Culinary Pataphysics: Dining, Theatre, and the Historical Avant-Garde

Abstract: The movement that is known as molecular gastronomy has received much attention over the past decade, both as a compelling artistic breach of "ordinary cuisine" and for its privileging the scientific advancement of food preparation. The great chefs of this movement are received as auteurs of the meals that they create; not simply chefs, but avant-garde performers. This article proposes that many of the facets of modern haute cuisine have parallels in the historical avant-garde. Through a theatrical lens, Culinary Pataphysics explores some of the history of food's artistry and draws parallels between drama and cuisine and both disciplines' use of simulation and disruption. With Alfred Jarry's remarkable play Ubu Roi as a starting point, three famous restaurants are assessed as contemporary exemplars of an artistic movement that has long been pronounced dead.

Keywords: molecular gastronomy, avant-garde, theatre, pataphysics, Per Se, Fat Duck, Alinea, simulation.

"Merdre!"

The purposefully misspelled opening line of Alfred Jarry's sensationalist play Ubu Roi incited uproar at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris at its 1896 opening. "Uproar" may be too tame a word, since the uttering of a nonsensical version of shit onstage actually caused a disturbance that turned into a riot which lasted for fifteen intense minutes and re-erupted periodically throughout the production. Ubu told the story of a tyrannical and obese King who ruled over an "imaginary" place called Poland. He used a mighty toilet bowl brush for a scepter and subscribed to an odd dogma called pataphysics. It was, he explained, a complex science that prized imaginary solutions to imaginary problems. Said the King: "Pataphysics, the world was cryin' out for it, so I invented it" (Jarry 2010: 56). Pataphysics, like the play itself, was a scientific or empirical falsification, a chimera, and thus classically absurdist. Did it mean anything? It didn't matter; it was just "science" and that was enough.

The play closed after a couple of tumultuous performances. Since then, it has only grown in art historical notoriety. It was the great marker in the history of avant-garde theatre, a play that was and is the literary symbol of a revolt against bourgeois illogic, not only in the representation of Ubu himself but also in the reaction from the audiences. Ubu Roi was raunchy and inexplicable to elite Parisian theatre-goers. Though theatrical verisimilitude had been challenged before, Ubu dangerously poked his finger in the eye of Paris.

I should not be surprised then when I thought of King Ubu while reading an email chain recently initiated by a friend who had just seen an article about Noma Restaurant, the famous Danish establisher that has topped many lists of the best restaurants in the world for the past several years. The article in question described in intricate detail the unusual food that experimental chef René Redzepi was presenting, from smoked quail eggs on burning hay to fish donuts. Having eaten there before, I recalled my enjoyment of Noma's delightful and artistically complex food. My friend was disgusted by what he read. He wrote, "Okay guys, I'm either going to go buy an AK-47 and go postal, or I'm going to calm down and consult the serious gourmands in my life and get educated. My Brit friend called this restaurant 'pretentious twaddle.' I think it's pure bullshit."

At about the same time that I read my friend's angry email, I noticed a column in an issue of the glossy western-living magazine, Sunset. In an article entitled "Why Molecular Gastronomy Must Die: And 9 Other Food Trends I Hate," Jonathan Gold wrote, with dripping sarcasm, an open letter to the generic "celebrity chef": "Congratulations, chef. You have managed to lay your hands on a stash of puntarelle, the rare, incredibly labor-intensive chicory shoots that until recently were found nowhere outside of Rome, where they are always served raw, dressed with anchovies. It is not necessary to make a statement by grilling them until they resemble charred radicchio" (Gold 2011: 42).
In light of these unnecessarily harsh critiques of molecular gastronomy, I could not help but think of my own field of study and the criticism and outrage that met plays of the avant-garde, most famously Ubu Roi. Gold, too, saw similarities and in the Sunset article he went on to note of food critics, “We still feel that expectant thrill every time we sit down at a new table—the thrill we suspect theatre critics feel with every rising curtain” (Gold 2011: 42). Indeed, that expectant thrill is often paired with immense and astonishing anger toward experimentation with the form. Here, in this Sunset article, was a clear and intriguing comparison between fine dining and theatre, two complementary art forms that share a maddeningly simple artistic conundrum—they are experiential and fleeting.

