

## **Towards an Ecological Dramaturgy of Dining: Plate as Landscape Device**

**Joshua Abrams**

Sitting down to a meal at Restaurant Noma in Copenhagen in 2012, then the top restaurant in the world according to the annual San Pellegrino ranking of global restaurants, my companions and I are struck by what first appears a quotidian centrepiece, a generic vase filled with twigs, leafy greens, and some weed-like flowers. After typical preliminaries about allergies and drink preferences, the waiter points towards the vase, advising with a smile that (with the exception of the crockery itself) everything is edible – the twigs are a trompe-l’oeil malt cracker with juniper dust, the rest all wild greens foraged for the restaurant, largely by the kitchen and front-of-house staff themselves. In a well-choreographed move, a second waiter appears, proffering a dish of lightly fermented cream; we are encouraged to use our hands to enjoy this snack. For my tablemates and me, as it did for other tables we observed throughout the evening, this gesture serves to shatter pretensions of formality that might be associated with such ‘fine dining’; tearing apart the table setting and recasting a crudité platter as an active dismantling of a more ‘traditional’ restaurant experience, the performance enacts the diner, setting a playful tone and interaction that frames us as active co-creators in our experience. In this interplay, this dish might be usefully understood to invoke what Gareth White has described as the ‘invitation’ of audience participation.<sup>1</sup> Such an invitation is perhaps an even more apropos concept for the restaurant, with its predication on hospitality and commensality. In transposing White’s invitation through this codified space, the dish

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<sup>1</sup> Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre : Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

engenders a sort of oscillation, where different senses might alternatively attract and repel, opening a space for the diner (and her companions) to enter and engage questions of story and performative affect.

This essay focuses on several such theatricalized encounters, where chefs evoke landscape images as a plating technique. These moments of iconicity and affective encounter produce a dramaturgical effect, a performative challenge for the diner, who is perhaps encouraged to recognize the issues at stake around climate and sustainability. ‘Dramaturgy, no longer belongs to the theatre, nor to dance-theatre, it is a practice spanning diverse disciplines and cultural sites. Wherever there is a performance taking shape there are a set of dramaturgical questions being asked and dramaturgical principles being tested.’<sup>2</sup> The restaurant, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has written, is ‘the dedicated space of food theatre’<sup>3</sup>; the active choices of contemporary chefs render the theatrical encounter far more explicit than in previous eras, with chefs’ recognizing taste as only one element of the performance, albeit centrally important.<sup>4</sup> Drawing upon the complex biochemical and evocative responses produced in the moment of tasting, but embedding this in a more complex set of relations, Noma’s René Redzepi and other chefs, including Dominique Crenn, Grant Achatz, and Heston Blumenthal, all discussed here, frame an encounter for the diners, embracing sociality and narrative.<sup>5</sup> The chefs discussed here are public figures, although not for scientific expertise; in these examples, their craft engages

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian Heathfield, ‘Dramaturgy without a dramaturg’, *The Theatre Times*, August 15, 2016, <https://thetheatretimes.com/dramaturgy-without-a-dramaturg/> (accessed November 10, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, ‘Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium’, *Performance Research* 4, no 1 (1999): 1-30, 4.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance Charles Spence and Betina Piqueras-Fiszman, *The Perfect Meal : The Multisensory Science of Food and Dining* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of personal narrative in dining, see Kwame Onwuachi, *Notes from a Young Black Chef* (New York: Penguin RandomHouse, 2019)

artistry and notions of scenographic presentation that encourage the diner to pause, to think, to engage across the senses, through recontextualizing food, enabling the diner to see it anew through deploying novelty. These interventions stage conceptions of climate change and sustainability, offering an encouragement for the diner to consider the issues at stake, framing ‘responsibility towards (and response to) that which is immanent in a given performance, its phenomena and forms of representation.’<sup>6</sup>

For chefs such as Redzepi, the destruction inherent in eating simultaneously presents a fundamental truth and offers a crucial challenge to this immanence. While historically perhaps most evident within the Western fine dining sphere, where luxury and decadence often remained explicitly and financially connected to scarcity – sustainability eclipsed by the demonstration of privileging quality, frequently regardless of questions of seasonality, source, or environmental impact – nature as a limited resource affects all cooks, with seasonal changes in availability and quality made evident through market effects. While the supermarket may mask such challenges, a number of fine dining chefs, led, at least figuratively by Redzepi, seek to return attention to these challenges. Anthropocenic impact on climate and resources directly ties to food sources, and chefs, in designing encounters between diners and nature, can choose to play an active role in framing these relationships through narrative and scenographic dramaturgical choices.

In an interview with the Nature Conservancy, Chef Bun Lai of Miya’s Sushi in New Haven, Connecticut articulates such ethical concerns. As overfishing has depleted stocks of one of the most popular sushi fish, Pacific Bluefin tuna, to an estimated 2.6% of historical levels, Lai explains that, he ‘began to think about how

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<sup>6</sup> Heathfield, ‘Dramaturgy without a dramaturg’.

serving invasive species could help curb their dominance in the ecosystem while also reducing the stress on more commonly served fish’;<sup>7</sup> framing these choices for the diner through programme-like menu statements, such as ‘Eating invasive species has the potential to restore habitats and take pressure off of factory farming’ or ‘Almost half the food produced in the world goes to waste — a fact that is a tragedy in a world where over a billion people are hungry. This tasty recipe was created to illuminate the problem of waste by utilizing crispy omega-3 rich salmon bones and broccoli stems, which are commonly discarded food items.’<sup>8</sup> While examples such as Lai’s may not be explicitly theatrical, other chefs, in seeking to demonstrate such possibility draw explicitly on the restaurant’s dramaturgical and performative potentials.

Framing these possibilities from within ‘fine dining’ clearly raises questions of accessibility – location and price delimit the immediate audience – akin to those around the potential political impact of much theatrical performance.<sup>9</sup> Such claims of constrained impact belie the many ways avant-garde practices and locations have historically produced efficacy beyond their direct reach. The privileging of the space and its remove from everydayness theatricalizes it, allowing and perhaps encouraging the diner to take time for thought and engagement, rather than encountering food

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<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/connecticut/explore/chef-bun-lai-qa.xml>. The concept of ‘invasive species’ should be troubled with regard to global migratory histories.

