The production of the 'New Romanian Cuisine': Elite local taste and globalisation

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Abstract

Under the attack of globalisation's universalising force, food traditions become sites of cultural resistance (Poulain, 2017) in a recent worldwide phenomenon that saw the birth of a new type of restaurants gathered under the umbrella of a New Cuisine taxonomy. The interest in what such actors perceive as "roots" and "traditions", their fear of alienation and their strong ethical and ecological awareness build an ethos that turns food production into a cultural phenomenon (Ferguson, 2004) and therefore into something good to think with (Levy-Strauss, 1963). The New Romanian restaurants position themselves as agents of change and nationalise the fine dining space according to their vision while setting up the local identity's resistance to global forces and building a new meaning for Romanian restaurant food. I analysed the mechanisms that help instil or dilute 'Romanian-ness' and the motivations behind this process that claims to address a need expressed by the up-and-coming middle class.

Keywords

Identity, gastronomy, New Romanian Cuisine;

Introduction

This paper addresses a gap in the body of literature dedicated to the local food scene and it puts a new phenomenon such as the New Romanian Cuisine in a context. The paper's value resides also in providing the local gastronomic community with a different perspective on a movement in progress.

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Before exploring the New Romanian Cuisine, I will start by defining it as the local embodiment of an international phenomenon that started after 2000; like many other New Local Cuisines around the world (such as New British Cuisine, New Anatolian Cuisine, New Latin Cuisine etc.), it gravitates around the New Scandinavian Cuisine and its iconic reference point Noma, a Michelin-starred restaurant run by chef-owner Rene Redzepi. The New Local Cuisine is a cultural niche movement framed in an ethnocentric identity search which in the kitchen translates into local seasonal ingredients, old techniques and emotion-laden recipes. These are to be recovered, (re)discovered, reinterpreted, and subjected to a total transformation from production to pairing to plating in a contemporary style. The consequence (and the core of the movement) is a re-signification of local food. My research question is related to the material and symbolic resources employed by chefs and owners in order to create the field of the New Romanian Cuisine.

In order to answer these questions, since 2016 I have gathered data from a plurality of sources: media, conferences, workshops, forums, and Facebook and Instagram discussions around the constitution of the New Romanian Cuisine. The field work counts observations of twelve restaurants, where I paid attention to food (plating, techniques, inspiration, creativity) as well as to the design, food menu, social interactions, etc. Also, I interviewed seventeen individuals – chefs working for such restaurants and other actors invested in the field.

The local movement is relatively young; it started as a discourse in 2015 and acquired body only when dedicated restaurants were opened beginning with 2018. Currently there are approximately twelve units, located mostly in Bucharest with a few others in Sibiu, Brasov and Sfantu Gheorghe. In the majority of cases their owners are also the chefs; however, only a small number have secured investments from outside their close network of family and friends. Many of them have worked abroad including in Michelin-star restaurants. Some of them have studied gastronomy at prestigious institutes such as Le Cordon Bleu London. The age spans across their late 20s and 30s, and only two are women.

Food studies is a relatively new autonomous domain of sociology. In developed societies, it has generated a consistent body of literature, which I found instrumental in my research; although not all concepts and theories are applicable to a developing society such as Romania's. Identity is a food dimension that attracted the interest of, among others: Douglas (1972), Grignon (1990), Scholliers (2001), Barthes (1997), Mihailescu (2017 a, b), Becut and Lurbe y Puerto (2017), and Paddock (2011). Matta (2015), Poulain (2017), Ichijo, Johaness and Ranta (2019) studied the interplay of globalisation and nationalism; DeSoucey coined the notion of "gastronationalism" (2010), and a few years later studied the restaurant and chef phenomenon, together with Demetry (2016). I found Schulze's (1993) concept of "experience society" and Pine and Gilmore's (1995) "experience economy", as well as Fonseca's (2005) study on New Latin Cuisine and Karaosmanolu's analysis of Ottoman-ness (2009) useful in analysing food as an experience. For taste, distinction and class, Bourdieu (1984) and Naccarato and Lebesco (2012) were instrumental.