Angry response to art is not rare; hostile reaction to experimentation and “dangerous” creativity are a staple of art history. The hostility comes from all sides, from casual observers of the art to refined critics who understand the methodology.

The critique is often the same. “You spent money on that?!” The derision, especially prevalent as theatre becomes more and more expensive, expresses hostility toward those who would spend money on the creation of memory. This critique of elitism is an easily understandable reasoning for anger directed at haute cuisine and it finds parallels, I contend, in the historical avant-garde. The enshrining of the absurd and the unusual in centers of bourgeois culture has been a goal of the artistic avant-garde for more than a century. If Ubu caused a riot, why shouldn’t Noma, a brilliant example of enshrined absurdity, make an ordinarily calm man hot under the collar? It would make perfect sense if it were still 1910.1

It seems that the business of haute cuisine has learned to tap into standard avant-garde methodologies, albeit a hundred years after the height of the artistic movement. Top chefs have realized in a more complex way than ever before that the perception and reception their food and restaurants receive may be more important than the actual taste and physiological value of the food. Just as a Dadaist might highlight the perception of art by formally exhibiting a urinal, as Marcel Duchamp did in 1917, chefs who see their practice as “art” might now problematize the diner’s relationship to the food. The avant-garde was an art of perception, an historical era that demanded that its audience think about the presentation of the art and its consumption of said art. The artistic value suddenly existed, self-consciously, in the intellectual dialectic between art and “viewer of art.” This change understandably caused unease. It is the same unease we see in many reactions to modern science and its influence on haute cuisine. Likewise, we can see the creators (chefs) of this new avant-garde use time-tested methods of performance and often slip into the same absurd and over-the-top performativity.

Nourishment of the body and nourishment of the soul through theatrical performance have always gone hand in hand. We think back to ancient Greek theatre and the festival of Dionysus devoted to revelry and wine, to Balinese trance performance and its associations with food offerings to the gods, to Filippo Marinetti and Italian Futurism and manifestos that called for the “participant” to eat olives and kumquats with one hand while caressing swatches of sandpaper with the other.2 The twentieth century saw major theatre makers playing with their food: from Jerzy Grotowski and the neo-avant-garde followers who accepted a methodology of communal living, practice, and eating to Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre in Vermont. Schumann regarded theatre as essential to life—comparing it to the bread that he traditionally served during the performances. It is a sentiment that is not far from the original democratic ideals in ancient Athens and something we continue to see. In a recent production of Our Town in New York City the coups de théâtre was a final scene in which bacon was fried on stage. The intimate theatre was filled with the sounds of sizzling and popping and delectable smells. The effect was of pure joy. It is a theoretically compelling joy, however, because it is a trick that is, in some ways, anti-theatrical. This avant-garde simulation is so arresting because it is not a simulation. And therein lies a common and decades-old theatrical disruption of perception: the placement of reality in a location of mimesis. Food in the theatre has always had the power to yank an audience into reality and out of the moment of simulation, thus making it an effective way to achieve a phenomenological and yet surreal response. Namely, by using pure realism. Food becomes a metatheatrical spectacle because verisimilitude is maintained by not even being challenged.

In “Consuming Passions: Eating and the Stage at the Fin de Siècle,” Laurence Senelick writes of connections between restaurant culture and theatre in France near the end of the nineteenth century. At the center of Senelick’s discussion is a reminder of David Belasco’s 1912 production of The Governor’s Lady in which the famous realist director re-created, in exact replica, Child’s Restaurant, complete with the aroma of buckwheat pancakes wafting into the audience. Here again, food was the central focus of true realism. But Belasco was doing what he had become known for, and even in 1912, it was not new. The Frenchman André Antoine, one of the forefathers of the theatrical avant-garde, used sides of beef in his onstage butcher shop in 1888’s Les Bouchers, creating one of his most remembered realist moments (Henderson 1971: 52). The audience was riveted and, as the critic Mordecai Gorelik wrote, “The curtain closes in an uproar, cheers, applause,
a stamping of feet shakes the rickety building” (Henderson 1971: 129). It was an uproar due to sides of beef but, more importantly, to a re-understanding of relationship to the place of theatre. The response was and is due to the renewed prizing of the shared experience of sensory engagement. The joy of smelling buckwheat was heightened knowing that other people were sensing the same thing at the same time.

