

# New Nordic upmarket bistros and the practical configurations of artful dining

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# **New Nordic upmarket bistros and the practical configurations of artful dining**

## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the blurring boundaries between food and art in the West by examining the contemporary field of upmarket dining. The study adopts a practice theoretical view, conceptualizes artful dining as a large-scale cultural formation (“teleoaffective formation”), and explores the configurations of artful dining in the context of New Nordic Upmarket Bistros (NNUBs). Based on blog texts, chef interview and participant observation at a Finnish NNUB, the study demonstrates how the local restaurant enthusiasts adopted and adjusted artful dining in a specific, “everyday” context of upmarket dining. The study presents dining at NNUBs as one of the many practices that have substantially expanded the art-oriented dining ideals beyond modernist cuisine. It discusses artful dining within the contemporary (gourmet) food culture and encourages further diversification of approaches in studies examining artful dining and the intersection of food and art.

Keywords: eating out; upmarket dining; food consumption; foodie culture; practice theory; teleoaffective formation; modernist cuisine; New Nordic Cuisine

## **Introduction**

In the late modern Western culture, boundaries between food and art appear to be blurring at an accelerating pace. For instance, artists in various cultural fields increasingly participate in food-related discourses (Johnston and Goodman 2015), home cooking is discussed as a practice that could be defined as art (Raviv 2017), and the ubiquitous foodie movement has been interpreted through the lens of art (Furrow 2016). Yet the food-art question is still mainly associated with the world of upmarket restaurants and professional chefs. In this cultural field, the emergence of nouvelle cuisine in France around 1970 remarkably paved the way for the presentation of chefs as creative artists rather than artisans (see e.g. Hollows and Jones 2010).

Recently, however, the food-art question has been connected mostly with what is called “modernist cuisine” and the related high-end restaurants (such as elBulli, Noma, and

Alinea) as initiators of a truly artful revolution of dining at the turn of the twenty-first century (Raviv 2017)<sup>1</sup>. A remarkable body of literature on modernist dining suggests that restaurants with a modernist orientation celebrate dining as a chef-diner dialog and as a source of a vast range of emotions as well as multisensory, participatory, and total experiences supported by surprising, esthetically inspiring or even shocking dishes (e.g., Myhrvold 2011; Abrams 2013; Tresidder 2015; Kaufman 2016; Opazo 2016; Raviv 2017). Modernist dining aims allegedly at challenging diners' expectations instead of fulfilling them as the traditional haute/nouvelle cuisine primarily aspires to do (Myhrvold 2011; Opazo 2016). In the modernist practice, a "proper" diner is someone who strives for an intellectual, "cultural" journey, instead of just enjoying the delicious and pleasurable aspects of a meal (see Adrià, Adrià and Soler 2008). Modernist restaurants thus seem to promote a "conceptual" approach to dishes and dining, which can be seen as a potentially revolutionary step toward dining as a form of art consumption (see Raviv 2017).

The emphasis in earlier research on the modernist high-end restaurants has brought about important elaborations on the interweavement of food and art in the restaurant world.

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<sup>1</sup> Modernist cuisine may be today understood as a wide-reaching, scientific culinary movement (see e.g., Borkenhagen 2017), yet in this paper we use the term in a specific sense, referring to the "modernist" restaurant revolution that associates famously with the restaurant elBulli and its head chef Ferran Adrià (see e.g., Opazo 2016; Raviv 2017). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, elBulli rose to a highly influential position and inspired numerous other restaurants across the culinary globe (see Opazo 2016). The influence of elBulli is not necessarily restricted to high-end restaurants and the modernist movement aims at creating cooking techniques etc. to be adopted at multiple types of venues and culinary contexts, yet in this paper, the "practice of modernist dining" refers to the high-end, clearly elBulli-inspired restaurants, such as Noma in Denmark and Alinea in the US. However, we do acknowledge there is a certain artificiality in such classifications. For example, although Tresidder (2015) defines Noma as a "terroir restaurant" and does not deploy modernist terminology, and although Raviv (2017) discusses New Nordic Cuisine (and e.g., Noma) as a potential step "beyond modernist cuisine", Kaufman (2016) studies Noma (and Alinea) under the umbrella of "modernist cuisine".