The collected data shows that the New Romanian Cuisine is closely linked to globalisation, identity, and distinction while chefs act as agents of change. Globalisation is

known as a universalising force, having to do with homogeneity and standardisation so food, being pliable, reflects the global trends (Metro-Roland, 2013) which may lead to culinary imperialism. In response to this fear of assimilation into a "McWorld" type of Western culture (Barber, 1992), food and food practices become ways of cultural transmission and resistance (Alvarez Lopez, 2006) with food cultures being seen as identity champions and causing processes of revaluation and revitalisation of local cuisines (Nikolic, 2019). This is a recent phenomenon (Poulain, 2017) that parallels a new interest in and a celebration of nature in contrast to the man-made urban universe. A consequence of this has been the inversion of the culinary hierarchy with rustic, country dishes ruling over international urban kitchen – the old opposition haute cuisine vs peasant cuisine has morphed into haute cuisine and peasant cuisine against processed, displaced food (Morin, 1975). Poulain (2017) explains that city dwellers' growing nostalgia for safe, anxiety-free social spaces causes them to place custody of gastronomic heritage in the hands of rural inhabitants. Poulain further explains that urban individuals feel that these spaces of regional or local cuisines are precisely the ones that harbour a clearly identifiable and identity-engendering culinary culture.

Challenge, opportunity and London prices in the EU periphery

In order to understand the origins of this newly found interest in local cuisine, I asked my informants what triggered it. Many of those that repatriated talked about an epiphany-like moment in their careers abroad – they saw potential in what used to be disregarded as old, familiar and therefore unattractive Romanian cuisine. Chef Alex Petricean confessed:

> "I learned perhaps from the best examples what culinary heritage and the joy of sharing this identity further, in a personal way. The memory and the emotion of the taste only got in my way when I didn't have the food I grew up with. Then I realised that no matter how good the food you have on your plate, the food that will sensitise you the most will be that of the territory where you come from. The food, the tastes, the habits, the feelings around the table are in the DNA of each of us. And so I realised that we, Romanians, meet all the parameters of culinary development. Tradition. Territory. Local product". (Restograf, 2020, author's translation).

During the interviews and coding process, one theme that emerged regarded the way informants saw the "old" or classic Romanian restaurant cuisine. They depicted it as the result of several layers of standardisation and industrial alteration that took away variety and richness of taste and ingredients. Classic Romanian restaurants feature menus that overlap almost entirely, offering the same trio of ciorba pui/ vacuta/ perisoare and one version of sarmale no matter where the restaurant is located, in Iasi, Cluj, Constanta, or elsewhere. This delocalisation (Hannerz 1987, 2000) is the result of decades of standardisation, started under the Communist regime and carried on afterwards for various reasons, from routine to complacency or rejection of change, etc. Chefs also mentioned the ongoing dispute around the local cuisine's originality, agreeing that the existence of a "culinary self-racism" among Romanians (Mihăilescu, 2017b) is not constructive, producing or contributing to a negative reputational badge. While working in

Western societies that value and exploit the 'local' and its heritage, these chefs observed the latent potential of the Romanian food and understood its value; they also saw the development of an affluent Romanian middle class that started to appreciate gastronomic experiences during their travels abroad. Their repatriation meant accepting a challenge which, should it succeed, would bring a double reward – distinction for themselves and a place at the global gastronomy's table for the country. In economic terms, this outcome would ensure capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1984) for the chefs, and increased visibility and tourism for the country.

In researching the ways these chefs ran their restaurants to meet these goals, I identified two opposing and simultaneous processes: considerable efforts to instil national identity in every meal went hand in hand with a clear tendency to also take some aspects as far away from its Romanian core as possible. I argue that this process of restoring the "Romanian-ness" aura is food-centric, strictly related to the plate, and it happens mainly through acts of "banal nationalism" (Billig, 1995) and heritagisation (Bessière, 1998). Simultaneously, the experience of eating out at such Romanian restaurants has changed, depleted of some local features and enriched with others of foreign extraction, as I will explain further.