Collective memory plays an important part of the food and theatre equation, especially as we assess the avant-garde obsession with simulation and reproduction. It is important to remember that Child’s Restaurant was one of the first major chain restaurants in America, a place of common/mass memory. This was a place that the producers could expect the audience to know. In this way, Belasco’s piece of trickery allowed the audience to revel in its own nostalgia by recreating the sights and sounds and smells of those memories. Senelick states it well: “By taking the public inside as observers, without the obligation to be customers, Belasco was doubling their pleasure, offering them a position of privilege and investing the overlooked quotidian with semiotic significance” (Senelick 2005: 48). Beyond simply the power of simulating a simulation (a chain restaurant represented on a stage), Belasco was adding real sensory engagement. In a strongly visceral way, theatre was giving audiences not the signifier, but the signified.

Senelick goes on to point out that on a more basic level the fin de siècle Parisian restaurant had similarities to the Scribeian well-made play, with rising action, an appropriate climax, and a dénouement.3 Reflecting neoclassical obsession with structure, Scribe’s pièce bien faite is now synonymous with pastness, stodginess, and devotion to rules. Theatre in the twentieth century moved beyond Scribe. But only relatively recently have dining conventions dispensed with structural theatrical style. Paralleling the avant-garde that hit its stride after the realist and Scribeian movements, the new haute dinner is often not Scribeian, and actually shuns structure and expectations.

As will be clear, restaurants now often place unusual signification on representation, simulation, and imagination. Avant-garde scholar Christopher Innes writes of Ubu that its lasting power partly rests in its structural assertion that reality simply is that thing which “exerts the most powerful hold on the imagination” (Innes 1981: 26). Playing with a viewer’s imagination and perception can be an offensive thing in art because it subtly allows the viewer of the work to assume that he has agency, when in fact the master chef/artist’s manipulation proves that he still controls the performance. As we will see, the methods recall Jean Baudrillard’s writings on simulation and the deconstruction of the real. Often the goal of haute cuisine, as with the avant-garde that preceded it, seems to be the disruption of expectation and the questioning of reality. Palaces of fine dining have, in fact, claimed a science for their disruption: not pataphysics but molecular gastronomy.4 Where the avant-garde challenged perception and societal mores, molecular gastronomy adds another element. It too pokes fun, it disrupts, it challenges—but then it makes you eat it. The ultimate ingestion of the grotesque adds to a new level of anger for the naysayers. “I just ate something that I didn’t understand!”

Theatre proceeded in the twentieth century through a tidal shift in presentational modes, from the avant-garde through Brechtian perceptual disruption and late twentieth-century performance art. But, as alluded to, culinary innovation stopped at the Scribian well-made play. Hervé This, the French physical chemist and inventor of the field of molecular gastronomy, confirms the delayed advancements in food preparation. He writes:

Despite having a huge impact on other aspects of our lives, scientific advances have done little to change our cooking habits. When it comes to preparing food—the most important aspect of our life from a physiological point of view—citizens in developed countries still cook almost the same way as their ancestors did centuries ago. (This 2006: 1063)

So it is with a degree of excitement that food and theatre critics in the past decade have welcomed the world of molecular gastronomy, for it not only fundamentally changed fine dining, but repositioned theatrical avant-garde into a more privileged cultural framework.5 Through the advancements in culinary art and molecular gastronomy one can see a familiar pattern of growth. The precise realism that theatre artists played with at the turn of the century—a movement that was the advance guard of the historical avant-garde itself—reflected a modernizing society coping with and eventually resisting mass culture. That resistance took many forms, from reverting to tribal arts a la Hugo Ball’s Dada, to embracing hyper-technology and modernism a la Marinetti and the Futurists. The questioning of the mode of distribution of art—as in the case of Ball’s obsession with tribal art and Antonin Artaud’s later prizing of “primitive” cultures—often leads to a style of art that uses memory, pastness, and nostalgia to effect the perception of the work.6 On the other hand, the avant-garde equally found creative footing by embracing ideals that strove for a brave new future of technology and advancement. The avant-garde was thus dominated by something that could easily be described as nostalgic whimsy and Futurist coldness.

