: 10).

cooking participate in the performance of gender is key for claiming that "angry chefs" and "culinary bad boys" are relevant topics for men and masculinity studies.

Historically, like other occupations classified as "blue-collar" manual labor, cooking has not been a prestigious profession. In the 1970s chefs began to adopt a model of creativity that had proved influential in other cultural fields: a restless lone genius who is moved by a permanent desire for creative innovation, and for whom no sacrifice is too great in his pursuit of greatness and perfection.[4] A gradual process of individual distinction allowed chefs to claim the status of authors or artists, and their image shifted away from the everyday provision of food to highlight the creative and intellectual aspects of their profession. Eating at award-winning restaurants became a marker of status and distinction, as the chef's names and brands became carriers of prestige and culinary capital (Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). Chefs were featured on magazine covers and in documentaries that followed the conventions usually reserved for musicians, athletes, or visual artists. Chef Paul Bocuse appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* in 1975, under a banner reading "FOOD: The New Wave". These terms signaled creative innovation, a culinary revolution steered by individual authors, and nodded towards prestigious cultural fields like French art films (the New Wave or *Nouvelle vague*). Noma's chef René Redzepi (2015), one of the current figures whose career best exemplifies this shift, observes:

> the cooking profession has been lifted out of the blue collar into something extraordinary. The level of respect that cooking and cooks receive is really astounding. The very act of cooking draws people into our world and our profession: they want to transform ingredients, they want to feel how lovely it is to make an omelet or cook a crème brûlée correctly for the first time. (par. 5)

In the United States, the growing cultural presence of chefs as tastemakers and individual creators with a media-friendly personality is tied to the emergence of television cooking programs in the mid-twentieth century, and in particular to the launch of The Food Network channel in 1993 (Harris and Giuffre, 2015: 36). Besides the innovative union between cooking and entertainment, the profession of chef continued to accumulate cultural legitimacy as an artistic endeavor. Friedman (2018) connects this process to the greater access to overseas travel and exposure to European cuisines in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as to the countercultural movements of the 1960s, which pushed the baby boomer generation to reject more conventional career paths and, for some of them, also awakened an inter-

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[4] I have used the pronoun "his" because social expectations and norms about women and femininity are very difficult to reconcile with this paradigm of genius (see Korsmeyer, 2004: 29-31).

est in organic farming. By the late 1970s, food personalities James Beard, Julia Child, and restaurant critic Craig Clairborne had become household names. As more chefs from a middle-class background, who were acquainted with French techniques and with other cuisines with significant cultural capital entered the field, cooking shed its association with manual labor and with women's undervalued domestic work. Harris and Giuffre (2015) argue that professional cooking had to adopt connotations of aggressiveness, heroism, and competitiveness to distance itself firmly from domestic work and to secure cultural prestige and the chef's professional status: "This process allowed men chefs to gain status, legitimacy, and compensation and firmly entrenched the notion of the chef occupation as a masculine pursuit" (par. 5). Moreover, ranks in professional kitchens were modeled after military hierarchies (Ferguson, 2004: 41). The brigade system devised by Auguste Escoffier in the late nineteenth century continues to be the standard in many fine dining restaurants.

Media played a fundamental part in the ascent of chefs to eminence: television, film, journalism, and social media contributed to enhancing their authority, artistic legitimacy, and cultural influence. Through cookbooks, restaurant reviews, profiles, publicity photos and audiovisual works, food media wield the power to grant status and shape the culinary field by elevating certain voices and select foodways (Harris and Giuffre, 2015: 44-5). It is now habitual for chefs to write or co-write memoirs, columns, and cookbooks, and to star in advertising campaigns. As Hollows (2022) argues, however habituated twenty-first-century consumers are to chefs' notoriety, their social and political significance should not be understated: "celebrity chefs shape how we feed ourselves and how we think about food and its role in social and cultural life . . . . [They] act as cultural intermediaries who not only play a role in defining what is 'good' and 'bad' food but also how we should shop, cook and eat" (par. 8).

Knowledge and appreciation of food have been, according to Vester (2015), "a favored vehicle to acquire middle-class cultural capital and habitus in American history", as food is easier to access than other markers of wealth (par. 11). Besides this implication of food in conveying status and taste, food journalist Meghan McCarron (2019) explains that "American culture sees chefs through a version of auteur theory" (par. 12). Although this theory no longer prevails in other fields, such as film theory, where it originated (Sarris [1962] 2008), "in the food world's under-examined version of this theory, singular visionaries are still seen as the sole architects of a restaurant's greatness" (McCarron, 2019: par. 12). Restaurant critic Tejal Rao (2020) succinctly summarizes this paradigm, not without irony: "I don't need to describe the chef to you. He's a man, probably. A genius, definitely. Let's say this genius is volatile, meticulous, impenetrable, charming, camera-ready. He doesn't just manage the staff behind a great restaurant. He *is* the great restaurant" (par. 3, emphasis in original).

