AKWA

Commercializing Creativity

The genesis of akwa was quite simple, really, and as coincidental as my love life. Back in 1999, I was cooking at El Bulli. When I wasn’t in the kitchen, I watched Pulp Fiction or slept on the back patio of the flat in Roses, Spain, that I shared with eight hungry Spaniards. One day Kasper Kurdahl, a Danish chef who had opened Ducasse and worked as chef de cuisine for Roger Souvereyns in Belgium, stumbled into our midst. Not long after, Kasper and I found ourselves in front of an outdated PC at a biker bar on the coast, and we started typing. Nine months later, I tripped over Davide Scabin on Barcelona’s Las Ramblas. Over dinner he convinced me of the merits of philosophy over technique. Then two weeks later the wunderkind of Spanish pastry, Ruben García, joined us from El Bulli.

Kasper and I had already begun our field dispatches under the acro-homonym akwa: Kasper and Will Like Water. Our mission was to make tangible the truths we held to be self-evident in cooking: the need for life, the need for love, the need for magic, and the need for sanctuary. We felt both bold enough to articulate these ideas and egotistical enough to imagine that we had uncovered profound gastronomic truths. The first akwa manifesto was dispatched by Kasper and me in the body of an e-mail. I must confess that our early work revolved mainly around trips, girls, drinks, and recipes. In other words, we wrote what we lived.

From these humble beginnings on the sandy shores of Santa Margarita, akwa spread a new gospel: Commercialize Creativity! We were soon catapulted to relative notoriety within the underground food development scene. Thrice the press (including the New York Times, no less!) dubbed us “the future of cooking.” An interview in Gambero Rosso made us official, and our position as a new vanguard, a collective representing all that cuisine could be, was cemented at Turin’s Salon del Gusto. Things were cooking.

Luckily we were a team, because trying to rule the world can be tiring. But just when things were hottest, our September 2001 plans for a New York City laboratory literally went up in flames less than two weeks after we had contracted for a Bond Street space. Since then, akwa has been hibernating, recharging for our next voyage.

So just what are we doing? akwa is an attempt by four young cooks to synthesize art, cuisine, finance, and leadership development, to create a learning organization from all the things we love. We bear ideas, nothing more. From the beginning, we akwarriors have set out to commercialize creativity by selling our ideas the way a rôtisseur vends roast chicken. Each of us tries to demonstrate the viability of idea-based cooking in the free market. And we are facing resistance. In my own case, criticism of the dessert program at Cru restaurant, where I was employed as the pastry chef, was broad and deep. One critic, in the New York Post, by his own admission condemned a dessert he had not tasted. Apparently, the very idea of a dish created to evoke a day at the beach was offensive enough to merit a one-half star downgrade for the entire restaurant. Though this review was personally devastating, it demonstrated the present commercial value of ideas. In retrospect, it’s rather wonderful that a critic would judge a plate of food on its ideology rather than on its taste or execution. The other akwarriors similarly confront the vagaries of public perception every day, yet we continue, constantly reexamining our perspective.

In our self-imposed hibernation, as we seek the right venue to put our ideas into practice, we have grown considerably. We now recognize that in order to commercialize creativity successfully, akwa first must redefine its principal principle. Herewith is a new creativity manifesto.

The Five Axes of Creativity in the Kitchen

Taking a cue from imaginary quantum physics, the five principal axes of creativity in the kitchen form a kind of “Gaussian sphere,” if such a thing can be said to exist. This means that lines curve and may, or may not, intersect at multiple points according to such variables as time, space, and taste. akwa uses a similar Gaussian grid to explain the relativity of taste across culture—culture itself being an
intersection of time, space, and information. For example, diverse cultures create dishes that correspond to the same range of flavors; conversely, a taste that is common to one culture is foreign to another.

For Akwa, the five principal axes of creativity in the kitchen are:

- Ingredient
- Technique
- Philosophy
- Love
- Solitude

**Ingredient**

Can be chemical or natural, old or new. Here is where the most easily comprehensible and applicable level of creativity lies. Perhaps, though, we should coin a new word, “creatiality,” to describe the evolutionary process of selling culinary ideas rather than products. With ingredients, countless chefs may be considered “creative”: what a novel use for tangerine slices on pork chops! Ever since chefs first donned toques, they have developed, or enhanced, their reputations based on unexpected combinations. But for Akwa the challenge is more basic: to create new ingredients. New herbs and spices, new smells and tastes. New compounds and scientific formulas to make new foods. Perhaps we can best develop them by going back to the genesis of everyday ingredients. Once you apply modern reproductive science techniques to a real understanding of the genetic composition of these foodstuffs, great things can begin to happen in the kitchen.