With this assertion, we may argue that the avant-garde dialectic between nostalgia for the past and an aggressive
grabbing at the future is easily seen in the methodologies of the world’s most well-known restaurants. It is through a use of Baudrillardian simulation and slippage of senses of reality that these restaurants can best be seen as modern-day heirs to the historical avant-garde.

Three chefs are of particular interest, as they seem to represent parallels to some of the early avant-garde movements. In fact, by using Per Se, the Fat Duck, and Alinea we can see a development of haute restaurant tactics that compellingly mimic the artistic change at the turn of the last century and reflect the artistic interest in simulation and reality-questioning.

Thomas Keller, one of America’s most famous chefs, taps into that most basic psycho-performative element of dining in his simple recognition of nostalgia as a critical somatic experience. Of course, that is far from a simple realization, once the layers of meaning are pulled back. The auteur/artist/chef guides the diner/spectator to dream into the work of art. The meal is not simply about the taste of the food but heavily relies on what the food-eating and gathering experience does for the receptive consumer. Keller is often described as an elegant chef who focuses on structural perfection and thus provides a superb example of the perfectionistic heights of the pièce bien faite. However, his ideals allude to a prizing of the nostalgia and simulation that begin to capture the questioning of perspective that the avant-gardists employed so well. Looking at dinner as a story, it is reasonable to see his restaurant, Per Se in New York City, as capturing all of the critical aspects of the Scribeian model. One does not just eat dinner, one allows the dinner to unfold like a play. After being shown into the theatre/dining room, a perfect proscenium stage with windows framing that most American of locales, Central Park, flawless waiters/actors, in hushed tones, guide you through a nine-course story of American food. Lingering on the names and descriptions of the country purveyors of their ingredients, the servers draw connections between each course and the wine that pairs with the food. The storytelling is central to the experience and allows the preparation of the meal to exist in the realm of mythology. The dinner is a story of American traditions, memories, and generational transitions. But it is equally preposterous, almost Dadaist, to eat a meal while waiters and chefs constantly remind the diner where the food came from. The cepe custard is made possible by the good people at the Eckerton Hill Farm, in Hamburg, Pennsylvania. The lamb with olive petal salad, compressed fennel bulb, ruby grapefruit, and nepitella mint lived its final days at the Elysian Fields Farm. Before a bite is taken, the diner’s narrative has followed the life of the lamb, its eating habits, its grazing habits, its humane death, and its happy drive to a plate in New York City. It is a Norman Rockwell vision of the story of the food, wrapped up in a now typical culinary obsession with farm-life Americana. From the avant-gardist perspective, it is beautifully absurd. Certainly it is understood that humane treatment of animals and the ideals of freshness are important to contemporary conceptions of food. What is here noteworthy is the obsessive need to remind the diner of these facts while he is ingesting said animal or plant. It is both self-congratulatory and theatrical in its insistence on detailed food storytelling.

The storytelling at Per Se seems aimed at capturing a collective national consciousness by highlighting food often associated with American youth. Keller always begins with his well-known first course. Ice cream cones arrive tableside and might recall a hot summer in the Adirondacks, or trips to Baskin-Robbins with grandmother. Except in what has become the chef’s favorite trick of anti-naturalism and simulation (a nod to the avant-garde), it is not ice cream but rather salmon tartare and crème fraîche. The dinner begins with a culinary palimpsest—the course allows for memory making in that it consciously insists that the diner build memory on top of memory. Like the photograph described in Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida, the new false mimesis of the salmon tartare becomes a “counter-memory” or at least a new memory that has double satisfaction. Consumption of the art becomes a filled personal experience because the diner is able to live simultaneously in his past and present. Baskin-Robbins now can remind him of salmon tartare, creating a postmodern pastiche of perception with different experiences and different eras disrupting and negating linear meaning.
The opening moments of the Per Se meal place the diner in the position of active participant in a theatrical world, and the chef expertly navigates the meal through a dramatic format. Keller uses an array of props that defy need but add to the spectacle and memory making. Six salts arrive in a specially designed cellar for the foie gras. And the dinner progresses in rising action into the fish and then fowl and finally meat courses. It is a tight plot that builds to a climax of macaroons, chocolates, cappuccino, nuts, and gifts, showered on the bloated patron who is ready for this final catharsis.