<sup>8</sup> Bun Lai, ‘Miya’s Menu,’

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/558daa20e4b0b1b18d42b946/t/5a7b324bf9619af057f93ac0/1518023268645/Miyas\\_Menu\\_Jan31\\_v2.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/558daa20e4b0b1b18d42b946/t/5a7b324bf9619af057f93ac0/1518023268645/Miyas_Menu_Jan31_v2.pdf), 18, 20, (accessed March 01, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Noma seats 42 people, typically for two seatings per day, five days a week. There is an addition private room that can seat parties of 18, either as private parties or a shared table. The tasting menu (the only option on offer) costs 2650DKK per person, approximately £320 at the time of publication.

simply as sustenance or bodily need. The rise of televisual and social food media, alongside cross-cultural emphases on the experience economy, position such chef-led restaurants to capitalize on the linkage between performance and performativity, with dishes both iterable and citeable, in ways that extend beyond the moment at the table.<sup>10</sup> As business scholar M. Pilar Opazo notes in discussing Ferran Adrià's El Bulli, the networks developed through work in high-end cuisine encourage rapid diffusion, with former El Bulli employees 'spread among over 150 different cities around the world, representing a total of thirty-eight countries across four continents.'<sup>11</sup> (Former Noma employees work on all six inhabited continents, with impact beyond direct networks.) Alongside increased emphasis on competitive results and the continued strength of the cookbook market (as well as changing aesthetics emphasized through the entrance of art publishers like Phaidon), practices from the 'high-end' can quickly echo across varied societal spaces. Opazo suggests that publication provides 'an "entry ticket" into the creative mind of Adrià and his team ... disseminating and institutionalizing new ideas and practices outside of the organization's boundaries'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Noma's pervasive influence through images is globally pervasive; while dining in China in 2014, in two relatively 'middle-class' restaurants, I was served dishes that clearly owed much in styling and choice to a 'Noma effect'.<sup>13</sup> While such practices may not produce the immediate change desired by more activist protestors, in conjunction with citation and imitation, they

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<sup>10</sup> For a broader exploration of a range of explorations of taste vis-à-vis performance, see Joshua Abrams and Richard Gough, edited 'On Taste', *Performance Research* 22, no 7 (2017).

<sup>11</sup> M. Pilar Opazo, *Appetite for Innovation : Creativity and Change at Elbulli* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 174-175.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-155.

<sup>13</sup> The dishes were an ice bowl filled with broccoli at Shanghai's People 6 and a forest 'salad' in a small restaurant in a Beijing mall.

set the table for a nuanced understanding and uptake of the political stakes, producing potential efficacies through engaging privileged location for audiences of likely potential societal influencers in possession of fiscal and/or social power. This Noma effect draws from the increased pace of global circulation of culinary development through both physical circulation (of chefs and diners), as well as through the publication of reviews, recipes and images both in traditional and social media; it allows for an increased focus on the local (in terms of both product and recipe/flavor), but within an envelope that is framed and delineated by global practices and historical iconographies of fine dining.

There is little question that cultural practices around eating must change drastically as the world goes deeper into the anthropocenic twenty-first century, amidst increasing population and concomitant global impacts. Scientific development from major corporations will likely play a significant role, but the deployment of theatricality within the restaurant space can crucially help to frame narratives and produce global influence. Engaging explicitly with the challenges of climate change and human influence on the world, Redzepi and like-minded chefs seek to help both diners and broader humanity understand our relationship to that which we eat, producing narratives within dishes and across meals to engage the diner and generate change in eating habits (encouraging deeper understandings of local ecologies and seasonal change, a commitment to more sustainable food sources and responsible animal husbandry), both within the restaurant space and bringing them back to the domestic.<sup>14</sup> This focus serves to bring chefs like Redzepi even more

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, I have committed to buying local produce, paying particular attention to both modes of growing and transportation methods throughout the year, which in a non-tropical climate means far more limited choice at particular times throughout the

broadly into dialogue with global ‘tastemakers’ and political influencers, as well as across lines from producers to consumers. On the strength of Noma’s success, Redzepi founded two key organisations advocating sustainability through culinary development, MAD and the Nordic Food Lab, which alongside chef-led initiatives worldwide, expand outward from Noma’s embeddedness in its location, akin to site-specific or site-determined theatre, to imagine larger-scale change.<sup>15</sup>

Redzepi temporarily closed Noma at the end of 2016, reopening in February 2018 with its own urban farm complex in Christiania, with radically seasonal menus, highly localized and responsive to the intense seasonality at such Northern latitudes. Surrounding the initial closure, Noma ‘toured’ to Tokyo, Sydney, and Tulum, Mexico. Yet, unlike much theatrical touring, each encounter served as site-responsive performance – drawing upon intensive research on local produce and historical techniques, resulting in such examples as placing a traditional comal at the heart of the Mexico kitchen, and hiring local Yaxunah women to both grow heirloom corn and, seated at the comal, make fresh tortillas at each meal.<sup>16</sup> Redzepi has discussed, publically at the MAD conferences and in personal conversation, the tours as a chance for the restaurant to both host and be hosted, learning from their

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year, as well as buying a range of products only from certain providers and with known provenance.

<sup>15</sup> MAD, which the Wall Street Journal called ‘the Food World’s G-20’ describes itself as ‘a not-for-profit organization that works to expand knowledge of food to make every meal a better meal; not just at restaurants, but every meal cooked and served’ and has produced symposia globally since 2011, including in conjunction with organisations like the World Bank and Yale University. Other chef-led initiatives include Adrià’s ElBulli1846/Bulligrafià, Dan Barber’s WastED (<http://wastedny.com/>) and Massimo Bottura’s Refettorio Ambrosiano alongside the Milan Expo 2015 (<http://www.refettorioambrosiano.it/>), now expanded as ‘Food for Soul’.