At the same time, it has bypassed the ways in which food and art mix at other types of restaurants that have emerged as part of the ongoing fast diversification of upmarket dining (see Lane 2014). In the Nordic countries, Noma and other such acclaimed high-end restaurants representing New Nordic Cuisine<sup>2</sup> have clearly embodied the art-oriented ideals of modernist dining (see e.g. Kaufman 2016) yet combined them with a focus on (extreme) locality and other rising culinary trends and concerns (Tresidder 2015; Raviv 2017). In the Nordic restaurant field, however, New Nordic Cuisine has been centrally promoted and put into practice not only in high-end restaurants but also in what we call New Nordic Upmarket Bistros (NNUB). Such bistros possess an upmarket image yet simultaneously embody the worldwide casualization of contemporary gastronomic field (see Pearlman 2013; Opazo 2016). Crucially, the dining experiences provided by NNUBs are remarkably more affordable compared to the most high-end modernist restaurants<sup>3</sup>. By allowing a greater number of consumers to tangibly play with the idea of artful dining the bistros can be seen as important intermediators in the interlocking of dining and art.

In this paper, we utilize blog texts, interview, and participant observation to study a particular case of NNUB, the Finnish restaurant Chef & Sommelier (C&S), which served customers in Helsinki between 2010 and 2017. Theoretically, the paper is inspired by practice theoretical studies (see Warde, Welch and Paddock 2017), in particular by those focusing on

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<sup>2</sup> New Nordic Cuisine was a large-scale Nordic food political and identity project (see Leer 2016), yet in this paper we use the term in a narrower sense to refer to restaurants that take on New Nordic Cuisine ideals. Restaurants such as Maaemo (Norway), Geranium (Denmark) and Fäviken (Sweden) have succeeded well in various restaurant rankings and competitions and are prominent examples of high-end New Nordic restaurants.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in Helsinki, New Nordic Upmarket Bistros have charged approximately 40-100 euros for a tasting menu (excluding drinks), depending on the length of the menu. This is by no means inexpensive, yet for a middle-class restaurant enthusiast in Finland, the price (as well as the availability of tables) enables frequent (e.g., monthly) visits.

consumption and gastronomy (Warde 2016), and by Welch's (2017) elaborations on the concept of "teleoaffectivity" (Schatzki 2002). As a result, first, we understand NNUB dining and other such distinguishable forms of upmarket dining as social practices that consist of specific types of elements that weave together the doings and sayings of practices. Second, we conceptualize artful dining as a "teleoaffective formation", i.e., a large-scale cultural formation which informs currently various kinds of restaurant practices while being affected by the practical, bodily-discursive configurations at those practices (see Welch 2017). Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to explore how the formation of artful dining was adopted, configured and shaped in the situated practice of NNUB dining at a Helsinki restaurant.

The remaining sections of the paper are structured as follows. First, we elucidate the basics of practice theory and the concept of a "teleoaffective formation" that attempts to bridge the gap between culture and practice. After presenting the data and method, we move on to demonstrate the adoption and adjustments of the cultural formation of artful dining at C&S. We conclude by discussing the findings in the wider context of the contemporary (gourmet) food and restaurant culture.

### **Practice theory and artful dining**

Different conceptualizations of practice theories share an understanding of human activity as social practices instead of as actions by expressive individuals or as a product of abstract social structures (e.g., Warde 2014). Informed by Schatzki (1996; 2002), a large part of research on consumption in recent years has built on the notion of practices (such as NNUB dining) as entities consisting of several types of elements that interlink the doings and sayings of practices (Warde, Welch and Paddock 2017). Many studies have built, albeit oftentimes with alternative terms (for a good overview see Arsel and Bean 2013), on Schatzki's (2002) schema of practices as consisting of "practical and general understandings", "rules", and "teleoaffective structures", each of these including materiality. Practices need to be constantly performed

by practitioners if they are to sustain or to develop (Halkier and Jensen 2011). Within the now diverse practice theory-family, however, discussions continue e.g. about the methodologies used to study practices, the complex interconnections between practices, and the capability of practice theory to explain and to take into account large-scale cultural phenomena (see e.g., Welch and Warde 2017).

