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Culinary Star Wars

By Claire Stewart

A review of The Cultivation of Taste: Chefs and the Organization of Fine Dining by Christel Lane (Oxford University Press, 2014).

The *Cultivation of Taste: Chefs and the Organization of Fine Dining* is a dogged endeavor to categorize and analyze the world of Michelin-starred restaurants and the chefs who run them. Author Christel Lane conducts a comparative study of restaurants in Britain and Germany, and applies her findings in an effort to examine the broader issue of social and economic differences in these two societies.

Lane, a professor of economic sociology at the University of Cambridge, uses interviews with twenty German and twenty British chefs as a foundation for exploration into the social forces surrounding this complex and lucrative world of fine dining. She goes on to survey an entire universe of restaurant characters: interviewing owners, wait staff, food critics, farmers, and patrons. Her analysis is based on the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's theory of *les économies de grandeur* (orders of worth). Very briefly here, it might be said that this theory does for work environments what Jungian classification systems did for personality types. The sociologists propose that in any given job or industry, the relationships between workers, the coordination of their actions, and their principal values vary depending on the particular nature (or "order") of the business. Thus, for example, in a "domestic" order of worth, tradition, family and hierarchy are the principal values; traits such as discretion and loyalty are highly valued, and vulgarity and innovation scorned. Older workers and the boss will also be highly valued, as will group rituals and get-togethers. This sociological approach lies at the heart of Lane's study of the world of fine dining, which becomes in reality a study of economics, work relations, and aspects of English and German history and culture that drive the public and restaurant workers to hold particular values and to be trained and work in certain ways.

In particular Lane discusses two forms of "worth" that should be incompatible; that of "market" worth (where price and profit rank high) and that of "inspiration" (passion, emotion, and creativity). She interviews chefs who speak of the pressure to stay on a budget and earn revenue, yet also seek to maintain inspiration while cooking. She also dissects the peculiar "worth" of celebrity chefs, exploring the ways in which the public values the work

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of various chefs. She finds, for example, that Michelin-starred chefs do not necessarily undermine their credibility once they host television shows or write cookbooks, but they do lose standing if they are not discerning in their choices, or if their presence is used for mere entertainment value. Insofar as chefs can find ways to “manage these contradictions and sometimes even use them to their advantage,” they can achieve a successful and stable compromise.

Different Approaches to Training

The book starts with an engaging discussion on the history of how chefs have been traditionally trained and how England and Germany have diverged in the manner in which they educate these craftspeople. German chefs have a reputation of being more regimented than their British peers, and Lane offers several reasons for this stereotype. When the once vigorous guild system waned as industrialization grew in Europe, the customary training of craftspeople diminished as well. Yet Germany did not abolish its craft guilds until 1868 (later than England) thereby maintaining its training lineage longer. German cooks also clung fast to their revered regional specialties, while the British emulated the French and failed to maintain an indigenous food identity. Lane writes that wartime austerity measures and food rationing were also more prevalent in England, leaving British chefs with fewer cooking options. England rushed to rebuild more quickly after the world wars, filling its rebuilt hotels with untrained help in order to meet staffing needs. Although Germany was yet more battered by the war, the higher value placed on meticulous craft work fueled an already robust apprenticeship tradition, supplying its businesses with a trained labor pool. Germany’s industrialization had also come later than England’s; thus, Lane proposes, the standardization and “degradation of food set in much later.”

The practice of apprenticeship for chefs in Britain has now been mostly replaced by simple on-the-job training (once the cook is hired) or college-based vocational programs. In Germany as in France, however, instruction continues to be through rigorous workplace-based apprenticeships in professional kitchens. The majority of the German chefs who Lane interviewed offer apprenticeship opportunities for aspiring chefs, and 30 percent of those head chefs have acquired Master Chef Certification. The British chefs interviewed, in contrast, generally do not consider formal training, through either apprenticeship or a college program, necessary for employment. In addition, the UK is home to few established hospitality management training colleges with “high reputations,” so there is not a homogenous body of knowledge, nor is there a steady stream of culinary graduates entering the labor market. This in turn results in a higher incidence of foreign kitchen labor, which in English kitchens now approaches 60 percent. Labor shortages are rampant, and the high turnover rate can be attributed to the fact that foreign chefs staying in England soon return to their home country. Their average stay in the UK is generally no more than three years. Only 15 percent of the chefs working in Germany are foreign-born, however, and a large proportion of these are from nearby Austria. These foreign chefs’ tenure is also significantly longer.

The lack of a steady and well-trained labor stream in England has been “put forward as one explanation for the lower number of Michelin stars awarded in comparison with Germany.” Lane’s research, however, also finds that British chefs are more entrepreneurial than their German counterparts, and that British chefs are more likely to be self-employed and profit-minded. A “virtual absence of empire building in the German high end restaurant industry” and a lack of “brand building” has kept German chefs focused on small independent restaurants and hotels, which are more likely to be starred properties.