The theatrical connections are not lost on Keller and his staff. In fact, they are embraced and built upon. In a section of her award-winning book about her time as a server at Per Se, Phoebe Damrosch describes the rehearsal process in the leadup to the opening of the restaurant. A dance teacher was hired and taught the entire crew some basic choreography: "The point of this dance is to think about giving and receiving," she said, pressing play on her tiny boom box. A slow and stately march started playing through tinny speakers, a march to which we learned a simple dance: stepping up to our partner to give him the feather, stepping back to a bow. (Damrosch 2008: 42)

That the "producers" of Per Se are so finely attuned to the performative necessity of dance in the dining room is at the least indicative of an industry that is coming to greater terms with its relationship to theatre and performance. In fact it more probably illuminates an industry that knows it is already providing the same experience as theatre and performance. Diners do not leave Per Se and go to a Broadway show. After four hours of dining, there is no time for other entertainment.

Just as the historical avant-garde reacted against and rejected bourgeois society and mass markets in the early twentieth century, the culinary avant-garde is finding a foothold by scorning the typical fine dining experience as facile and representative of the past. If Thomas Keller identified the heights of theatrical precision and culinary finesse in his restaurants, as many claim that he did, by perfecting preparations of old and nostalgia-generating recipes (ice cream, refined stews, tapioca), the new generation of chefs/artists have stepped forward to advance versions of anti-cooking. Rather than serving foie gras torchon, what if we freeze the goose liver and grate it over a dish tableside? Or, what if we serve oysters and tapioca (Keller's "Oysters and Pearls") and...
challenge the diner’s sense of what food is or should be? These ideas are the beginning culinary parallels to the issues that Guy Debord described in his Society of the Spectacle, itself a commentary on mass media society in an avant-garde world of simulacra and simulation. “The true,” he writes, “is a moment of the false” (Debord 2000: 9). Debord’s phenomenological treatise critiqued the falseness created out of society’s fetishism of mass media and simulation. But, perhaps it is in Ludwig Feuerbach’s famous quote that begins Debord’s study that we may find the essence of the fetish of culinary mimesis that we begin to see in Keller’s ice cream cones: “sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness” (Debord 2000: 1). Contrary to the assertion about frying bacon on stage in a postmodern theatrical society, what we want in a postmodern culinary society is the joy of the signifier, not the signified. That is/is was the province of the theatre. Our Town was revelatory for its meaningful use of the signified. Per Se’s ice cream cones are revelatory for their highlighting of the signifier and its relative meaninglessness.

Enter Ferran Adrià, Heston Blumenthal, and Grant Achatz as examples of the second wave of a culinary avant-garde, and you see a group of chefs not unlike the great manifesto-writing artists of the historical avant-garde. Blumenthal’s Fat Duck in Bray, England, may be the finest example of this style of avant-garde cuisine. Considered by many to be the best restaurant in the world, it reflects a move from the well-made play to more robust avant-garde experiments that press perception to the point of breakage. The chef is adamant about reversing long-standing perceptions of British food and forces the viewer/diner into those perceptual changes. What he creates is nouveau cuisine alongside nouveau British performance. The calling upon a cultural past (the food’s British-ness and culture’s culinary reputation for being distasteful) is examined alongside a recreating of nostalgia through technological advancement.