Recent research on the social and political significance of food media highlights a change in food journalists' agenda and topics at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic (Fürsich, 2023: 100). Moving beyond the more limited role of guiding readers through culinary skills, ingredients and dishes, or those restaurants worth visiting, U.S. food journalism began displaying greater political awareness (Fakazis and Fürsich, 2023) by connecting food to sociopolitical issues that did not typically appear in lifestyle content, such as the protest movements that took place in the same period, the unfair compensation of chefs of color in major platforms (Israel, 2024), and the economic struggles of food producers. Nevertheless, the portrayal of chefs in media did not, initially, deviate from familiar archetypes of heroism and individual power.

LeBesco and Naccarato (2023) coined the term "culinary philanthropy" to designate the media's representation of chefs as "good citizens through their food-related practices and choices" (85). These scholars argue that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a rethinking in media depictions of chefs. Former "bad boys", outfitted with knives, meat, and fire, became "culinary heroes" who directed their professional skills and resources to the aid of healthcare workers and other vulnerable communities. However, this emphasis on moral goodness falls short of challenging the capitalist values and power structures that tend to favor cisgender white men. Although this shift towards culinary philanthropy speaks of a departure from other figurations of culinary masculinity that are less valued in the current cultural climate (Pascual Soler, 2018) and might even be dismissed colloquially as "toxic", LeBesco and Naccarato (2023) conclude that coverage of altruistic chefs does not depart from a laudatory portrayal that reinforces the classed, gendered, heteronormative archetype of power in the culinary world (88). In fact, it works towards expanding the chef's influence beyond the kitchen, as the chef becomes authorized to comment on matters of health, public policies, nutrition, and sustainability (91). The chef as hero is limited "in terms of challenging the structural inequities that make such philanthropic interventions necessary in the first place" (94).

In the midst of a crisis like a pandemic, journalism has the power to shape the narrative surrounding celebrity chefs, to measure and qualify their response to the emergency, and ultimately influence consumer behavior (LeBesco and Naccarato, 2023: 85). Because of this, I pose the question of what narrative threads characterize recent portrayals of the cultural authority of chefs. Pierre Bourdieu's influential theorization of social fields is fitting to think of restaurant culture and food media as ever-shifting: as LeBesco and Naccarato (2023) explain, "[a] food practice that may bestow culinary capital at one historical moment or within one cultural context may not do so as social conditions change" (86). Current discourse on celebrity chefs indicates a loss of their currency and cultural appeal, and a call to significantly transform the conditions that

contributed to their ascent to power. In U.S. popular culture, this has resulted in a lessened popularity of the "culinary bad boy" and the "angry chef", who appear now as leading figures in a system where abuse and authoritarianism are built in.

Journalistic investigations uncovered deep-rooted, shocking work conditions at upscale restaurants such as Willow's Inn (Moskin, 2021), Eleven Madison Park (Taylor, 2022) and Blue Hill at Stone Farms (McCarron, 2022), where diners were lied to about the ingredients served, workers were called racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs, and reports of sexual violence went unheard. #Metoo pushed many companies and industries to review their operations, and to design new policies aimed at preventing and penalizing sexual harassment and other forms of workplace violence. But just as these new measures were being introduced into restaurants, the pandemic made their implementation challenging, given that economic survival became a more pressing issue and awareness and prevention of abuse received less attention (Meiser and Pantumsinchai, 2022: NPI3947). President Joe Biden's signing of the Ending Forced Arbitration Act and the Speak Out Act, which render arbitration clauses and nondisclosure agreements invalid in instances of sexual violence, are widely interpreted as victories for #MeToo advocates, but these acts became law only in 2022. Meanwhile, restaurant staff had to meet the demands of privileged customers who were in a rush to return to normalcy. These new figures of villainy and excess, the abusive chef and the entitled customer, demand nuanced interpretation that considers the cultural effect of social justice movements in the U.S. throughout the past decade. The following section will trace these effects as they were registered in two media events: the exposure, exacerbated by the pandemic, of the faults of the restaurant industry, and responses to the closure of Noma. This analysis is motivated by the following questions: How is social change mirrored in a diminishment of the power of the auteur-chef to confer cultural prestige and culinary capital? What circumstances have shaped the current rejection of the tyrannical chef persona? What new paradigm could take its place?