The kitchen brigade system, based on the military, with the chef as general, is alive and well in both England and Germany. The one skill chefs most prize in their staff is a willingness to “obey orders.” Personality and pluck in prospective candidates takes on added importance if applicants are not vetted by culinary programs. Manual dexterity, coupled with a tolerance for working long hours under psychological pressure, can be the markings of a successful chef. Chefs tell Lane that their staff must be able to do tasks repeatedly, take orders without grumbling, and to withstand long grueling shifts in sweltering heat. To reach the level of a Michelin-starred head chef, however, these same people must be chameleons. In order to reach the pinnacle of their profession, they need to develop from tolerant underlings into dynamic innovators capable of leading their own large and obedient staff.

Where are the women?

Lane devotes few pages to gender in her 340-page volume, and there is scant mention of race. The socio-economic background of chefs, however, is well covered, and much is made of kitchen brigades mirroring street gangs and all the male-bonding analogies this implies. Chef Marco Pierre White refers to the restaurant world as a type of “Foreign Legion: a last resort for the inadequate.” German chef Tim Raue claims that his days as a member of the Kreuzberg gang in Berlin prepared him well, noting that “in the kitchen, you fight a battle on the highest level twice a day.” While the author surely did not set out to write an exhaustive treatise on Michelin-starred female chefs, she did set out to write an exhaustive treatise on the sociology of Michelin-starred chefs, and her lack of attention to the topic of female chefs is disquieting. She trots out some quotes and statistics, notes that “the few women who made it to the top of their profession are either young and or childless,” and ultimately does not revisit the topic in her chapter summation.

Lane does enumerate her reasons for the dearth of female chefs, her first reason being “the long and exhausting working schedule” and the unsocial hours which are “incompatible with child-rearing—a task still mainly reserved for women.” She “confirms” these musings with a quote from a three-star male German chef who reasons that “the long and late hours are not compatible with having a family.” Her assertion that the “very charged atmosphere in kitchens, where swearing abounds and physical violence is not unknown, has not been attractive to women.” The topic of the female chef is then dispatched with Lane’s opinion (in a book based on research) that women don’t really want these jobs anyway. Perhaps Lane’s next research foray should take her on another less glamorous tour, one in which she interviews all the women working in nightclubs, pubs, and take-away shops in

London. The professor can ask the female staff working there, late into the night for substandard wages, enduring their own “charged atmospheres,” if they would like the chance to achieve the status and career mobility offered in high-profile kitchen work.

In 2013 there were eight female Michelin-starred chefs in all of Germany (3.5 percent of all the starred chefs in the country), and all but one of these women were at the one-star level. England had ten starred female chefs in 2012 (17.3 percent of its total), a statistic that would not seem impressive on the surface, but is certainly better than in the past and a sign of change to come. It would seem that a socio-economic study of an enormous employment industry (and written by a female academic) could have been more progressive when discussing childcare, and perhaps found language more respectful in general. When Lane states that chefs’ work schedules are “completely incompatible with child-rearing,” this assumes that child rearing is purely the women’s concern, that paid childcare is unheard of, and that couples can’t share parental responsibilities.

In the chapter “Front-of-the-House Staff” Lane handles the topic of whether employees are hired for their attractiveness. She blithely volunteers that at one noted restaurant she was “struck by the fact that quite a few of the waitresses were exceptionally plain.” It would have been refreshing had she followed up this comment with some analysis. Were there also male wait staff? Were they too “plain?” We will never know. We move to her interview with Shaun Hill, a one-starred chef in Wales, who discloses that he reveres the community that has welcomed him, and happily hires middle-aged female staff because they are locals. So Lane puzzlingly concludes that “looking good may be welcome, but it is not a necessary requirement for employment.” Apparently, in the author’s world, female attractiveness and middle-age are not compatible. The author has again gathered solid research, yet tacks on startlingly insensitive commentary.

Ethnic vs. French

Any discussion of haute cuisine must address the monopoly France has historically had over the culinary psyche of the world, and in *The Cultivation of Taste*, Lane also explores how French authority has remained universally entrenched. Lane investigates how this French influence has given way to the indigenous influences in Britain and Germany, and how these changes have affected these nations’ respective pursuit of Michelin stars. The vibrant effects of foreign trade and immigration have long exposed Londoners to ethnic ingredients and culinary influences that stretch beyond traditional British cuisine. In London ethnic food is a natural part of city life, although affection for it “occurs below the top level of restaurants.” There are several Thai, Chinese and Indian single-starred restaurants in the UK, but none have advanced to two-star status. In contrast, traditional French cuisine (complemented by regional Germanic cuisine, which is also esteemed) has held particularly fast in Germany, at least in part because of the adherence to the French model of professional training. Lane’s research proves, however, that, ultimately, Michelin-starred chefs, no matter their ethnicity, are careful about not seeming too attached to a particular culinary tradition or region. Chefs

are reluctant to “declare allegiance” to a certain cuisine, as it could be construed as a way of “professing subordination to a particular national style.”

Lane uses the Michelin star system to interpret German and English society, her research placing chefs in the center of a tangled and messy universe, with all other players in the restaurant world radiating from them like concentric circles in a web. *The Cultivation of Taste* is replete with charts and data, and there is no doubt the author did a large amount of painstaking research. I may have issue with what she has to say about some of that research, but there can be little question that she has dug deep and thoroughly documented a previously under-examined topic. This is a dry book and not intended for pleasure reading. It is, however, a book dense with information and a real find for anyone doing research on restaurants or employment, and certainly of interest to those in the hospitality industry.

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