The last aspect is of particular relevance here. That is, the frequent focus on practices as a main unit of analysis allegedly discourages the use and development of concepts suitable for capturing the large-scale cultural formations involved in the consumption of goods and services (see Welch 2017). Whether practice theory ever actually neglected the “culture” is outside the scope of this paper<sup>4</sup>; nevertheless discussions continue about the potential benefits of bringing practice theory closer to the cultural approaches (see Evans 2018; Welch 2017). By applying Welch’s (2017) recent conceptualizations at the intersection of practice theory and “culture”, this practice theory -inspired article on culturally expressive upmarket dining aims at contributing to the emerging dialog between the traditions<sup>5</sup>.

Welch’s (2017) theorization at the intersection of practice and culture is substantively informed by the interweaving practice theoretical concepts of “teleoaffectivity” and “general understandings” (Schatzki 2002). Teleoaffectivity instructs what is to be perceived as desired

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<sup>4</sup> As Evans (2018) notes, one of the main exponents of practice theory among the scholarship on consumption, Alan Warde, never distanced the “cultural” viewpoints from practice theory. Warde (2016, see also Neuman 2019) does promote putting more emphasis on the mundane aspects of eating, yet simultaneously demonstrates the deployment of practice theory in the context of culturally expressive dining out.

<sup>5</sup> Arsel and Bean’s (2013) study on “soft modernism” as a guiding principle of home design illustrates such bridging neatly. Inspired by Hennion (2007), the authors conceptualize taste, a key concept of the culturally oriented analyses of consumption, as a social practice. They utilize practice theoretical vocabulary and the elements of practices as empirical tools to analyze the situated, practice-level configurations of the wide-spread cultural, esthetic ideal of soft modernism.

and worthy of attention in the performances of practices, and each practice may be consequently understood as a particular order of affects, connected with ends and larger cultural projects that motivate action (Welch 2017). However, since Schatzki's (2002) main concept dealing with teleoaffectivity, "teleoaffective structures", situates conceptually at the level of practices, it remains unsuitable for studying large-scale cultural formations (Welch 2017). Although Schatzki (2002) tentatively introduced the concept of a "teleoaffective regime" for such purposes (see also Welch and Warde 2017), Welch (2017) argues for the development of novel concepts. He claims that "teleoaffective regime" "suggests a manner or method of rule or government, uncharacteristic of the range of the more or less coherent teleoaffective formations that pervade the contemporary world" (ibid., 5). Furthermore, Welch underscores the difficulties in distinguishing teleoaffective regimes conceptually from "general understandings" (see also Welch and Warde 2017), i.e., widespread tacit-discursive cultural understandings shared by many practices (Schatzki 2002). General understandings might usefully inform practice theoretical studies on culture (Welch and Warde 2017), but like teleoaffective structures, Schatzki (2002) conceptualized them as properties of a practice (Welch 2017; Welch and Warde 2017).

Hence, Welch (2017) offers "teleoaffective formation" as a novel configurational concept that intertwines teleoaffectivity with general understandings. Teleoaffective formation becomes defined as "a configuration across multiple practices, conditioned by a relational nexus of general understandings, that enjoins those practices to common ends and normatively orders the orientations and affective engagements of those practices" (Welch 2017, 7). Performances of practices (such as NNUB dining) constantly shape teleoaffective formations while leaning on the resources provided by such formations. Furthermore, in Welch's schema and unlike some other similarly oriented configurational concepts such as Foucault's *dispositif*, teleoaffective formations may include both widely shared cultural understandings as well

as understandings that operate only in certain slices of society or are only carried by certain consumer groups (Welch 2017).