The content analysis presented here was conducted according to the following criteria: because I aimed to trace a link between the economical and ethical turmoil experienced by restaurants during and after the pandemic and a visible shift in the public image of chefs, my search covered the period between the Spring of 2020 and early 2023, which saw the greatest concentration of articles discussing the closure of Noma. Reading a broad range of journalistic stories, primarily in American food magazines and periodicals with solid food sections, allowed me to identify a distinct narrative thread that portrayed fine dining as suffering a crisis in legitimacy. Since these periodicals were key sites where middle-class taste and gastronomical culture flourished throughout the 2010s, I was interested in locating a revisionist or

self-scrutinizing tone in these publications. Another methodological strategy was to follow stories that quoted from Tejal Rao's article "Twilight of the Imperial Chef", published in August 2020, as this piece provided early commentary on the cultural shift that I have been describing and gave cohesion and impetus to discourse on the "rise and fall" of chef-auteurs who "built big restaurant businesses, often referred to as empires, [and] became powerful brands, capable of obscuring abuse, assault and discrimination" (Rao, 2020, par. 22).

PANDEMIC REALITIES, INDUSTRY ETHICS, AND NOMA'S CLOSURE (2020-2023)

The period between 2020-2021 saw the publication of a number of essays and books dedicated to reflecting upon the necessary evolution of restaurants into a post-pandemic world. Besides the more immediate issue of economic recovery (*The Washington Post* estimated 78,000 additional restaurant closures in 2020 over the yearly average prior to that year [Carman, 2022]), some authors consider the future of restaurants from an ethical standpoint. Corey Mintz (2021), in his book *The Next Supper*, worries that "as the pandemic recedes, we will revert to the trajectory we were on before—that in our relief, and as we have done after previous crises, we will snap back into supporting a restaurant industry that is fundamentally broken" (Introduction, par. 19). Regretting the higher rates of closure among small, independent restaurants (as opposed to fast-food chains), Mintz declares: "What is happening right now is a tragedy. A bigger tragedy would be to learn nothing from it while blindly reproducing the same broken, cruel system" (Introduction, par. 58).

Mintz dedicates an entire chapter to critical examination of "the chef-driven restaurant", the establishment built around "the personality and vision of the chef" (chapter 2, par. 20), claiming that it requires a profound transformation. This is the type of restaurant that tends to receive the most attention from the media, and as award-granting institutions (such as the Michelin Guides or The World's 50 Best Restaurants) continue to exalt the most labor-intensive dishes, restaurants that aspire to receive this recognition are pressured to endorse a system based on rigid hierarchies, unpaid internships, and unending work shifts, which creates fertile ground for exploitation and abuse. Moreover, the media and awards have focused on individual creation, obscuring the collective effort that goes into every service or presenting the staff as mere supporting players.

For Mintz, abuse of all kinds is "exacerbated by the structure of chef-driven restaurants, the dominance of chefs both within the hierarchy that rules a particular

type of restaurant and externally, through the food media that perpetuates it" (chapter 2, par. 13). He acknowledges the responsibility of the media in idolizing volatile chefs, a narrative that portrays chefs' violent outbursts as honest utterances that will, in time, prove to be valuable lessons for younger cooks who aspire to perfect their craft by working for them.

> We have been celebrating a clichéd, larger-than-life concept of a chef—brilliant, abusive, insulting, demanding, loudly cruel—for the past twenty years. We have promoted the idea that this is what a winner looks like in the world of restaurants, filtered through the TV trope of the screaming mentor who will change your life and the ubiquitous print profile of the "difficult genius." It wasn't even that we held these people up as leaders, despite their cruelty. We exalted them as leaders because of their cruelty and allowed their corrosive personalities to define workplace culture, because that was somehow a mark of their dedicated pursuit of perfection. (chapter 2, par. 14)

Mintz is not alone in pointing towards the media's role in shaping the expectations of workers entering the culinary industry. According to Meisner and Patumsinchai (2022), the increase in food-related entertainment, and the changes in public perception of cooking as a profession, are reflected in the extraordinary growth of culinary schools in the United States —a 30% increase between 2010 and 2014 (NPI3934). These researchers, who conducted fifty interviews with chefs and cooks in ten different regions, also note the frequency with which these workers mentioned British chef Gordon Ramsay. Whether the chefs mentioned Ramsay with admiration for his professional success or denounced him as a poor role model, the researchers conclude that Ramsay is "a television figure who has paved the way for cooks to expect and accept abuse" (NPI3946). This is reminiscent of the expectations voiced by Dan Barber in his episode of *Chef's Table.*