<sup>16</sup> Such practices can also be critiqued as ‘gastronomic colonialism’; see for instance Claudia Prieto-Piastro’s critiques in HuffPost Mexico.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.mx/claudia-prieto-piastro/noma-mexico-colonialismo-culinario-o-el-restaurante-que-no-nece/> (accessed July 25, 2019).

locations, an echo of the encounter the restaurant seeks to produce for its diners. These spaces of encounter are key nodes across an international circuit of restaurants acknowledged for innovation and creative practice, as destinations for gastronomes and chefs, and frequently appear across televisual and social media as well as in global rankings. Through a network of internships, conferences, and discussion sites for chefs and aspiring chefs, such scenographic and dramaturgical encounters imagine iterative impact beyond the live encounter. For many diners lucky or privileged enough to dine at these restaurants, the limited accessibility and eventness encourages the consideration of the meal as not only simple sustenance, but ‘avant-garde’.

From the diner’s arrival at Noma, the carefully performed encounter foregrounds relation and hospitality; as each guest enters the door, chefs and front of house staff gather in the reception area to welcome and shake their hands, producing an odd sensation of time stopping. As a visitor, the experience feels as if the entire business pauses to focus on you. This welcome has been rendered even more explicit in the move to the new space, where the entry walk through the urban farm provides an opportunity for multiple staff members to sequentially introduce themselves and chat, and the entrance to the restaurant opens to this same gathering. There is a magic in this moment, a liminality that separates the journey to the restaurant from the event within. Returning to the vase, the serving process throughout the meal further stages hospitality through the active choice that chefs join front-of-house staff in presenting dishes; rather than a server describing a dish prepared by an unknown labourer, this becomes a direct personal encounter between performer and audience – ‘Here is something *I* prepared for *you*’. There is a clear gesture of welcoming in



these opening moments, as we move from restaurant-goers to diners play on the notion of ‘audience members’ in White’s articulation.<sup>17</sup>

As diners, we are then asked to literally ‘dig in’, focusing attention on a key development that Noma has articulated in reframing Western restaurant cultures throughout the twenty-first century, continuing a move away from the formal starched presentational mode of traditional French/Western haute cuisine with its own proposition of ‘New Nordic’, as well as drawing particular attention to our own locatedness and potentially raising questions about labouring bodies and privilege.<sup>18</sup> My table’s conversation turns to the foraging for which the restaurant has renewed a vogue within popular culture; as we take what traditionally might appear to be offered for our visual pleasure and break it down physically in order to taste and ingest it, this change turns all the space (of the restaurant) into potential food, and brings us back to the act of foraging and an awareness of our surroundings in a way distinct from the classical hush and starched white placelessness presumed of more traditional fine dining.

This convers(at)ion relies on the visual playfulness of the dish, its performance as something other than what it will become, but crucially the simplicity of the gesture frames a relationship between the diner and the earth. Even though there has clearly been a not-insubstantial intervention by the restaurant staff, we are

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<sup>17</sup> White, *Audience Participation*. 160.

<sup>18</sup> While for much of the twentieth century, Western fine dining typically followed one template, events including the rise of nouvelle cuisine in the 1960s, the expansion of global/’ethnic’ cuisines and the ‘celebrity’ of el Bulli in the 1990s helped to democratize and open new modes of understanding. Such changes have also developed through the increased pace of globalization, which allowed for traditions of fine dining from within a range of cultures to draw from each other. For instance, there is much in Noma’s practices that draws from Japanese dining traditions aimed at the nobility, as well as from explorations of indigenous practice by chefs such as D.O.M.’s Alex Atala in São Paulo, Brazil, but both are subsumed within the overall shape and space of presentation and dining.

encouraged to recognize in this interaction our own reliance on the natural and perhaps, returned a little bit towards a fundamental encounter with nature, so distanced for many people today. This frames a performative affect, in which the diner is challenged to take an active role in the creation of the meal and to recognize, through this encounter, the relations between the human and nature, opening perhaps towards a complex understanding appropriate to the contemporary (Anthropocene) moment, in which human impact on nature is so clearly detrimental. In doing so, it stages a shift from the distinction Hegel draws in 'The Beauty of Nature' between theoretical and practical senses, and I would argue engaging Peggy Phelan's celebration of performance's disappearance, to focus on the historically 'lower' senses. For Hegel, '[t]he purely theoretical process is managed by the tools of the senses of seeing and hearing; what we see or hear we leave as it is. On the other hand, the organs of smell and taste are already the beginnings of a practical relation. For we can smell only what is in the process of wasting away, and we can taste only by destroying.'<sup>19</sup> Drawing on the chemical truth of Hegel's suggestion and the centrality of taste and smell in the act of dining, the fundamental destruction and disappearance of that which I eat, shifts the focus from Hegel's theoretical hierarchy, through a theatrical valorisation of that which disappears, to serve as a challenge and a reminder of human responsibilities to nature and the question of inherent destructiveness in much human action.

This active dismantling of the visual into the gustatory, and the recognition of sensuous relations, frames a dramaturgy to which this meal (and the others discussed here) will continually return. We are challenged, through this transition, to recognize

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<sup>19</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and T. M. Knox, *Aesthetics : Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 137-38.

ourselves as implicated in the processing and distancing of food in the current moment; this affective interplay frames a performative challenge, questioning the types of responsibility that our engagement with nature might beg.

Within this moment as well, the apparently rustic nature of the vase is an important opening gesture, establishing an interplay between haute cuisine and simplicity that is central to Noma's performance. Indeed, despite its strategic use of cutting-edge technique, much journalistic analysis of Noma's significance continues to focus on a return to more 'straightforward' nature in response to the so-called 'molecular gastronomy'/modernist technique<sup>20</sup> for which its predecessor at the top of the Pellegrino list, Spain's El Bulli, was recognized, a move that culinary historian Ken Albala suggests is merely a recent incarnation of culinary style's evolving via historical dialectic.<sup>21</sup> While, as Albala acknowledges, such narratives necessarily oversimplify, there is a usefulness in this framing, which encourages media coverage and allows for outsized impact to extend beyond the moment at the table. Yet what both Noma and El Bulli foreground, in distinct and yet related ways through the deployment of a range of techniques and aims, is the possibility for the chef's construction of narrative through culinary choices, aligned with theatrical engagements and performative effect.