Early in my research it became clear that the restaurants I analysed are expensive and elitist. Just as the nouvelle cuisine became, for certain market segments, a pejorative term for minimalism ("nothing on the plate, everything on the bill" as many TripAdvisor reviews state), so too the New Romanian Cuisine restaurants are described as graphic plates, little food, big price – a customer in her late 30's dismissed the whole dinner as fonfleuri in farfurie – something insubstantial but highly priced (S.A., interview). Romania has a brief history of modern fine dining; one explanation is related to the average income, which is still lagging behind Western standards. Classic Romanian restaurants are perceived as being accessible, but at 75 Euro a tasting menu, no wine included, the New Romanian restaurant cuisine is not attainable to large categories of public. Adopting Romanian food at London prices is not an easy-going process in a country where Eurostat shows restaurants and hotel spending habits represented 3.1% of the household' income versus the European average of 8.8% in 2017 (Eurostat, 2018).

These restaurants claim their price reflects the value of premium quality ingredients, highly skilled staff, high-end space and fixtures, legal requirements, and something less tangible such as the customers' expectations. In analysing the New Latin Cuisine as a postmodern experience, Fonseca (2005) argues that its exchange value is also made up of additional layers of meaning of the price. Kotler and Armstrong (1991) define price as more than amounts of money but an aggregate of all values that buyers are exchanging for the benefits of the item bought. There is a symbolic component of the price as a sign, as representing something else – reminding of Marx's value theory (Fonseca, 2005). Pricing strategy helps restaurants position themselves as trendy spaces and build a reputation among food critics and consumers. Following Veblen's theory of price decoding value (1899), I suggest price is not only indicative of buying power but also a way of taste and status displayed for both restaurants and their customers.

Banal nationalism and new food items

Billig (1995) proposed the concept of "banal nationalism" for the ways people produce and reproduce nations through daily, simple, banal actions. Building on this, Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) highlight the ways normal people, not the state or the elites, engage with the idea of nation through the selection or creation of symbols and their use. The New Romanian Restaurants performs this type of nationalism by relying heavily on re-localisation practices order.

Writing about food linking people to their land, Ichijo, Johannes and Ranta (2019) argue that a primordial organic non-negotiable bond is thus created. One way of making the new cuisine more local, more blatantly Romanian is through enlarging the culinary paradigm – that is bringing back forgotten foods or giving new usage to familiar ones. For example, chefs employ foraging practices to acquire wild flora produce such as nettle, ramson, accacia flowers or water chestnuts. While many of these newly rediscovered items are in fact old, being familiar to previous generations of cooks and consumers, their presence on the menu today is seen today as exotic.

This exotic sense is also enhanced by new ways of using ingredients such as chef Andrei Chelaru' dessert with galbiori (chanterelles mushrooms). This extension of edible foods is a "reconfiguration the culinary system" bringing back complexity (Mangiapane, 2015) while re-constructing the connection between land and diet. Of course, it provides a challenging route to take in going back to Romanian roots.

Besides reviving forgotten ingredients, another mnemonic instrument that the New Romanian Cuisine restaurants use is building the menu based on old recipes. Foods eaten by older generations and those before them are made available in a creative new form and, given a certain degree of familiarity, have the potential to act just, as their Catalan counterparts as "touchstone to a historic past" (Johannes, 2019). By giving simple dishes a place in a fine dining menu, the "transformation of the everyday into the extraordinary" (Brucher, 2016) ensures a sense of continuity. However, striving to make the experience intelligible and attractive means that they resort to what Lowenthal (1985) conceptualised as a translation, re-conceptualisation, and reframing the past in a new paradigm. According to this author, the past is thus offered as a show "dissolved into a simple representation" whose role is to incite, to avoid the taboo boredom. Other scholars have spoken of reproducing and reinventing the past as means of creating difference and alterity, exoticism in the larger frame of continuity and familiarity (Karaosmanoˇlu 2009). Kaiamo's dish called 1989 parizer turns the humble Communist baloney into a fine dining dish which sparked interest and created a dialogue. Its reconstruction makes the collective past tangible, turning food into what Pierre Nora named lieux de mémoires (1996). On the other hand, the experience strays far enough from the original; the past is rendered in such ways that sometimes it leaves eaters baffled. There are cases where the connection to the past fails to be recreated: grandmother's polenta was not a mousse that smells of truffles. It is Pollock who talks about the irony of representation being its"tendency to make absent the same thing it wishes to present" (Pollock, 1998). Collected data showed such a propensity towards hiding the familiar while striving to keep it.