One notable voice in the field who addresses a sense of fatigue with the genius-chef in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is restaurant critic Tejal Rao. In her essay "Twilight of the Imperial Chef" (2020), the author points at a commonplace image in which "the chef is in sharp focus, but everything else — everyone else — is an inconsequential blur" (par. 2), noting how the visual language of food media obscures workers from lower ranks. Rao notes that the media's preference for the paradigm of the auteur-chef excludes many other kinds of alternative food businesses that do not fit into this scheme, and as a consequence they are overlooked by the public and by potential investors. Writing in 2020, Rao enlists the effects of a period of intense reckoning:

The pandemic has exposed the fragility and inequity of the restaurant industry, dispro-portionately affecting Black people, people of color, restaurant workers and those who keep the food chain running in the nation's factories and farms. Bolstered by the power of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, workers are speaking up. The model for the industry, as it exists now, has to change. (par. 31)

The new guidelines for the James Beard Awards, considered the "Oscars" of the U.S. food world, are a clear result of this revisionary moment. Besides honoring culi-nary excellence, the James Beard Foundation (2024) has made public its intention to deliver the awards with a focus on "commitment to racial and gender equity, com-munity, sustainability, and a culture where all can thrive"; however, the process for disqualifying nominees accused of not complying with the Foundation's Code of Ethics has been controversial (Anderson and Moskin, 2023). A worker shortage has also been reported (Anderson, 2021), indicating that the prestige of acclaimed res-taurants might no longer be enough to attract workers to an industry where fair wages are uncommon, ruthless bosses are often a mainstay of workplace ideoculture (Meiser and Pantumsinchai, 2011: 3-5), and formal protections against harassment and abuse are still insufficient.

A recurring theme among writers who addressed the crisis of values in the res-taurant industry is the moral imperative to end a business that was beyond repair. A radical expression of this stance can be found in Tunde Wey's essay "Let It Die", which claims that efforts to rescue restaurants after the pandemic are centered on prioritiz-ing "the capital of a few people over the labor and lives of many" (Wey, 2020). This view is echoed by other writers who suggest that, if a restaurant cannot pay and treat its staff fairly, closing is the only logical choice. As Joe Ray (2023) wrote for *Wired*: "Cre-ating food at this level involves an intense amount of work, and despite the whopping price tag for a meal, high-end restaurants often struggle to stay afloat. Maybe they should sink" (par. 16). In *Bon Appétit*, the U.S. leading food magazine, Genevieve Yam (2023) wrote: "as I reflect on my time in the hospitality industry, I'm relieved to watch as the most exclusive, often most exploitative fine dining restaurants finally seem to be going out of fashion. It couldn't come soon enough" (par. 5).

The two quotes above come from stories published in response to the announce-ment of the closure of Noma, a restaurant founded in Copenhagen in 2003, expected to close at the end of 2024. Noma, led by chef René Redzepi, is one of the 143 restau-rants in the world possessing three Michelin stars and held the first position in the prestigious list *The World's 50 Best* on five occasions. I considered it pertinent to focus on a Danish restaurant and its chef because, as Hollows (2022) clarifies, many celeb-rity chefs "are well-established global brands whose output is sold across a range of

territories and who also produce content tailored to different national and supranational markets" (par. 8); in fact, Redzepi created a pop-up restaurant in Tulum, Mexico in 2017. Noma's operational and creative model was adopted around the world, demonstrating that "the gastronomic field is no longer bound to one geographic location. Elite chefs travel all over the world to train alongside chefs from other countries or to expand their culinary empires" (Harris and Giuffre, 2015: 8). I am interested primarily in how coverage of Noma's closure complements the shift in U.S. food media that I have been tracing.

The story in which reporter Julia Moskin from the *New York Times* broke the news of the forthcoming closure, on January 9, 2023, became the newspaper's most read food story of that year. Redzepi cited a crisis of values as a central reason behind his decision: "We have to completely rethink the industry . . . This is simply too hard, and we have to work in a different way" (Moskin, 2023: par. 8). Behind each dish there were hours of meticulous work, largely carried out by interns or stagiaires, cooks willing to work without payment in a renowned restaurant in exchange for the learning they hope to gain from the chef and the boost that this internship will represent for their future careers. Rob Anderson of *The Atlantic* (2023) stated: "the kind of high-end dining Noma exemplifies is abusive, disingenuous, and unethical. Chefs know it but continue to imitate Redzepi. The food media know it but continue to celebrate his kind of food. Wealthy diners know it but continue to book tables en masse—if not at Noma, then at comparable destination restaurants around the world" (par. 5). Only a few months earlier, in October 2022, the restaurant had begun paying its interns: in 2019, it was counting on the labor of thirty unpaid interns at a time (West-Knight 2022, par. 18). Yam (2023) summarizes many of the themes I have highlighted in this paper: the media's responsibility in elevating culinary excellence without regard for workers' fair remuneration and personal wellbeing, a cultural shift that has moved victims to speak out, whose testimonies amount to the uncovering of entrenched systems of abuse, and the moral imperative to bring to an end a business model that is beyond repair:

> These multi-Michelin-starred destination restaurants were able to exist without criticism for so long in part because of a certain kind of fanfare doled out by food and lifestyle publications, including this one. But as media reports stack up and staff feel emboldened to speak out on social media, the house of cards that sustained and drove the popularity of many elite restaurants for so long is beginning to crumble.
>
> As a diner and former restaurant worker, I have no desire to visit the restaurants I once so eagerly placed on a pedestal. The Noma's of the world are closing, and that's a good thing. Because if restaurants can't figure out a business model where they pay and treat their staff fairly—they simply shouldn't exist. (pars. 19-20)

Another effect of the growing concern in U.S. food media about toxic kitchen culture is the rejection of the "angry chef", a figure that is rendered problematic for a more inclusive, ethically-conscious kind of food journalism. At times, celebrity chefs themselves have heeded the call for self-scrutiny. Although he initially adopted the persona of a "bad boy" and depicted the "culinary underbelly" affectionately in his early writings, Anthony Bourdain (1956-2018) vocally supported #MeToo, and in a 2017 post expressed regret at the part he played in the normalization of toxic kitchen culture: "To the extent which my work in *Kitchen Confidential* [Bourdain's 2000 memoir] celebrated or prolonged a culture that allowed the kind of grotesque behaviors we're hearing about all too frequently is something I think about daily, with real remorse" (Bourdain, 2017: par. 5). His untimely death gave impetus to campaigns for suicide prevention. Montreal chefs David McMillan and Fred Morin have campaigned for prevention and treatment of alcohol addiction among restaurant workers (Goldfield, 2019). René Redzepi admitted in a 2015 essay: "I've been a bully for a large part of my career. I've yelled and pushed people. I've been a terrible boss at times" (par. 8), and spoke of seeking therapy (Cohen, 2022). Vulnerability and disposition to care and to receive care are at odds with normative notions of masculinity: as sociologist and videoessayist Alexander Avila (2023) observes, "to be a successful man in a patriarchal and capitalist society is to excel at a game that doesn't intrinsically value your well-being or your mental health, but the ways you succeed in maintaining the dominant social system" (00:09:27-00:09:39).

In his memoir *Eat a Peach*, famed Korean-American chef David Chang (2020) writes: "With friends, family, my co-workers, and the media, my name has become synonymous with rage. I've never been proud of it, and I wish I could convey to you how hard I've tried to fight it. I've been entrenched in a war with my anger for many years" (Chapter 18, par. 28). However, the martial vocabulary remains a part of this repentant persona. A former employee of Chang's, Hannah Selinger (2020), lamented that the memoir represented a further effort on the part of the chef to control a profitable narrative, and failed to offer an apology to the workers who had endured his violent outbursts. This raises an important question: Should individual acknowledgment of wrongdoing be the clearest path towards a more just culinary field? Public acknowledgment of wrongdoing deserves credit; however, narratives of this kind seem likely to reinscribe the chef-as-hero archetype, which, as LeBesco and Naccarato (2023) argue, ultimately invests the same figures of authority with positive attributes without redistributing power. Opinion articles such as Rao (2020), Telfeyan (2020), and Lux (2024) call for an end to media's enshrinement of individual authors and advocate instead for viewing the restaurant as a collective effort: "A pivot to a more critical, adversarial approach to covering restaurants seems unlikely as long

as the food media is built on the idea of the chef as a singular creative mind" (Telf-eyan, 2020: par. 11).

Fatigue with the Tyrannical Chef in Popular Culture: *The Bear* (2022-2023)

Yam (2023) notes that "[b]eyond the investigative reports and the media coverage, a shift is underway in mainstream culture" (par. 11). The television series *The Bear* is a distinct example of this shift towards a critical depiction of abuse in professional kitchens and of the exhaustion of the paradigm of the volatile chef, along with the Australian series *Aftertaste* and the films *The Menu* and *Boiling Point*. Jayaraman (2022) praises the show for accurately portraying "the relentless pressure that drives some restaurant workers to addiction or injury; the screaming, harassment, toxic masculinity and overwork that they often endure for very little pay; and the pride in their work that brings them back day after day" (par. 3). The series also points to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and sleeping disorders as mental health issues that restaurant workers struggle with. The chefs' previous traumatic work experiences cause them to experience a constant fear that a single mistake will result in humiliation, punishment, and being judged as unable to meet the demands of the job.