**Technique**

It was Albert Adrià at El Bulli who told me that new combinations are easy; the challenge is to find a new way to make something. These days creativity, on a “techniquelogical” level, is commercially viable. For instance, the Inicon collective in the European Union represents a collaboration among key players in science, industry, and gastronomy who are working together to create a hyperblender that can blend at varying speeds, temperatures, and pressures. It will be able to process materials in a way never before seen. Although the textures or tastes of the end product would not necessarily be foreign, the result would be instantly recognizable as a new kind of creation. In short, if you make a sauce with a different herb you add to the body of sauce making. Add a new way to make sauce, and you have multiplied the techniques of sauce making. But if you create a machine that makes sauce in a truly different way, you exponentially increase the capacity for “creativity.” Still, we mustn’t forget that without taste, the application of science or technology is meaningless.

**Philosophy**

One evening, over tapas in Barcelona, Davide lamented: “I can buy information. I work to make a reason for cooking. If I develop one reason in a year, then it is a good year.” With this statement Akwa moved into philosophy, the intangible realm of creativity, and this marked a fundamental shift in our approach to cuisine. By considering activity outside the realm of known factors and by accounting for the unknown, we established a constant state of self-awareness and potential
for growth. It is difficult to give examples of philosophy-based gastronomy, though not impossible. For instance, Pierre Gagnaire is a chef whose work demonstrates his personal aesthetics. His cooking is an expression of his belief system regarding taste, beauty, and harmony. Is it possible to apply any kind of personal aesthetics in the kitchen? I challenge the reader to discover the meaning of a particular establishment and then determine alternative methods of applying the concepts it espouses.

**Love**

Kasper’s suggestion that only love has the power to unify ingredient, technique, and philosophy is challenging. In experimenting with love as a creative level, akwa has developed a mock computer program for creation. Our prototype program generates dishes by realizing an exponential power of ingredient, technique, and philosophy. With love, one can dance freely and without inhibition across previously determined levels of creativity. Intense, true love has proved the sole tool available to humanity to bridge a seemingly broad gap: between self and other, or chef and guest. One characteristic of all great plates is clear: they are made with love.

**Solitude**

Davide taught us this one. Then again, so did Rilke, via Alma Blount’s leadership class at Duke, where she presented his texts among more traditional leadership studies to demonstrate the impact of old-fashioned values on modern leadership theory. The apparent ideological contrast between history and modernity turns out to be a red herring. There is no inherent conflict between different vintages of ideas. Love can be construed out of two separate solitudes that border, protect, and salute each other. Is it not then cyclically, or at least recidivistically, logical that solitude would be the natural evolution of love? Perhaps the recurrent tumult between self and other really resembles thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Fernand Point may as well have said: “Each day the cuisinier begins alone.”

akwa’s self-imposed exile has forced us to grow. We now recognize that the “sphere of creativity” is not limited to the known axes. In fact, the value of this model lies, like akwa itself, in its fluidity. Like cooking, it provides evidence of the evolutionary process. Though we have not yet confirmed the sixth axis of creativity, it could very well be technology, history, aesthetics, voyage, or formula.

The elaboration of the creative process is liberating rather than stifling; it provides so-called creative people a safety valve when catering to the masses. Imagine being able to be creative at a precise, given level rather than feeling the need to pursue creativity in a general, vaguely understood way. Such an approach would make creativity in mass commercial operations more readily digestible; it would, for instance, enable McDonald’s to be recognized as genius, or at least as palatable to those who believe that the commercial has no place in the current culinary zeitgeist.

A fluid definition of creativity will liberate you.

But don’t take my word for it.

So where is akwa now? Davide Scabin is a relative celebrity. He can at once be considered the best, the worst, and the golden mean in his domain, for the cuisine he creates is like no other. At the contemporary art museum of Rivoli Castle outside Turin, Scabin’s creations dazzle on Europe’s main stage. Both akwa Kasper and akwa Ruben equal him in passion, intensity, and determination. The darling of the Benelux media, Kasper has opened two restaurants and is developing a third, all the while jet-setting to the former eastern bloc. Restaurant patrons were not dissuaded by the title of his first interview: “I Hate Belgium.” Kasper’s formula is remarkable: a four-day turnaround and a 40 percent net profit. Ruben has landed in Washington, D.C. as guy Friday for a leading Spanish chef and has just marked his biggest international success: engagement. As for me, I fell on my face, but not flatly, at one of New York’s (and America’s) biggest openings.

*Mais, attention!*

akwa is coming soon to a mouth near you.