Doing field work I noticed how chefs are exploring and exploiting culinary tradition as a means of re-localising restaurant cuisine. The concept of tradition is a large and vague umbrella for many things that evoke "sepia-coloured image" since tradition is strongly associated with an idealised past (Billiard, 2010). That is why, noticing how restaurants exploit the collective nostalgia for a short supply chain and clean, wholesome food brings to mind Herzfeld's "structural nostalgia" (2004). In the context of the New Romanian Cuisine, reminiscing of the time food came from one's own garden is visible in restaurants' private vegetable gardens, which add weight to their local-centric narrative.

Traditions are ambiguous, shifting, subjective and selective (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) which serves the New Romanian Cuisine's purpose as they can be changed for modern use, reinvented, and revitalised to match new consumption habits. Billiard (2010) states that the retraditionalization of the culinary practices focuses on rural traditions based on the idea that people in rural areas are more "authentic". Chef Mihai Toader runs a project that documents culinary and musical traditions in rural areas, focusing on micro-regions; he asks local cooks to show him how food is traditionally done in their household and afterwards he sets up pops-up dinners in Bucharest based on interpretations of his findings. He shared his notes on the old ways and the modern shortcuts women now employ when cooking:

> '(…) cooking and food supply are influenced by the villagers' demand and aspirational models – they try to cook, eat and live modernly like city dwellers to show to the world that they are well-to-do, that they have evolved too.' (interview M.T)

His objective is to document as much as possible of the last century's food practices (traditions) in the rural areas; these will serve him and others as inspiration and reference when building New Romanian menus. In the current post-modern societies, marked by the need for perpetual show (Lubecka, 2013), restaurants find useful tools in traditions. Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) seminal study of "invented traditions" shows the mechanisms at work – the use of old elements in new roles or simply reconfiguring them to fit the new environment. For example, going to the market to personally buy the ingredients from those who grow them casts a particular aura on the chef and on his restaurant, channelling a pre-industrial world of face-to-face interactions. Traditional festive dishes such as the beans & knuckle cauldron for National Romanian Day are what Hobsbawm (1983) considers responses to a new situation that takes the shape of a reference to an old situation. This stew has also been adopted by some New Romanian Cuisine restaurants, becoming a ubiquitous symbol, and therefore morphing into a collective "invented tradition", building a culinary national myth and "establishing its own past" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Invented traditions are brilliant marketing tools that reconcile the "modern yearnings for a romanticised past" (Laudan, 2004); Hobsbawm (1983) writes that "they seek to inculcate certain values and norms through repetition by implying a continuity with a convenient past". However, the New Romanian cuisine is a recent movement that has not had the time to give birth to many "new" traditions.

Another aspect that surfaced during my research was the exposure and commodification of childhood memories and family customs; food constitutes a magnet

for creating and triggering memories (Allen, 2012). Chefs offer for consumption food that often recreates their childhood memories; and even if the dish itself is not identical to the source of inspiration, it functions as a Proustian madeleine not to the letter, but in spirit. In the process, people discover common habits, practices, and memories and feel part of a larger group practicing what Billig (1995) called "banal nationalism". Therefore, by bringing back common memories through their choice of dishes, New Romanian Cuisine restaurants consolidate what it means to eat Romanian food.