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<sup>20</sup> These term "molecular gastronomy", while originating from the work of food scientist Hervé This, has been used to refer to a range of cooking processes arising primarily in the late 1980s and across the 1990s by chefs such as Adrià, Heston Blumenthal and Grant Achatz and often drawing on laboratory sciences and the development of new techniques to deconstruct more traditional modes of cooking. However, most of the chefs involved in such movements have argued that all cooking is about molecular change so prefer a range of other terms including deconstructive and modernist. See, for instance, Hervé This, *Molecular Gastronomy Exploring the Science of Flavor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and Maxime Bilet, Nathan Myrvald and Chris Young, *Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking* (Bellevue, WA: The Cooking Lab, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Ken Albala, 'Toward a Historical Dialectic of Culinary Styles', *Historical Research* 87, no. 238 (2014), 581-590, 582. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12073>

The encounters discussed here draw from live moments, performative relations among chef, restaurant and diner, where the iconicity and theatricality of a dish gives the diner a space for reflection and consideration; while not explicitly tasked with responsibility, she is offered the chance to engage, to respond to, and to develop these ideas. Across Noma and several other restaurants with which it is in global dialogue, I pose analyses of several performed encounters, examining the stories being told and read across the table, and suggesting how the chefs' stagings of nature can encourage the consideration of relationships between nature and culture and questions of responsibility around food.

### **Plated Landscapes**

Opening the introduction to Redzepi's first cookbook *Noma: Time and Place in Nordic Cuisine*, Danish artist Olafur Eliasson describes an encounter with a Noma dish as follows, 'A plateful of milk skin with grass, flowers and herbs. That was one of the dishes on the day's menu. The garnish came from the field where the cow that had supplied the milk had walked, grazed and defecated. The plate itself was a small closed ecosystem, which I ate my way through in some surprise (after all, it was a rather slimy looking milk pancake with some greenery on top). There was no doubt about it: my mouth was exploring every area of the field.'<sup>22</sup> Eliasson's descriptiveness echoes multiple dishes I have eaten at Noma since 2012; it describes an almost Badiouian notion of event, provoked by the strangeness of the dish, as well as functioning to show the post-event afterlife of the experienced live moment. While the dish is not strictly visually representative, the meadow is clearly evoked through

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<sup>22</sup> René Redzepi and Ditte Isager, *Noma: Time and Place in Nordic Cuisine* (London: Phaidon, 2010).

this multisensory encounter. Frequently appearing early in meals at Noma, such dishes in my experience are typically plated on heavy stoneware, their rough-hewn, ‘natural’ appearance and heft grounding the dish – a ‘limestone’ layer visible through the vegetation. On my first encounter with a version of this dish in the meal above, I was struck that it spoke explicitly to terroir – the French term for the determination of taste through natural location.<sup>23</sup> – as a landscape that becomes itself through interaction. Rather than telling a complete story, Redzepi requires the diner to interact with the dish in order to understand it. Its visual appearance is pretty, but the initial moment of taste is one of surprise; it asks the diner to enter into dialogue. An element such as the milk skin (which frames the foundational encounter with disgust that Julia Kristeva uses to define abjection in *Powers of Horror*) might evoke questions of freshness and revulsion, the complexity of tastes within the greenery evinced conversation around the table and with staff as we sought to identify ingredients and techniques.<sup>24</sup>

This plate functions on a personal scale, while in dialogue with artistic practices that challenge the viewer to consider her place in the environment. Tasting adds a Hegelian level of complexity to the interaction, the ingredients functioning as actants to engage the diner. Critic Richard Dorment’s description of the performative functionality of Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* (2003) evokes the sublime, which echoes my encounter with Redzepi’s dish, yet at a vastly different scale.

Not only does the audience help to create Eliasson's work of art, but [...] the behaviour of that audience has added another layer of meaning to it. Visitors

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<sup>23</sup> See Amy Trubek for a more detailed exploration of the conception of terroir. Amy B. Trubek, *The Taste of Place : A Cultural Journey into Terroir* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982).

respond not only to the circle of light, but also to the mirror above their heads. Adults and children lie on their backs staring up at the ceiling, often moving their arms and legs in a sweet, sad effort to find their own reflections in the swarming mass of undifferentiated shapes in the distance. It is as though some deep primeval instinct compels us to do something ...<sup>25</sup>

Redzepe's plate, like Eliasson's installation, requires participation that encourages questioning our place in the world. In framing the plate as a miniature landscape, he draws upon a history of landscape painting that in 'framing' stakes a claim to ownership; by layering this with the chefs' presentation and explanations, this opens an invitation to consider the means and condition of production. The staff's presentation plays a fundamental role, as they describe the dish, leaving gaps for us to understand the encounter, encouraging the diner to better understand the complex ecosystems involved in the production of food, from farm through kitchen to table. This invitation serves as a potential challenge aimed at the diner who sees herself as knowledgeable – can you identify what's here? How does it fit? This shaping of narrative engages the diner in a performative relationality through the landscape it evokes.

Historical modes of displaying food as landscape (or in relation to landscape) are nothing new – perhaps the most famous pre-twentieth century example are Antonin Carême's entremets, elaborately romantic confectionary edifices, although medieval banquets also frequently relied on mimetic display. The concept of landscape, which first appeared in English in Richard Haydocke's 1598 translation of Giovanni Lomazzo's 'Tract on the Art of Painting,' embeds a reference to human