The main character in *The Bear* is the young Italian-American chef Carmy Berzatto. Having worked under extremely high pressure and cruel bosses in some of the best restaurants in New York City and Copenhagen, Carmy comes home to Chicago to manage a rickety sandwich shop he inherited from his brother Michael, who took his own life shortly before the start of the story. At a glance, *The Bear* might appear as another production that exalts a white male chef as an extraordinarily talented artist whom the audience roots for. But as the series progresses, it becomes clear that Carmy's background in Michelin-starred kitchens is at odds with leading non-violently. Carmy still has nightmares about the abusive chef who demeaned him. He does not want to be an abusive chef whose anger erodes his business, but at crucial moments he cannot help but repeat these patterns. *The Bear* rejects glamorous representations of professional kitchens, and uses close-ups to focus on the shop's disrepair and the dirtiest corners of the preparation areas, along with the piles of bills that Michael left unpaid due to mental health problems that aggravated at the end of his life. The show connects the precarious state of the sandwich shop with the post-pandemic condition of the industry, emphasizing the workers' shortage and the economic, ethical, and identity crisis of restaurants. At the end of season 1, the team's desire for a fresh start leads to the decision to close the sandwich shop and reopen it

as a new fine dining establishment that reflects the contributions of each member of the staff.

Carmy is set in contrast to the *sous chef* Sydney, a young African American woman who demonstrates the creativity and decisiveness to lead the restaurant into its new iteration. However, not only does Carmy fail to support Sydney as an equal partner: whenever he feels overwhelmed, his violent temper threatens to undo the positive changes they have achieved. Although Carmy intends to leave behind the abusive practices of professional kitchens and look after his mental health, the second season finale finds him locked inside a walk-in refrigerator, yelling insults and breaking down, while Sydney and the rest of the team successfully manage the evening service. Thus, the series presents the angry chef as completely unnecessary in the current culinary landscape.

The characters face never ending problems as they remodel the shop, including mold, collapsing walls, and exploding toilets. These hindrances serve as an allegory of what is "rotten" in a dysfunctional industry. As technician Fak says, the expected transformation cannot be a mere "facelift" (season 2, episode 3, 00:22:02), but will require a more radical rebuilding. When Carmy decides to organize the staff in a kitchen brigade, the older cook Ebraheim, a survivor of civil war in Somalia, says: "I was in a brigade once . . . many people died" (season 1, episode 3, 00:09:51-00:09-56). In the most hopeless moments, Carmy hallucinates a fire that consumes everything, as if there were no other way to end the cruelty and suffering of professional kitchens except by burning them to the ground.

Still, the tone of *The Bear* remains optimistic overall. The show subverts audience expectations of characters who seem prone to abuse through interactions founded on kindness and generosity. Two characters follow this narrative arc. Marcus, the pastry chef, travels to Copenhagen to work as an intern with Carmy's colleague Luca. Luca is the kind of character from whom the audience would expect ruthless perfectionism and abusive treatment of the cooks in lower ranks, interns in particular. Instead, Luca is patient, kind, and rejects the hypercompetitive mindset that many young chefs are pressured into.

The second instance of subverted expectations involves Richie, Michael's childhood friend. Richie is violent, impulsive, and condescending; he is a loud, chaotic worker who causes constant accidents and mishaps, clashes frequently with Sydney, threatens a crowd of customers with a gun, gets into physical fights, and resists change in the shop. In the episode titled "Forks" (season 2, episode 7), Richie also works as an intern in preparation for the opening of the new restaurant. He is tasked with polishing silverware at a fictional fine dining restaurant, considered the best in the world (these scenes were filmed at Ever, in Chicago). Richie initially mocks the rigor

and perfectionism of the staff, but he soon learns to value this non-violent work environment. The commitment his supervisor shows to hospitality as an act of care work leaves a mark on Richie. The final revelation of the episode is that there is no tyrannical chef leading this kitchen; instead, the chef is a kind middle-aged woman who up until this point had only been named as "chef Terry" (the character's gender is unspecified until she appears on screen). Chef Terry talks to Richie about the serenity of devoting time to repetitive tasks, which she takes on herself rather than assigning these duties to interns. The characters learn that both are the children of soldiers, which gestures towards the military origins of fine dining and the aspiration to replace this system with a more egalitarian one. The title of the episode not only hints at the menial task that was assigned to Richie: it echoes the idiomatic expression "a fork in the road", which speaks of a point in which a crucial choice has to be made, as future outcomes will depend on this decision.