A different way of practicing the above mentioned "banal nationalism" is through appropriation of culinary stereotypes. There are cases when food reproduces and supports the idea of a nation better than other means: Parkhurst Ferguson (2004) mentions the French cuisine, Johaness exemplifies with Catalan foods (Johaness, 2019). They act as "signature foods" (Mintz, 1996) meaning foods that hold a meaning to people that eat them and that represent ideas and stories. These are also part of the arsenal employed to bring even more "Romanian-ness" into the restaurant cuisine. Beans and knuckle, sarmale, mici (small casing-less sausages made of minced mixed meat and resemble cevapcici or little kebabs) are such examples of foods previously disregarded for various reasons. On Labour Day 2020, some of the restaurants offered slightly revisited mici to go. I suggest this menu choice was intended as an identity reminder and social solidarity symbol (even if the ordinary accompanying mustard is replaced, in this context, by a fancy Dijon dressing). However, it remains to be seen if mici will be showcased again in a fine dining menu or whether they will remain as singular patriotic PR stunts.

This brings heritagisation into question. Raul Matta (2015) argues that conceptualising foods as identity markers of heritage allows for cultural awareness at individual and group level; he also sees heritagisation as part of a body of vital topics that include reinventing traditions, nation building, legitimisation, and contesting. Heritagisation is the process that, in Bessiere's view, "brings up to date, adapts and reinterprets elements such as knowledge, skills and values from a group's past" mixing "conservation with learning, stability and dynamism, reproduction and creation" therefore "[giving it] a new social meaning" (Bessière, 1998). Fear of identity erosion leads to actions of identification with the culture of origin – one example of this would be the resuscitation of old recipes and cooking practices (Brulotte, Di Giovine, 2014). This is the case of the attempt to reclaim what is now known in the USA as Jewish pastrami as originating in the Romanian province of Bucovina (Dragomir, 2019) or of the re-adoption of forgotten or ignored ingredients, intentionally ignoring their negative associations and striving to identify their new attributes. In Matta's words (2015) "what was previously an underprivileged Other was symbolically and economically upgraded through discourses that show values and goods no one detected till then". In other words, heritage food has new social meaning – the very objective of the New Romanian Cuisine, as stated as motivation by the chefs.

However, there are authors that point to a dual nature of heritagisation – while it saves endangered or disappearing cultural elements (Observatorio de la alimentación, 2019), it also creates space for commodification. For instance, Matta (2015) spoke about it being both an object of consumption and a form of entertainment, an important aspect for

the food industry which is always on the lookout for a new concept to turn into a commodity. The New Romanian Cuisine restaurants explore and exploit the relationship between food and heritage seeing it both as duty and opportunity; therefore, they address sets of conflicting parameters. By putting back in pole position local ingredients and practices, chefs recover and promote traditional or classic Romanian cuisine; on the other hand, by creatively innovating and interpreting these old recipes and practices, they change and redefine the same cuisine. The result of the selection process is a shortlist of dishes considered representative and subsequently idealised and promoted as such (Observatorio de la alimentación, 2019). As Fonseca (2005) argued, this food is simultaneously different and similar to its source of inspiration, tradition is redefined through aestheticization and modernisation, being taken away from the authentic and local due to sophistication and cosmopolitanism. Defining cultural heritage as "fluid, unfixed social constructions" Brulotte and Di Giovine (2014) are on the same page as Innocenti, who argues that "culinary cultures are at the same time traditional, contemporary and living heritage, constantly re-performed and re-invented" (Innocenti, 2019). Building upon this theoretical framework, I suggest that the New Romanian Cuisine is supporting tradition while giving it a new shine. By making these Romanian-to-the-core dishes cool and desirable, New Romanian Cuisine chefs build and consolidate the Romanian gastronomic identity. To illustrate this, there is the example of the dish called "Romania on a plate" with its own Instagram hashtag #romaniainfarfurie; despite the name, the new cuisine has no xenophobic dimensions, on the contrary is more inclusive than ever since menus embrace and revel in multiculturalism.