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Dormant, 'A Terrifying Beauty', *The Telegraph* [Online], November 12, 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> (accessed August 21, 2020)

perspective, control and artistic endeavour. Carême, working at the eighteenth and nineteenth-century height of enlightenment rationality, created pastry landscapes that represented human progress and the sublimity of nature, manmade prospects that reproduced the elegance of often ruined neoclassical and historic edifices in juxtaposition with natural features, rendering them in a controlled (and saccharine) representation of human achievement amidst the vast scope of the natural.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, as art that ‘shows’ nature, this is part and parcel of the broader Enlightenment project, akin to Carême’s contemporary, Victor Turner. As with other representations of the Romantic sublime, this mimesis sought a Platonic ideal, producing an awed diner, rather than a thoughtful one. Carême’s work, although inverting the terms, evinces Brecht’s pejorative ‘culinary theatre’: ‘the theatrical culinary’ produces mimetic food not to provoke thought, but amazement. Much of the long history of mimetic foods, from medieval banquets to Second World War attempts to disguise food in response to rationing to the long history of ices moulded and painted to resemble cooked delicacies, is of a continuous trajectory with Carême.<sup>27</sup>

Contrastingly, in the contemporary moment, examples like Redzepi’s above and those that follow both explicitly and implicitly seek to produce performative engagement, to ‘make strange’ – continuing the Brechtian logic – going beyond awed encounter through the multisensory immersiveness to seek the production of an affective change, hopefully impacting the diner’s way of thinking. In this, they draw from a canonical Nouvelle Cuisine dish, Michel Bras’s 1983 *gargouillou*, a ‘vegetable architecture’ delicately composed of raw and cooked vegetables, flowers

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<sup>26</sup> M. A. Carême, *Le Cuisinier Parisien, Ou L’art De La Cuisine Française Au Xix Siecle* (Paris, 1828).

<sup>27</sup> Joshua Abrams, ‘Performing the Ephemeral: On Ice Cream and the Theatre’, *Performance Research* 18, no. 6 (2013).

and herbs from his own garden as well as the surrounding mountainside<sup>28</sup>, which did not look to stage an explicit landscape *per se*, but to show off the bounty of local terroir in Auvergne.

Nouvelle Cuisine, originating in the late 1960s, opened the door to a new focus through chefs' plating dishes. While its manifesto focused on technique, its recognisability and iteration relied on a shift in emphasis to the chef and concealed kitchen plating, which allowed for elaborate compositions and *coup-de-théâtres* achieved by a tableside reveal. Alongside roughly contemporaneous social unrest and movements such as new wave cinema and conceptual art, the focus on chef parallels the auteur, with total control over the multisensory presentation of a dish, and heightened emphasis on process (what Michael Fried decried as art's degeneration).<sup>29</sup>

A key transitional location between Nouvelle and New Nordic, El Bulli continued a focus on location, speaking to its Spanish identity and Mediterranean location, and indeed, Albert Adrià's cookbook *Natura* (2008) used landscape iconography for plating within the heart of modernist cooking.<sup>30</sup> The emphasis through much of that movement relied on showcasing techniques, emphasizing the 'magic', where Redzepi and others in the contemporary moment (while still drawing on such contemporary technique) shift the focus to place and temporality, deploying

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<sup>28</sup> Sebastian Bras, <http://www.bras.fr/fr/page-article/le-gargouillou-de-jeunes-legumes> (accessed January 20, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> For an unpacking of the history of service in relation to art history, see Elaine Sikorski, *Cooking to the Image : A Plating Handbook* (Hoboken, N.J. Wiley; Chichester: John Wiley [distributor], 2013). She analyses the history of culinary display through defining a series of paradigm shifts, or 'frames' to articulate a 'Culinary Art History'.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Adrià is Ferran's brother, he long ran the dessert section at elBulli, and since its closure has developed a substantial portfolio of restaurants in Barcelona, including Enigma, Pakta, Bodega1900, Nino Viejo, and Tickets, as well as Cakes and Bubbles, a dessert-focused restaurant in London's Hotel Café Royal.



this to draw the diner's focus back to the natural/landscape itself and using the chefs to reveal the magic. Allowing an open space for discussion and not overdetermining narrative, while provoking thought, question and engagement, Redzepe produces dramaturgical frame where the political may enter. In addition to Noma and restaurants closely associated with the New Nordic movement, including Sweden's Fäviken and Denmark's Amass and Relae, such practices today appear globally across restaurants including Spain's Mugaritz, El Celler de Can Roca, and Aponiente, the US's Atelier Crenn, Alinea, and Husk, Brazil's D.O.M., and Japan's DEN, some of which are included below. This turn towards presentational landscapes, as in the milk skin example above, 'enacts' the diner; like the vase, this frames a space for debate and engagement, returning to a Hegelian dialectical relationship of theoretical and practical sensualities, engaging with disappearance and destruction.

Redzepe's culinary landscape stages a miniaturized archive; a self-contained ecosystem, refracted through a post-expressionist pictorial mode. It is not literal representation, but evocative presentation, allowing the diner the space for both her own memory and an engagement with the location it conveys. In the space that opens between those, the blend of nostalgias – personal and cultural, real and imaginary – reminds us attention must be paid to the act of destruction, both in the moment of taste and in the cultural encounter. These choices stage the importance of location upon taste, a juxtaposition that is not a new concept – both convenience and a terroir-driven understanding of taste have long advocated such practices. The presentation here reveals it as if new, opening to an emphasis on locavorism and questions of sustainability. In this plated performance, the pairing of ingredients with proximal relations begins by clarifying taste relations – the elements on the plate remind us as

diners to pay attention to the ways those tastes carry through into the milk-skin; we are here eating ‘with’ the cow, and, although it may seem remote on the page, the labor of our eating provides a space where we may consider those cows, who also ate these greens to produce the milk that we eat with them.

Across much of the developed world, the cow as a real laboring body has been erased from many people’s relationship to milk; the landscape here not only makes it the centre of the dish, but contextualizes it. The use of milk in a surprising form raises questions for the diner; while milk is most of our earliest sustenance, heated milk coagulates, producing the textural dalliance with disgust that Kristeva cites. Using that skin in a context where privilege creates trust, Redzepi opens a space, encouraging us to recall the forcible ignorings that typically remove the plate from nature – from animal and human labour to factory farming that removes the cow from the meadow, to destructive agricultural practices and climate change – challenging the diner to consider human impacts on the natural. The delicate translucence of the skin and the deliberate plating are a reminder of the extensive labours within the restaurant; the chef who introduced the dish carries the embodied labour of its preparation. I am encouraged to remember the cow and the layered labors of the dish – the aesthetic framing opens that space, for consideration and acknowledgement of history and environmental relationships.