Jayaraman (2022) credits the success of the show to a larger cultural shift: "*The Bear* is resonating now partly because it shows workers demanding a better workplace, one where their work is valued and they are respected — which is happening in restaurants and beyond" (par. 8). As said at the beginning of this article, an effect of current conversations about power and justice is that certain representations become viable. Carmy encourages all members of his kitchen team to address each other as "chefs" as a sign of respect. The larger question, which *The Bear* has not fully answered yet, is whether it is possible to overhaul an industry where toxic actors are excused as being merely passionate or short-tempered, and where wage theft, illegally-long shifts, and physical, emotional, verbal, sexual and racial abuse have been tolerated for too long.

Unlike Carmy, I am not entirely convinced that the term "chef" can be resignified, as it evokes the image of a fearsome boss with unchecked power and sharp knives at his disposal. Could the word evoke, in the future, someone who looks and acts like Sydney or Chef Terry? A current debate in men and masculinity studies asks whether the reparation of hegemonic masculinity by means of integrating subordinate qualities, like vulnerability or the disposition to be helped and to care for others, is an effective strategy towards gender freedom. We might take a more reserved stance concerning "hybrid masculinities", which refer to "the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and –at times– femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 246). The problem is that this assimilation of subordinated qualities could work to further enhance the status of cisgender white heterosexual men. I agree with Martín and Santaulària (2023) in their assessment that contemporary Anglophone popular culture primarily offers

examples of incomplete arcs of "detoxing", as seen in Carmy's character development and his retrogression. Still, I hope that the series will allow more space in the future to non-white male characters like Marcus, who do not need to reform because they have never been violent. To sum up, the popularity of *The Bear* opens a unique opportunity to further question "hybrid masculinities that carry considerable baggage from a problematic past" (Martín and Santaulària, 2023: 6) and to discuss whether the same subjects, albeit transformed by the adoption of more positive features, are ideal to lead the restaurant industry into a post-pandemic world.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has focused on U.S.-based food media to identify a sense of fatigue with the archetype of the genius-chef, a model of culinary creativity that was deployed to justify serious instances of workplace abuse. As a result of an era of reckoning that began with the #MeToo movement and accelerated in 2020, when restaurant workers joined other groups denouncing institutions' tolerance towards racial inequality, the deification of volatile chefs seems out of place in the current cultural climate. To this, we might add the legacy of previous movements like Occupy, which protested economic inequality and influenced fast food workers who, in 2012, organized to denounce wage theft and to demand an increase in the minimum wage. Awareness of economic inequality has also led to greater skepticism regarding that the meritocratic myth of the "self-made man," a narrative of upward social mobility that served as one available public persona for celebrity chefs (see Johnston, Rodney, and Chong, 2014, pp. 17-18). This narrative presents hard work and dedication as the exemplary path towards wealth and status while conveniently glossing over structural privilege or the previous possession of social capital or family wealth. Reviewing the documentary film *Wolfgang* (2021), which tells the story of the stellar career of Wolfgang Puck, an iconic figure in California Cuisine whose restaurants were frequented by movie stars, Jaya Saxena (2021) takes issue precisely with the fact that "despite a recent push to view chefs and celebrity through a wider, more critical lens . . . Wolfgang Puck is portrayed as a man with unique drive and talent, fighting his way to the top and deserving everything he got once he arrived there . . . the film, to its disservice, rarely contextualizes or expands on the environment and culture that assisted his rise" (par. 2).

The body of writings reviewed here, which considers books and journalistic articles published in 2020 and afterwards, suggests the emergence of two central discursive trends: on the one hand, the pandemic exacerbated the unjust conditions endured by an already vulnerable workforce, creating not only an economic crisis

for restaurants but also an ethical one, as industry professionals have voiced the need for a new business model that prevents abuse and protects workers' basic rights instead of prioritizing profits and the brand and public image of the chef at the helm. On the other hand, the debate surrounding the new personas that chefs adopted during the crisis, such as the altruistic chef or the repentant "bad boy" who acknowledges past wrongdoing, implies that it is not enough to update the usual figures of authority with subordinate qualities, substituting toughness and hyper competitiveness with a disposition to aid, to receive help, and to become a better leader.

Representations in popular culture, such as the television series *The Bear*, which reflect this cultural shift in the genius-chef's presentation and current status, advocate for a restaurant free of cruel, volatile chefs; however, the series yet has to create a full picture of a restaurant where innovative, exciting cooking is seen as the product of a collective effort, and where women and people of color become equal partners. If, in future seasons of the show, Carmy succeeds in the new venture, there is a risk of uncritically replicating the myth of the self-made man if these rewards are not justly shared with the women and people of color who make up most of the staff of *The Bear*.