The Fat Duck builds upon the Keller model of the dining experience but becomes more self-consciously theatrical. While a diner at Per Se is subtly lulled into a state of psycho-theatrical reverie, at the Fat Duck the viewer is abruptly pulled into the experience. This is audience participation on an heightened level and one would be forgiven for feeling a bit accosted by the experience. Food critics generally agree that a Fat Duck meal is transcendent, but one cannot help feeling that the joke is on him. After all, Blumenthal seems to be saying, “Everything you thought about food is wrong. All of your first impressions will not hold.” Even the physical menu is the classic milkman’s puzzle of interlacing straps and pages that leaves the diner laughing at himself and looking to a waiter for help. It is a sly joke regarding the fact that the menu is not needed since the chef will be selecting your courses anyway. But rather than eliminate the menu altogether, the auteur has decided to leave it intact but to actively call attention to its uselessness in a new world of fine dining. Just as with the avant-garde, it is essential that the spectator be reminded why this experience is contrary to and thus better than the past.

Again, it is impossible to escape the writings of Baudrillard in any analysis of simulation, and here with Blumenthal and his tricks of presentation we have a Baudrillardian example of existence being an illusory state of performance. The theorist is enlightening in light of the confusion of the Fat Duck menu and the dinner that follows. “Simulation,” he notes, “stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value” (Baudrillard 1994: 6). As in Baudrillard’s model, a concept previously toyed with by the avant-gardists, the sign (here the menu) has no value. These moments of confusion and helplessness of signifiers represent one of the goals of the meal and the avant-garde in
The effect is built upon at the Fat Duck. A wooden box filled with moss is placed on the table, followed by quizzical looks as some substance is poured over the top. The box steams and fizzes and the aroma of the woods blankets the tables—the blending of sensory memory with a scientific curiosity. Other small dishes are brought out, which the diner eats while engulfed in mossy steam. A course titled “Sounds of the Sea” sits on a simulation of sand and is accompanied by an iPod stuffed in a seashell. Sounds of crashing waves accompany the dining experience so that the diner is transported into memory and recollection through a creation of an “authentic” sonic landscape.

One can see a development from Kellerian nostalgic perfectionism through Blumenthal’s futuristic whimsy that borrows from pastness and tradition. Blumenthal, who has become a television celebrity in England, hosts a program called *Heston’s Feasts* in which he creates dinners that capture an era or a theme. In his words: “cooking lies in the secrets of the past, so I am on a mission to use myth, science and history to create the greatest feasts ever seen” (*Heston’s Feasts*, 2009). The sentiment here represents that classic avant-garde conflict between hyper-modernity and ancient ritual and myth. Not satisfied with the present, avant-gardists, like many modern chefs, look both to the mythic past and technological future for inspiration. This is taken even further in Grant Achatz’s Alinea Restaurant in Chicago, echoing the transitions of the Italian Futurists in the nineteen-teens, from realist simulation to something that draws attention to a presentational style that is so forward thinking as to be futuristic while also self-consciously preposterous and unrealistic. On a pure culinary level, can one really take seriously a dinner of eighteen or more courses? Probably not. But on a theatrical level, it all makes sense because, well, it is pure spectacle. And though the food at Alinea is critically praised and must then be recognized as delicious, the revolt against the mediocrity of consistency is the unwritten but understood manifesto. When reading Filippo Marinetti’s Manifesto of avant-garde Futurism with its insistence on the shiny, the fast, the scientific, and the new, one could certainly also read it as a proto-modus-operandi for Alinea.

The story that is told through presentation is less about local harvesting and butchery, as it is at many modern restaurants of high cuisine, and more about the creation of a culinary culture of technology and artistic austerity. A pumpkin morsel (maybe?) arrives, smoking in a sling, a piece of pig fat hangs from a gallows, and a disk of foie gras is stabbed through with a titanium needle. Achatz is, like all of his contemporaries, precise and considered about the serving
ware and has even hired a designer, Martin Kastner, to create futuristic-looking delivery methods. The designs are reminiscent of Futurist and later Constructivist set design, with their focus on form, temporal duration, and aggressiveness. No two dishes are served on the same type of plate. One course may arrive on delicate china, another impaled at the end of what looks like an antennae, and still another on a pillow filled with scented air that complements the flavor of the food as it deflates.