Food as entertainment

Along with the strong reenactment of 'local', the New Romanian Cuisine also presents evidence of "global" practices that aim to change significantly the eating out event. Most commonly, the dining experience taking place in a classic Romanian restaurant implies a rather standard menu featuring familiar dishes and a ubiquitous design showcasing rustic material culture (and sometimes folk music and dance). Based on my own dining experiences while carrying out field work, I propose that the new practices aim at improving the overall experience, where improvement is seen as updating and refining, sublimating it to meet the omnivore's taste (Peterson and Kern 1992/ 1996, Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal 2007, Paddock 2018). To achieve this level of sophistication, restaurants borrow heavily from their foreign acclaimed counterparts order.

Post-modernity brought the need for a fulfilling and satisfying life, rich in experiences (Schulze, 1993). Survival is being replaced by cultural consumption, the current age being that of experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Consumption becomes personal and supports the requirements of ethics, environment, health and social status (Bujdosó, Dávid, Tőzsér and Kovács, 2015). Following these global trends, the New Romanian restaurants supply not just a product or a service but an experience too. Eating 'traditional' Romanian food while enjoying live folk music is regarded as a classic local dining experience, with various drivers: home cooked meals and associated warm fuzzy feelings,

pride and prestige, belonging, etc. The New Romanian restaurants share part of that ethos, but understand the experience outside its hedonistic frame – they claim to offer local, creative food that stirs up the Romanian within, food that is also intended to become the topic not the pretext of a meeting. This comes with the expectation that customers share their view of re-interpreted tradition or, in Pilcher's (2017) words: "understand the new lingo", appreciate the food, the interior design, social interaction, and accept the markup price that comes with them.

During the interviewing process but mostly the participant observation, I became aware of the new restaurants' capitalisation on the appetite for novelty as a source of enthusiasm. This perspective is similar to what Sitwell (2020) described as a hunger for emotion and new experiences rather than food only. In such a new restaurant, eating out is an experiment closely guided by the chef since the menus – and especially the tasting menus – are built as concepts. Food does not happen in a context anymore, but it becomes the context, since one no longer knows beforehand what will be eaten at the restaurant. Interviewed customers describe their experiences in these restaurants on a broad spectrum from superlatives to "fonfleuri" ("tentatives of getting attention and amazement through pseudo-discoveries" – Comanescu, 2015). Their perception and reaction reflect habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), culinary capital (Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012) or the antinomies identified by Beardsworth (1997) and (Warde et al., 2007).

Eating out is obviously from the beginning an experience – the working hours are a startling departure from what became standard practice in classic restaurants. The new restaurants are open to the public for a much smaller amount of time; some of them only being open for dinner from Wednesday till Saturday, and while on Sunday, they offer lunch only. It is a strategy they explained as a result of practical reasons – unavailable human resources and high levels of payroll and taxes – that also allows for a decent work-life balance. Most of the New Romanian Cuisine chefs are privileged millennials, and although it is not clear if this generation has indeed different work ethics and expectations (Pyöriä et al., 2017), they surely favour a different schedule than their classic counterparts. According to one chef-owner, the limited accessibility of a place made it even more desirable, but another chef disagreed. He recollects eggs being thrown on the restaurant's facade by discontent customers, upset by its service break between lunch and dinner: "they asked me who me think do I think I am and where do I think I am" (interview R.I.). The chef asserted that abroad the same people would respect the house rules without questioning.

Booking exclusively, that is no walk-ins allowed, is another manner of parting ways with the established ethnic Romanian restaurant dining experience. The logic behind this measure is a more predictable cash flow and an attempt to educate the public by asking it to think about what and where to eat, and of course the price they are willing to pay for it. Regarding prices there are different strategies – some display priced menus on websites, others prefer to keep the menu and price unknown until the clients reach the premises as a way of selecting only those who are truly open to an "experience" (interview C.B.).