In this paper, thus, we identify “artful dining” as a large-scale teleoaffective formation that increasingly informs the practice-level developments in the field of upmarket dining<sup>6</sup>, at least in some realms of the restaurant practice and as carried by certain consumers and culinary professionals. What, then, might the relational nexus of general understandings composing artful dining consist of? Given the constantly evolving nature of restaurant culture and the open-ended logic embedded in the concept of a teleoaffective formation (i.e. formations as constantly open for change due to the performances at the level of practices), a fixed definition is surely unreachable. In the contemporary restaurant world, various kinds of emerging dining practices contribute to the potential transformation of the formation, be it museum dining (Mihalache 2016; 2017), New Nordic dining as a whole (Raviv 2017) or NNUB dining as a specific form of it. Empirical analyses of such practices enrich our understanding about the manifestations and potential transformations of artful dining.

For explanatory purposes, however, based on the existing literature on contemporary upmarket restaurants and on artful dining as depicted in the introductory section of this paper, we define the teleoaffective formation of artful dining as follows. To start with, we suggest that the formation intertwines the widely shared general understandings of creativity, self-actualization, and novelty seeking. In Reckwitz’s (2017) view, these sorts of understandings borrow from the artistic field and characterize late modern society profoundly. Such understandings manifest in the specific field of upmarket dining as the celebration of the personal

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the “extremely fast transformation” (Lane 2014) and rapid diversification of fine or upmarket dining, we avoid conceptualizing upmarket/fine dining as a practice with a single teleoaffective structure (although in some empirical cases this might suffice). Rather, we understand the contemporary field of upmarket dining as consisting of various kinds of (sub-)practices that each possess their own (although in part overlapping) teleoaffective structure.



and creative cooking style of chefs (see Ribbat 2016), perhaps crystallizing in the general understanding of “moral authenticity” (DeSoucey and Demetry 2016, see also Carroll and Wheaton 2009). Furthermore, and especially informed by the literature on modernist dining, we suggest that artful dining contains the interrelated understandings of conceptual, emotional-intellectual, and challenging/adventurous eating, carried by certain consumers and culinary professionals in the restaurant field. With these in mind, we now move on to the Finnish dining scene to inspect the practice-level configuration of such nexus of general understandings.

### **Data and method**

Finland is among the countries in which interest in eating out is increasing (like e.g. Norway, see Bugge and Lavik 2010). As part of this trend, restaurant Chef & Sommelier opened in 2010 as one of the first and soon-to-become most prominent NNUBs in Finland<sup>7</sup>. C&S occupied an informal and tiny space with 20 seats, informal decor and an open kitchen. In 2010, the least expensive option was a three-course menu that cost 39 euros without beverages (by 2017, prices had increased moderately, and the shortest menu consisted of 5 courses). The head chef of C&S, Sasu Laukkonen, has publicly expressed that the original price point was comparable to the prices of three-course meals at any mid-market chain restaurant in Helsinki. The personnel consisted of the sommelier and only a handful of chefs who personally served

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<sup>7</sup> Other Finnish examples include Grön, Ask, and Spis, and internationally speaking we consider the Danish Relae as one of the best-known examples of such restaurants (not surprisingly, C&S’s tiny book collection next to the window included the Relae cookbook), even though e.g., Relae is not dogmatically Nordic (see Leer 2016). Indeed, by NNUB we do not refer to any strict “Nordic” approach (as for e.g. ingredients) but to a practice that “embraces a lot of central ideas of the New Nordic Cuisine”, as Leer (2016) depicts Relae’s food. As Leer aptly shows, the second wave New Nordic chefs may refuse the label of New Nordic to establish one’s own creative position in the foodie world.

the dishes. The simple, New Nordic inspired dishes were based only on a limited number of ingredients: mostly organic, vegetarian and local, oftentimes also self-foraged. Guide Michelin awarded C&S a star in 2014, making it then one of only six starred Finnish restaurants.<sup>8</sup>

Our data consists of blog texts, participant observation at the restaurant, and an interview of the head chef. The blog texts describing the bloggers' experiences of a visit to C&S were written in Finnish between 2011 and 2015. The texts were collected from blogs that explicitly claimed to be food and/or restaurant blogs. In total, 16 texts from 16 blogs were included in the analysis<sup>9</sup>. In the presentation of results, the texts are anonymized and referred to as numbers to protect the anonymity of bloggers. The second part of the data, participant observation, included two visits to C&S (2016 and 2017; in addition, a non-documented visit in 2010) by the first author of this paper. While experiencing the six- (2016) and seven-course (2017) menus, the first author of this paper took notes about food (including photos of dishes), the atmosphere, the physical space including all kinds of objects, other diners and staff, service and diner-staff interaction, and the intertwinement of these elements, especially from the perspective of what seems to be desired and worthy of doing. Right after the dinners, the author wrote a more complete diary to reflect the affective aspects of the evening (including the observed behavior of others), particularly reflecting the themes of modernist dining since the initial analysis of the blog texts had already revealed intriguing similarities between