Alinea is a dinner that delights in its problematizing of creation and re-creation of something that forces the diner out of a mass cultural slumber. But there is something cold, solitary, and ascetic about a dinner of this sort, much like the Futurist movement itself. If a family dinner with crusty bread and stew is at one end of the spectrum, Alinea is at the other. After all, it is that shared sense of community that drives many people’s passions for restaurants and for the theatre, and the Alinea dining room, perhaps because of the price, does not seem like a cross section of the community. The theatre, a form of expression that relies on the delight being shared and considered together. It is in those two places in our society that tradition and stories are made and told. And though he does not articulate it, that may explain my friend’s fierce emotional reaction to Noma and response to the avant-garde. When it comes to eating and social engagement, there are traditional expectations for the experience that once upended may feel like an offensive attack against essential human needs.

It has to be noted that Achatz wraps memory into his futuristic methods as well and hopes that they will incite discussion and communities. Just as the Keller “Salmon Cornet” or the Blumenthal “Sound of the Sea” are meant to evoke individual memory, Achatz too teases with reference to the diner’s past. His new restaurant, Next, recently featured a menu entitled “Childhood.” Courses included PB&J (in a tempura shell) and an offering that arrived inside a child’s lunchbox complete with plastic baggies filled with snacks and a note from “mom and dad.” The music in the restaurant included themes from childhood television shows. But whose childhood? It is easy to feel a bit annoyed, accosted (especially) without having even eaten there. From the outside it seems like a cross section of the community. The theatre, a form of surrogate reality, but also to force each spectator to imagine his own reality” (Innes 1981: 26). In this light, an irritated response to “Childhood” or other forms of food-play is understandable. There is nothing subtle about this since an imagined past is seemingly forced on the participant as reality. And while it may be an accurate memory, it could also be very wrong. The annoying, even anxiety stimulating, attempt to create a monolithic childhood memory and therefore negate your own (or alienate you as “Other” if your childhood seemed different) is easily associated with the authoritarian tendencies that often were associated with the Futurist movement. In this way, the diner’s memory is co-opted by a mass imaginary, or by the controlling ideals of the leader, in this case the chef. Similarly, Blumenthal devotes the entirety of a television program to the creation of a feast that feels like it has jumped out of the pages of Alice in Wonderland, from turkey juice to mock turtle soup. The use of a children’s book that virtually everyone knows is here noteworthy. Memory of the story becomes a catalyst for the taste experience of the dinner and that memory, itself distant, mythic, and primitive, is augmented by the heavy use of science. The juice is served in a specially designed test tube.

It is one thing to create odd dishes for the delight of a television audience and another thing to create for the experience of diners sitting around a table and paying hundreds of dollars. Does the obsession with technicality, advancement, and new forms of delivery necessarily leave the diner and audience member alone in the dark, amazed by the innovation rather than the shared experience of eating and tasting? Does forced nostalgia feel convivial or rather irritating? It makes one feel that the wheels-within-wheels of questioning perception is the only thing that is at play, even if the food tastes good. Though perhaps not entirely fair, it could easily be a critique of the avant-gardists of the early 1900s.
After the Futurists, the Dadaists and Surrealists likewise forced perceptual norm questioning so far as to finally lead to deconstructionism and meaninglessness. In the theatre, ultimately, the avant-garde gave way to mid-century obsessions with slow development of performance that focused on ritual and creation of theatre out of the specificity of locale and not about dreams of the future (Grotowski et al.). The avant-garde was eclipsed by movements that seemed to revert back to the traditional. Likewise, when Sunset calls for the death of molecular gastronomy, when we see the new rise of the Slow Food movement and when so many restaurants and chefs want to prepare comfort food, perhaps we can see the dénouement of molecular gastronomy as a fetishized and sensationalized science. Perhaps the lessons have been learned and can thus be incorporated into the future development of cookery, just as any theatrical performance now uses influences from the avant-garde past as it attempts to speak to the present.