Of course, toxic chefs in popular culture and real workplaces will not disappear in a matter of months or even years. Gordon Ramsay's shows are still airing, and cooking competitions where judges treat contestants harshly are still enjoyed by many viewers. However, just as molecular gastronomy soon became the subject of parody and is no longer as exciting for diners or food critics (Johnston and Baumann, 2015, p. 203), forces within the culinary field will continue to shift and rearrange, and there are signs that the "angry chef" is being portrayed much less favorably. A visible shift in representations of chefs and professional kitchens in U.S. popular culture can be expected to resonate in other regions because, as Lindenfeld and Parasecoli (2017) observe,

> [U.S. food media] play a crucial role in the constitution of the global foodscape, that is to say the totality of representations, values, and practices that underline the spatial nature of foodways as seen through the eyes of those who inhabit that specific environment. These mediated representations are interconnected, mutually influencing and engaging in dialogue with each other. (par. 17)

Keeping in mind this idea of the foodscape as a site of dialogue, the materials under consideration suggest a certain consensus about why the archetype of the ruthless chef has been harmful and should be abandoned. The theoretical bases I drew from are best suited for texts that have an interest in reshaping the culinary field to be more attuned to the legacy of progressive social movements. Still, it would

be remiss to omit some more conservative statements on the current status of the genius-chef. Restaurant critic Pete Wells (2023), responding to the announcement of the closure of Noma, wrote passionately about "the gentle sweetness of parsnips and other vegetables that took the place of fruit in desserts" (par. 6), "the shimmering beauty of what came to the table" (par. 16), and the "sauce full of pleasure and complexity" (par. 17) that he tasted at the then best restaurant in the world. He makes no reference to interns, nor does he focus on Redzepi's own admissions of his rage and cruelty at the workplace, but instead praises him as "a great chef and not just a sculptor working with materials that go bad after a few days" (par. 17). Wells' focus, then, is on outstanding aesthetic experiences that unfortunately were so reliant on a dysfunctional, at times unethical business model and ideoculture.

In another opinion article following the announcement of the closure of Noma, Bryan Walsh (2023) concedes that the explosion of food as high art was profoundly dependent on inequality: "The unequal economic growth of the past several decades created a large enough group of potential diners willing and eager to seek out and spend hundreds of dollars per person at the world's top restaurants" (par. 13). However, this admission is framed by disapproving remarks about how Americans are consuming less high culture like theater, opera, or poetry, and the article adheres to the rigid view that sustainability is at odds with artistic freedom. Finally, Walsh regrets that if this paradigm of fine dining falls out of public favor, culture will lose "that special thing that can only be the product of one ambitious person's singular, uncompromising vision, something for which they're willing to sacrifice everything and everyone in their way, including themselves" (par. 30). I made the choice for this paper to foreground the point of view of former cooks (Yam, Rao, Mintz), labor activists (Jayaraman), and investigative journalists (Moskin) who assume a "'watchdog' role of documenting abuses of power in government and business" (Fakazis and Fürsich, 2023, p. 3). These are the groups who overwhelmingly conclude that the costs of centering singular creative brilliance and ambition in the upper strata of the restaurant industry are just too high.

Reacting to Noma's closure, Rao (2023) remarked that, while it would be premature to proclaim the end of fine dining, "[w]hat feels different this time is the seismic cultural shift in our tolerance for the idea of auteur-chefs who make cooks suffer for their art" (par. 19). A year later, it seems necessary to have more temporal distance to confirm if 2020 was indeed a fork in the road for restaurant culture. While their efforts have merit, individual restaurants that seek to "detox" their work environments do not amount to systemic change. Ultimately, it is the state that should uphold the protection of workers' rights, and making this protection contingent on a shift in the mindsets of individual business owners exemplifies how neoliberal

policies are one of the larger backdrops against which tyrannical chefs have been able to evade accountability. Fairer workplaces will be more likely to become the new norm if the media commit to a redistribution of culinary capital instead of perpetuating the familiar archetypes of ruthless geniuses. If fine dining aspires to continue to thrive, it must confront its history of abuse enabled, in part, by the idolization of chefs who harmed and tormented the staff, and it must comply with regulations that protect fair wages and basic rights for workers across all kinds of food industries. In addition to this, editorial teams should answer the current call to feature and support establishments that do not base their business model on unpaid work and the cult of individual personalities.

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