Design and atmosphere are instrumental also in creating an experience. Ferguson (2004) posits that taste requires the use of all other senses; the French food, given as

example by the researcher, would not be the same or have the same status if served in an environment that does not evoke distinction. One does not consume just food but also service, atmosphere, plating, cutlery, interior design; food is only part of the equation The New Romanian Cuisine restaurants, I did my fieldwork in, have their interior design aligned to their concept. For example, the architects that undertook the renovation of Kane's grade A historical villa were briefed to translate Romanian cuisine into contemporaneity and push visitors into a trip, just like an art gallery. Understanding space requires a certain degree of literacy that allows a meta-textual reading. "Romanian-ness" is no longer at the customer's fingertips in stereotypical and cheap-looking glazed pottery, embroidered towels, bear skins and stuffed stag heads hanging on the wall. The sheep skins, wood, pottery, flags, masks and old terracotta stoves displayed by the new restaurants are custom-made and inserted in a decor inspired by international trends: Scandinavian minimalism and Asian refinement. One restaurant displays borderline-kitsch interior brimming with references to the Romanian culture offering spicy little morsels of irony and endearment to be nibbled upon – Brancusi, Voronet blue, Eminescu, etc. All these form an array of identity reference, their discovery leading the consumer along a treasure hunt path as the meal is being consumed. Material culture becomes a tool that links to the past in a visible, yet different way, incorporating both tradition and self-reflective innovation. I suggest that the classic approach uses traditional material culture as an identity marker too but strictly declarative as instant consumption, a visual fast food that is gulped down indifferently, having no power to cause emotion, thought or any profound intellectual connection. This type of interior design is void of references because of its uniformity and ubiquity.

Once the guests arrive at the restaurant and take in the design and atmosphere, they are ready to place an order using a menu built simultaneously on the notions of "local" and "global". It is this interplay which makes the New Romanian Cuisine a true new experience. It starts with food being brought to the table deconstructed, disguised, plated following international trends. Consumers pause and enrol in a brief educational class given by the waiter who also instructs on what is edible and what not (such as edible and non-edible pebbles in a dessert, for example). Some dishes give way to a "performance tour" where guests are asked to participate in constructing their experience (Edensor, 2001). Authors such as Vittersø and Amilien (2011) see this in a "concrete way to go backstage". The presentation is followed by a process of assessing the food in terms of taste, smell, texture, etc. This is when the chef's creativity is put to test since the new cuisine, like its Scandinavian model, is also a case of "changed culinary syntagm" (Marrone, 2011). Old recipes and (re)discovered ingredients require a different usage. The New Romanian Cuisine is not about saving and replicating the old ways; the humble nettle stew needs to be re-invented if the chef wants it to star in a new menu. The novelty stems from creating a dish on a different basis than its classic one. Rene Redzepi of Noma Copenhagen, the idol of many young chefs around the world, parted ways with the Promethean approach of putting together "things that normally do not go along, deconstructing and reconfiguring them in unpredictable ways" (Marrone, 2011) embraced by earlier chefs such as Feran Adria of El Bulli fame. Redzepi sees himself thinking about cooking is "in harmony

with the natural order, taking an orphic stand, imitating nature" (Marrone, 2011). Following in his footsteps, the New Romanian Cuisine chefs place value on terroir and combine elements mirroring Marrone's principle of what grows together stays together, thus writing a narrative of the land (Mangiapane, 2015). Therefore, dishes stand out as both local and global, familiar and foreign, Ours and Other's.

To complete the experience, service, and interaction are differentiating factors too. Classic fine dining is seen as ceremonial and excessively formal, creating distance between customers and servers. Today's focus is on creativity and free exploration, and these get to the clients easier if service is performed in a more relaxed and personal manner – tattooed chefs that come out of the kitchen and work the room, friendly maitre d' that give house tours and smiling, witty and doting waiters. Because food is performative and theatrical (Karaosmanoˇlu, 2009), the New Romanian Cuisine restaurants offer the full package; food, drinks and entertainment become public and spectacular. They do so in a different way than their classic counterparts, where experience means impressive quantities of rather simple food and a folklore band, which the new chefs call a caricatured version of the Romanian restaurant experience. In response, they propose a new dining experience, seen as being more refined and not confined to the restaurant's premises; nonetheless, the balance of power relations, the display of wealth and prestige, and the shape-shifting commensality might remain the same.