### **At Sea in a Changing World**

Rising sea levels, plastic ‘islands’, bleached coral reefs – the human impact on the 70% of earth covered by oceans appears nothing short of catastrophic – indeed it is perhaps the sea that is the clearest indicator of the world’s changing conditions and the urgency of change in human behaviours. The technical innovation in haute cuisine over the past thirty years has often been accused in the press and by more

conservative chefs (with antitheatrical overtones) as style over substance, allowing for a divorce of ingredient and its representation – focus on the surprise itself, rather than the consideration of how such making strange, as with Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, might also stage a representational politics.<sup>3132</sup> Dining at The Fat Duck in 2013, I initially thought I knew what to expect from Blumenthal’s oft-referenced 2007 ‘Sound of the Sea’ – an overly self-conscious use of *theatre*; the dish comes to the table with an iPod inside a conch shell. Of these chefs, Blumenthal most explicitly engages an overt theatricality – (in-)famously hiring choreographers to work with front-of-house staff and a 2016 revamp of the Fat Duck’s menu imposes a temporal Unity, staging the meal as ‘one day on vacation.’ Indeed, in many ways, his ‘cross-modal’ use of sound (and the recent addition of picture postcards targeted at the diner’s personal memory) is ‘bad theatre’, overly obvious contrivance that threatens to shortcut more thoughtful conversation through the gimmickry.<sup>33</sup> Yet despite its regular social media presence, facing the dish in person offers a different encounter, fundamentally theatrical not simply on the surface, as a joke, but through its evanescence. Atop a striking wood and glass multi-layered plate, a maltodextrin beach (including crumbled sugar cones to truly evoke summer), pickled sea vegetables, shellfish and edible lily-bulb ‘shells’, all crowned with a sea ‘air’ – an intense saline hit combining a shellfish stock with seaweed dashi. While post-El Bulli, such foams are oft-cited as overused, in this moment its

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<sup>31</sup> See for instance the review article from Elvira S. Poloczanka et. al. ‘Responses of Marine Organisms to Climate Change across Oceans’, *Frontiers in Marine Science*, May 4, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2016.00062> (accessed August 19, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> For more on the controversial readings of such practices, see the discussion of Adrià’s feud with Santiago Santamaria by Victoria Burnett, ‘Spain’s Top Chefs Clash Over Ingredients and Culinary Innovations’. *The New York Times*, June 1, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/world/europe/01spain.html> (accessed July 15, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman, *The Perfect Meal*.

representationalness and taste make the dish far more ‘live’ – without chemical stabilizers, from the moment of presentation, the bubbles pop and fade, the ‘coastline’ always already eroding, the dish becomes through disappearance. The awareness of that produces a sense that we need to eat quickly, becoming aware that both the erosion and our greed fundamentally alter the ‘beach’. There is a nostalgia in this dish, for me not through the overdetermined sound, but the visceral reminder of childhood tidal pools and a hinted sense of our own human culpability, a dramaturgical citation and iteration evoking risk in the contemporary moment – perhaps generational responsibility that such nostalgic possibility continues to exist for future children. While limited audiences mean that such citations are perhaps chiefly reminders to a culinarily ‘educated’ audience, there is a performative viscosity here, an affective invocation and invitation that might extend beyond the moment of the meal. It is not the complexity of Blumenthal’s overly theatrical dish, but the simple evanescence that is theatrically effective. The gap between the dish as served and its disappearance produces a space wherein I can search for meaning, a transposition of Hana Worthen’s description of the space of dramaturgy.

‘Dramaturgy arises at the politico-aesthetic nexus of performance: between its conception and its execution, between its practices and its purposes, between its aesthetic and artistic aims and its action with and through the audience.’<sup>34</sup> This dish clearly occurs in the space of encounter, allowing the diner a chance to engage through the act of eating with the political meaning carried in the aesthetic. Such dishes and concepts have the possibility to take on a life of their own, through evocation and experience. Dominique Crenn at San Francisco’s three-Michelin

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<sup>34</sup> Hana Worthen. ‘For a Skeptical Dramaturgy.’ *Theatre Topics* 24, no. 3 (2014): 176.

starred Atelier Crenn offers similarly thought-provoking plates with a juniper-lime foam in her course ‘The Sea’, evincing her own Breton upbringing, and echoing this later in the meal with a dessert of shaved coconut water, coconut ash sorbet and sake bubbles, both of which have the potential to ask these questions. As such, presentations appear on social media and in chefs’ conversations, they begin to proliferate more widely in more casual environments – I’ve eaten similar evocations at places including New York’s Acme as well as at a London neighbourhood gastropub, as well as seeing numerous recipes for seafood foam dishes online, extending possible affects and effects beyond the immediate privileged audience of the initial conception. The live encounter is a crucial first step in imagining such possibilities for change, but these have the possibility, as here, to extend beyond the borders and boundaries of such initially circumscribed events through repetition and reperformance.<sup>35</sup>

The most explicit culinary performance of oceanic climate politics over the past decade has been through Cadiz’s Aponiente, where chef Ángel León is involved with European and global political initiatives around saving the oceans, constructs the entire meal as a tasting menu framing a dramaturgy of the ocean’s possibility and its peril. While his visual choices often may be less explicit, the overall structure draws on similar plating, as well as using other means to evoke surprise. Working in

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<sup>35</sup> While many of the dishes explicitly discussed here were initially developed in the first part of the 2010s, it is through repetition and development that such change begins to take hold. These function alongside the more scientific developments around laboratory-grown and ‘fake’ meats to produce a range of possible impacts, both through mass commercial development and performative effect. In 2015, the World Bank produced blunt guidance on the importance of such change, ‘The world needs to produce at least 50% more food to feed 9 billion people by 2050. But climate change could cut crop yields by more than 25%. The land, biodiversity, oceans, forests, and other forms of natural capital are being depleted at unprecedented rates.’ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/foodsecurity/overview> (accessed June 15, 2019).

collaboration with the University of Cádiz, León has removed all land-based ‘meats’ from the restaurant’s menu, instead utilizing seaweeds, plankton and sea water itself to narrate both the restaurant’s locatedness and global issues around sustainability. Like Lai, he draws on bycatch and less popular fish; while most dishes are recognizably ‘delicious’ within a fairly standard Western palate, the unpacking of this use alongside unusual sea products like plankton and sea water expands taste boundaries, as well as employing visuality to provoke the diner. Much of a meal at Aponiente draws on mimetic display; a wheeled-in cheese-style cart offers versions of traditional Spanish cured meats produced entirely from seafood, including sobrasadas, chorizos, as well as eelskin ‘chicharrons’<sup>36</sup> – the replacement of conventional meats with more sustainable and less farming-intensive options helping to articulate a clear narrative of ethical production.