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8 In August 2017, C&S was reborn in the same location as Ora, the concept of which resembles that of C&S's yet offers the experience in a slightly more refined and expensive form (in February 2019, menu prices start from 89 euros).

9 Texts were searched via both Google and Bing with various search queries such as "Chef & Sommelier and blogi" (blog in Finnish). Each text published in food and/or restaurant blogs was included in the data, except for one case in which a blogger had published several texts about C&S. In this case, we chose only the text that appeared first in the search results and that also appeared most in the form of a restaurant review. Eventually, the substantial saturation that occurred over the analysis convinced us of the sufficient amount of texts.

the teleoaffective structure of the modernist practice and that of NNUB's. The third part of the data, the interview of the head chef, took place in 2017, after the participant observation. The semi-structured and recorded interview took place at C&S, lasted 64 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. On top of intentionally freely flowing talk about the production and consumption of the "ideal" experience at C&S, the interviewer guided the discussion toward the key themes of modernist dining.

In practice theory, all these qualitative data types may be analyzed as practitioners' performances (see Halkier and Jensen 2011), and practice theorists often prefer the combination of various types of data since this allows a study of practices as a multifaceted nexus of doings and sayings. Thus, in our case, the different data sets, when analyzed iteratively in relation to each other, enhanced the detection of the teleoaffective structure of the practice and the interweavement of the structure with the other elements of a the practice, i.e., objects (e.g., the physical space, dishes, ingredients), doings (e.g., chef-diner interaction, ordering or tasting of food), and general understandings (e.g., personality, originality)<sup>10</sup>. The interpretation of the data was further supported by various types of other materials and observations. These included monitoring the websites and other (social) media communication of and around New Nordic restaurants, cursory reading of (the introductory sections of) their cookbooks, as well as by a few "analytically oriented" restaurant visits beyond C&S especially for the purposes of this article (e.g., Relae in Copenhagen, Grön in Helsinki).

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<sup>10</sup> Various and partly overlapping versions of these elements exist (see Arsel and Bean 2013). Our choice does not attempt to comment the differences between the versions but is rather a practical solution that nevertheless includes "general understandings" due to their central role in the concept of a teleoaffective formation.

Worth explicating here is also the guiding principle applied in the data collection: we studied the practice from the viewpoint of restaurant enthusiasts, including both staff members and diners (or diner-writers)<sup>11</sup>. Thus, we were interested in analyzing the adoption and adjustment of artful dining within the enthusiastically oriented slice of the restaurant practice which more or less operates as cultural intermediary at the intersection of food and art. Consequentially, and since practice theory privileges the collective nature of consumption, our analysis aims at revealing the emerging, collectively shared ideals (at least among restaurant enthusiasts) of restaurant consumption that are relevant in relation to artful dining. Through the analysis of one Finnish restaurant only and the decision to concentrate on the enthusiasts our investigation aims at providing a detailed account of one specific context of artful dining rather than giving a broad outline of the phenomenon in the Nordic dining scene. Nevertheless, C&S was one of the most paradigmatic examples of new wave Finnish/Nordic dining, and we feel confident to suggest that the insights provided by this particular context are to a reasonable extent applicable to the wider context of New Nordic (upmarket bistro) dining.

### **The foundational premises of artful dining**

Our data reveals similarities between the teleoaffective structures of the modernist practice and NNUB dining. Both practices look beyond the perfect execution of delicious flavors, approach dishes “conceptually” (Raviv 2017) and celebrate the emotional-intellectual and challenging aspects of eating.