Furthermore, just as John Urry's tourists make a place touristic (1990), so restaurants exist and produce themselves only when full house because guests produce the place. To achieve essential interaction, the new restaurants display what I am tempted to call 'total exhibitionism' because everything can be and is shared with the consumers – from the open kitchen that knowingly invites peeping and staring, to chatty servers and chefs that connect with customers via Facebook or Instagram, sharing recipes, tips, providers, etc. This dialogue makes these restaurants stand apart from the classics of the category which have built themselves an ivory tower and got stuck in it. Their aim is to provide a gastronomic experience similar to those offered by Western restaurants; it is something that might be interpreted as an elitist translation of the new civic mantra "vrem o tara ca afara" chanted in the public space in the last couple of years.

Supporting this idea, the presence of ideology and discourse is another aspect that sets apart the new units from the classic restaurants. The classic restaurants do not have a public discourse aside from communicating or advertising their availability for dining events. They do not highlight their ingredients nor their providers (assumed by informants to be of industrial-scale and accepting imported goods over their local version). Classic menus change at a very slow rate and usually through small additions, with no complete make-overs. They do not undertake curatorial projects in regards to forgotten regional recipes; creativity is rather limited to keep the dishes as familiar as possible. There are no known social or cultural projects attached to their name.

I argue that under the new set of beliefs, the restaurants I analyzed claim to stop being exclusively profit-driven, although profit remains an essential key performance index. The novelty are the cultural, social, and ethical dimensions that the commercial gains. Profit is now the result of a new way of thinking of cuisine and food, but also the

business and its place and role in society. The organizational culture changes to – the team becomes as important as the paying customers, and a sense of belonging to community and responsibility comes with the territory. Both their discourse and their actions approach themes, such as the creation of an ethical and sustainable supply chain, moral authenticity, environmental and social responsibility. However, despite the apparent moral high ground of the new restaurants, one should not forget that they are legally incorporated as lucrative businesses, not as non-governmental organizations; that is why I argue that their new narrative should be read through the lens of Bourdieu's distinction (1984). A cumulation of cultural, economic, and social capital allows chefs to disguise profit under a trendy discourse. This does not deny the truth or pursuit of the other motivations mentioned.

Conclusion

The New Romanian Cuisine restaurants aim to meet a need they see as being expressed by the up-and-coming middle class; they respond to it with a proposal about a different way of performing culinary 'Romanian-ness'. The new field is built with material and symbolic resources that bring on the same plate notions of "local" and "global" through ingredients, techniques, recipes, vision, creativity, and a Western business model. Restaurants challenge consumers to start questioning the food in front of them. To achieve that they propose food as an experience. The menus address hedonistic needs but also act also as invitations to reflection – what does it mean to eat Romanian style, how do Romanians relate to food, and how can food influence the perception of the Other – local, foreigner, business partner, food writer, culinary guide or international community. Looking at these two simultaneously opposing and complementing processes through Fischler's incorporation principle (1988) and Bourdieu's distinction (1984), I argue that the practices I identified reframe imagined national identity for the new affluent middle class, otherwise lacking interest in classic restaurants, stereotyped as lacking originality, standardised, altered or simply persisting in old school cooking. By making it more Romanian here or less Romanian there, the New Romanian Cuisine chefs claim to fine tune Romanian cuisine's capacity to take a seat at the international gastronomic table. They aim to turn food into eatable and memorable examples of cultural and culinary heritage able to channel cultural awareness and identity claims. These will further position the country as authentic, increase its visibility and attract economic capitalisation, while ensuring distinction and the capitals' conversion (Bourdieu, 1984) for restaurants and chefs as agents of change.

On the other hand, the production and reproduction of taste as a social marker (Bourdieu, 1984) acts as a way of parting with stereotypical, lower-class Romanian-ness and it is discriminatory. Targeting customers that are both able to pay and understand the food, the New Romanian Cuisine is not accessible for everybody despite democratisation through ingredients and rustic inspiration. Finally, it is important to highlight that without aiming for a mass appeal and in the absence of top-down actions, these new restaurants cannot function as an element of cohesion for a large population and it remains to be seen if they will create a change among the targeted middle class.

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