Yet, as the meal progresses dramaturgically, rather than remaining within this tightly mimetic frame, the dishes integrate these more atypical ingredients to engage theatrically on a broader scale. León’s signature dish is a vibrantly green plankton risotto, and plankton reappears throughout the meal in a variety of guises; while Aponiente is closed seasonally and the menu changes annually, plankton remains constant, its colour and intensity provoking response.<sup>37</sup> (Through his work with scientists and Veta la Palma, León has begun to encourage the sale of plankton to both restaurants and consumers). Journalist Lisa Abend’s description of an early León phytoplankton dish is typical of a number of experiences with this unusual ingredient in its encouragement of engagement – ‘coated in a dark gunk resembling

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<sup>36</sup> Typically all made from pork, Sobrasadas are a paprika-spiced, spreadable, raw cured sausage typical of the Balearic Islands, chorizo a fermented and smoked sausage, and chicharrons an Andalusian fried snack of pork skin or belly.

<sup>37</sup> He has additionally opened restaurants in Barcelona (2015) and Madrid (2019), where he both showcases some of his now more ‘classic’ dishes, alongside new ones.

something that the Gulf of Mexico coughed up in the wake of the BP oil spill’, she notes that it tasted ‘as if you were eating the concentrated ecology of the sea’.<sup>38</sup> In a moment where high-end cuisine often appears ‘answerable’ to photography, this insistence on dishes that evoke seascapes without simplification or skeumorphic representation, while still remaining recognisable is a significant gesture. Dishes like an earlier menu’s ‘Marine biomass pilpil with squid fritters’ (2013) challenge the diner both as representation – a seaweed-gelled amoeba, its shifting shapelessness pictorially essentializing the fluidity of water – and in consumption – too large for one bite, it appears impossible to cut, its fragility and tenuousness echoing the airs in the previous examples. While elegant, the dish is not beautiful – it is too intensely green and too formless, but its evocation of the sea is equally explicit and provocative to those above. As the staff introduce each dish to the diners, explaining its components and techniques, the relationship to the local ecosystem and global challenge are rendered palpable, delving deeper than overfishing, combining to paint a more holistic image of the marine ecosystem, and dramaturgically extending an invitation to consider these relationships, to taste the whole of the environment, encouraging through the narrative structure of the tasting menu and its presentational and representational challenges, the importance of the sea to humanity’s survival.

### **Longitudinal Dramaturgies**

In the move to Noma 2.0, Redzepi shifted focus to hyperlocal seasonality, emphasizing both questions of climate change and framing a possibility of continuous long-form dramaturgical structure across meals. Such practices are not unusual in fine dining globally (Japanese Kaiseki meals, for instance, are broken down into seasons within seasons, with some products only appearing for the weeks

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<sup>38</sup> Lisa Abend, ‘Angel León’s Courses of Nature,’ *Time Magazine*, May 23, 2011.

they are at ‘perfection’).<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of the possibility in such continuous dramaturgical possibility is Chicago’s Next Restaurant, run by Grant Achatz and Nick Kokonas, who along with head chefs Dave Beran, Jenner Tomaska and Ed Tinoco, develop this potential through the restaurant’s founding principles.<sup>40</sup> Established in 2011, Next draws from seasonality as its *modus operandi*, turning this into explicit performance, shifting not only the menu, but the type of cuisine triannually, and selling theatre-style season tickets, allowing diners to pre-purchase a table for each menu during the year.<sup>41</sup> Such sales ensure that many, if not most, diners are guaranteed to return; in selecting menus, Next considers both the individual season as well as menu possibilities and histories. While menus have ranged across organizing conceits, in 2013, the first two menus very explicitly framed environmental questions related to human responsibility, staging versions of global tours. Not as focused on the local as previous examples, these menus traverse locales, moving rapidly across landscapes. ‘The Hunt’ explored global hunting traditions, framed scenographically with a deerskin runner atop the tablecloth as we sat down, keeping ‘the animal’ physically, (though technically not viscerally), present throughout the evening; a note on the runner evoked the hunter as a character, and encouraged an ethical awareness that ‘In a culture that gets nearly all of its meat from factory farms, hunting is a celebration of the animal and its locale: of using what surrounds you – flora and fauna – to the fullest extent in order to

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<sup>39</sup> For Noma 2.0, the seasons have to date repeated annually, focusing on the oceans in the winter and early spring, vegetables in late spring and summer, and meat and game in autumn and early winter.