Many molecular gastronomists recoil at the term with which they are labeled, and understandably so. A label makes it a movement, and artists abhor associations with movements. And, certainly, artists do not like to be defined from the outside. Blumenthal believes that the term “molecular gastronomy” overcomplicates, perhaps makes the process seem too elitist. The revulsion and attraction to defining art is another element that the masters of haute cuisine share with their historical avant-garde forefathers. At the same time that they resist definition, the need to identify what they are doing is something that does not escape the great chefs, and avant-garde cooking’s success and its backlash have forced many of them to clarify, to contextualize their art. In 2006, Keller, Adrià, Blumenthal, and the cookery writer Harold McGee wrote an article in the London Observer that was striking for its similarity to the manifestos written by so many of the avant-garde leaders. It introduces a problem, in this case the oversensationalizing of many aspects of molecular gastronomy. Through calls to action it identifies the utopian goals of the authors/creators. It highlights tradition that should be built upon and sets a vision for the use of new technologies and innovation (Adria et al. 2006). At the end of the manifesto, they simply and almost offhandedly mention what must be the most significant area of culinary development when they write: “The act of eating engages all the senses as well as the mind. Preparing and serving food could therefore be the most complex and comprehensive of the performing arts” (Adria et al. 2006).

The acknowledgment that cuisine, especially “the new cuisine” or molecular gastronomy, is inseparable from performing art, is here clarified, though undercut by the authors’ hesitant conclusion. I cannot imagine, nor can I find any evidence, that a conscious copying of the modes of the historical avant-garde has been followed by the practitioners of this art. Fine dining has naturally (albeit it very late, as Hervé This notes) come to a place of appropriation or incorporation of now old tactics of the performing arts. Though the methods are old, the use of them by preparers of our food is still disconcerting to some, just as modern art offends many even though much of it is hardly modern. It is as if a giant “merde!” has been shouted out in the culinary world. The disruption reverberates as a call to arms across the spectrum. On one side, there is a need to push it away as “pretentious twaddle,” and on another, a tasty acceptance with a soupçon of suspicion that the trend might simply be a delightful retread of old and perhaps instinctive artistic tendencies.

NOTES
1. When I refer to the historical avant-garde I am writing of the artistic movement that began in the late nineteenth century and continued into the middle of the twentieth century. Early avant-garde was dominated by the rise of several of the well-known -isms including Realism, Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism.
2. The Futurists were, in fact, obsessed with food and the need for new preparations and culinary experiences. As with all Futurist work, the mode of presentation was concerned with hyper-modernity, mechanization, and odd juxtapositions.
3. Eugène Scribe is credited with the well-made play that followed a set and predictable structure. He wrote many of them. No one would describe Scribe as even remotely avant-garde.
4. Lest I incite the wrath of molecular gastronomists, it must be noted that theirs is a legitimate and important branch of scientific study. It is not of the imaginary sort of Jarry’s pataphysics. Here I use the term molecular gastronomy as a fetishized style of cooking, far from its original definition as a science of food and food preparation. Molecular gastronomy, as a title and idea, seems often to be a marketing tool for restaurants intent on boosting their “dramatic” bona fides.
5. I do contend that cuisine and its preparation and distribution is, and always has been, more historically significant than theatre because of its cultural and physiological necessity. This precept is critical to the argument of this article since the altering of food to look more like theatre/performance is a disturbance that goes a step too far for many people.
6. There are, of course, many theories of the avant-garde. Some of my terminology comes from Peter Berger’s seminal study, Theory of the Avant-Garde, that defines the needs of the avant-gardists to problematize both the art and the distribution of the art.
7. A catharsis that exists in the audience is the primary focus of Aristotle’s treatise on theatre.
8. “The past” is a complex idea when discussing the avant-garde. The past that the artist rejects is really, more aptly, the popular present and very recent past. As noted, avant-gardists often find artistic muses in primitive cultures of the distant past or re-creation of personal nostalgia.
9. Adrià, who will not be discussed in this article, is without doubt known to Gastronomica readers.
10. Marinetti, the hero of the Futurists, drove around in fast cars and tossed his manifestos into the air with glee. He disrupted church services with rantings from the balcony about the brave new future. He became a passing interest of Mussolini and his desire for a state of the future that prizes clean architecture, efficiency, and speed. In *The Futurist Manifesto*, Marinetti writes: “We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.” From http://vserver1.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html

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