<sup>40</sup> Tomaska replaced Beran as Head Chef in May 2016 and Tinoco took over in early 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Menus include: Paris 1906, Tour of Thailand, Sicilian Home, Kaiseki, El Bulli, Childhood, Chinese Modern, Chicago Steakhouse, Alpine. In 2018, they shifted to four menus, but returned to three in 2019.



nourish.’ Ranging across traditions and cultures, the creativity and breadth of this menu was striking, and made more resonant through the completion of a dramaturgical arc by the second menu as a ‘sequel’ of sorts: a wholly Vegan menu, again offering a global tour of products and technique, reconfiguring the environment through shifting focus from an emphasis on fauna to flora and framing questions about sustainability in relation to contemporary discourse.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout both meals, multiple courses frame post-pictorial landscapes, building on Bras and a broad contemporary culinary repertoire. Within the Hunt, an autumnal dish of ‘fallen leaves and kidney’ served on birch bark, explicitly evoked the ‘Autumn Forest Walk’ of their earlier Childhood menu, or a Dominique Crenn forest landscape, staging an encounter with nature, while explicitly in the middle of a meal constantly recalling the importance of animals to humanity. For the Vegan menu, the deerskin was replaced with a terrarium, which the waiter, in a gesture similar to Noma’s vase, opened to plate salads tableside. These were quickly replaced by a served ‘burnt avocado with kale bouquet’, a forest floor of green paste with crisped greens and flower petals, plated in the kitchen atop a rock that recalled a similar use as a tabletop cooking surface for slivered bison in the previous menu – the natural plate becomes the earth and in both serves as key provider. Like the repeated appearance of the rock, the most explicitly landscaped dish in each menu draws on iteration, a theatrical recycling. A fallen log appeared as a plate in both menus, first for a punning woodland ‘Charcu-tree’, of rabbit terrine, elk jerky,

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<sup>42</sup> Such a vegan menu is very different from much of the development of veganism in the west over the past five years, which has often tended to focus on products that mimic meat, rather than, as the Next menu did, exploring the possibilities of veganism within existing cultural practices. While meat substitutes are crucial to the spread of veganism, it is equally important to recognize sustainable practices within pre-existing traditions.

venison heart tartare, blood sausage and wild boar, replaced in the latter menu by nori dumplings, sprouted tempeh tarts, and earl grey rambutan ‘shots’. Such differentiated echoes prompt discussion across the table and with staff (with whom a relationship develops across multiple menus), not only about nostalgia, but about the importance of repurposing and reuse. Coupled with the turn to veganism (for an adventurous and largely omnivorous audience), as well as the globally referential menu and the natural platings, conversations both at my table, and throughout the restaurant, turned from the deliciousness of both meals to engage questions of the politics of shifting towards more vegan diets, as well as less intensive animal farming in the return to the hunt. Indeed, while not literally transposing the hunter with the forager/farmer, the sequence of the meals and the echoes across them through landscapes served to stage in miniature these more global shifts in culinary cultures that may be necessary for survival.

Writing in the *New York Times* in 2012, William Deresiewicz suggested that ‘just as aestheticism, the religion of art, inherited the position of Christianity among the progressive classes around the turn of the 20th century, so has foodism taken over for aestheticism around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup>’ but asserting that ‘food, for all that, is not art. Both begin by addressing the senses, but that is where food stops. It is not narrative or representational, does not organize and express emotion.’<sup>43</sup> In the aftermath of a shift in art towards relational aesthetics, where artists such as Rirkrit Tirjavanija and Alison Knowles, as well as immersive theatre companies like PunchDrunk, Third Rail Projects, and Blanch and Shock have used food and drink as a way to produce commensality and conversation, this claim seems naïve and dated,

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<sup>43</sup> William Deresiewicz, ‘A Matter of Taste?’, *New York Times*, 28 October 2012., SR5.

and indeed, the rise of television shows such as Netflix's *Chef's Table*, *Ugly Delicious*, and *The Final Table* demonstrate how clearly food itself within the restaurant space can frame narration and representation. In their increasingly public roles, many contemporary chefs are explicitly speaking out on food and politics, and through their cooking, reiterate those statements and practices. Imagining their plates as landscapes, evincing both pictorial and abstract representation, as well as structuring menus to build sequences and relations, they produce dramaturgical narratives, drawing focus on issues from factory farming to marine destruction, from invasive species to climate change. These platings and encounters offer an invitation to the diner, a chance to respond. While the plate itself may not immediately offer solutions to global issues, it can serve an imaginative challenge to the diner, who is encouraged to think not just about the food itself, but about the broader networks in which both it and she are embedded, to consider and to respond, both in the moment as the sensual interplay frames the issues, but also moving beyond the restaurant's shared space, to take up the issues framed here: whether simply through the sharing of images and the retelling of the meal or more explicit action is left to the diner. The challenge offered is not simply to revel in the sensuality and deliciousness of taste, but to provoke thought and engagement, to ask about the conditions of production of deliciousness, using the practical to evoke the theoretical .

To conclude then with a return to Redzepi, I turn to what has been arguably their signature dish, a seemingly simple dish of 'roots in soil'. Appearing in a flowerpot, the diner is expected to eat the entirety of the serving, root vegetables, soil and all. The soil is mimetic – a trompe-l'oeil combination of malt flour, beer, hazelnuts and sugar, atop an herbed yoghurt, the roots real. The key to this dish here is its unquestionable Nordic quality; not only in taste, but staging a northern

landscape, in close-up. Like the vase with which this article began, this dish asks the diner to get her hands dirty, to return them into the soil. As I pull each root from the soil, the repetitive labour and care of planting, digging, replanting becomes palpable. The seeming joke of appearance becomes more than visuality and the act of eating becomes one of explicit response, engagement, and recognition of the intertwined roles and responsibilities of chef, farmer and diner.

These literal rhizomes move us from the Hegelian dichotomy between practical and theoretical sensualities; to Deleuze and Guattari. Like the examples here, it is indeed, the prevalence of rhizomatic networks, with multiple points of entry and efflorescing possibility and imagination that spreading these performances from a range of chef-led, 'high-end' restaurants to influences far beyond their limited initial audiences. These acts of creating landscapes on the plate map the terrain of global food issues in a way that becomes simultaneously visible and digestible, inviting the diner to participate in finding solutions, and calling for attention to the literal tending of the earth. Through scenographically deploying landscape as a plating technique, both in explicit (post-) representational imagery and in the relation to the plate itself, contemporary chefs refract the classical notion of landscape as a lens through which we can understand and see the world, staging dramaturgical questions and posing narratives about relationships between 'nature' and 'culture.' The dishes remind us to question human impact and responsibility, challenging diners by presenting the world, framed to remind us of the environment that is always already in front of us, but through its translation into encounters with carefully crafted miniatures that surprise, delight and beg close tactile and corporeal engagement, they extend a hand of invitation, reminding us of the need to engage globally through closer sensual engagement and detailed focus.