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<sup>11</sup> Instead of speaking of some sort of extreme or extremely stylish form of food/restaurant consumption, “enthusiasts” refer here to the rather large and diverse group of amateurs or professionals who are “esthetically” interested in eating out, and who might be referred to as foodies. Notable differences between the level of enthusiasm and connoisseurship of e.g. bloggers surely exist. A few bloggers had clearly established a relationship with C&S at the time of writing.

To start with, the first author's diary data contains several moments that exemplify the shift from pleasure toward art. For instance, at the start of the second meal at C&S, he was offered a dish, that mainly consisted of extremely mild-flavored milk pudding and plenty of different yet likewise mild-tasting wild herbs on the top. Had he approached the dish (teleoaffectively) in the traditional way, the experience could have been easily judged negatively due to the lack of instant deliciousness. However, should he wish to become part of the movement in which the conceptual approach of dishes is acclaimed, an alternative (teleoaffective) orientation would be available as a cultural resource. The diner could contemplate the dish as symbolizing the essence of the restaurant or reflect on the global cultural influences that could be detected in the cooking at C&S.

Moreover, the shift from pleasure toward art interlinks with the notion of the whole menu as a main unit of the dinner instead of individual dishes. Thus, although the menu at NNUB is remarkably shorter than e.g. at elBulli or Noma, the diners are nonetheless encouraged to enhance the creation of emotions by going through the full set. In fact, Laukkonen reports that over the years of C&S, most diners started to embrace (and perhaps became socialized to the world of NNUB dining) the idea of 5-9 dishes instead of three, and the option of eating a three-course meal was eventually removed. It seems that the longer the tasting menu is, the more space it allows for challenging, mildly flavored or even unpleasant dishes. Laukkonen states, referring to the thinking of the chef Mauro Colagreco from the French Mirazur<sup>12</sup>, that a good menu should never be "flat". Instead, in Laukkonen's words, such menu should aim at "strong emotional engagement". In Laukkonen's thinking (too), thus, loving certain dishes and hating others outweighs pure deliciousness. He elaborates Colagreco's approach admiringly:

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<sup>12</sup> Often one of the "best restaurants" in the World's 50 best competition. Colagreco (who is also mentioned in blog texts) and Laukkonen have cooked in each other's restaurants.

... he really shakes people [...]. First there may be like a really classic and delicate [dish], and the next is like boom! I mean you make people, you kind of mix it. And the more you mix, I mean I'd rather like it to be like I fell in love, I hate, I fell in love, I hate – so there are bigger feelings at play, not like yeah, it's okay.

If a diner wishes to be a proper insider in this artfully oriented movement, s/he should thus approach the milk pudding conceptually and appreciate it as part of the narrative of the whole menu. Intriguingly, Laukkonen also depicts how he personally and rather successfully attempted to encourage the diners to reduce the amount of work or family-related discussions while dining in order to enable the focus on the experience. This move appears to support the transition from the appreciation of delicious flavors to the consumption of restaurant as an art experience.

One blogger who explicitly stresses challenges as a key ingredient of a successful experience underlines that the dishes and the accompanying natural wines are not there to always please the diners but to challenge them to view food and the potential future directions of the local food culture from a new perspective. He finds an intriguing and intellectually oriented meaning for the C&S's kitchen space, describing it as a "library", an endless source for chef Laukkonen to facilitate his storytelling. Another blogger calls some of the dishes as pieces of art that contain an overload of thought.

A proper chef knows how to cook precisely and do a matching sauce, but it takes more to invent new flavors. It doesn't please my palate every time, but always makes me think. You don't easily measure the value of such a thing. Are there many dinners that have made you see the food from a new perspective? (9)

There are so much flavor and thought at plates that your mouth and brain fail to record everything. Replay, please! (12)

Although most other texts do not frame the experience discursively in such intellectually oriented terms, we noted more subtle ways through which the principles of artful dining

become accepted. Crucial here are the general understandings of creativity, passion, and personality, features bearing close resemblance to those suggested by Reckwitz (2017) in his account about the art-influenced late modern society. Such understandings demonstrate DeSoucey and Demetry's (2016) view of "moral authenticity" as a prominent virtue of twenty-first century upmarket dining, encompassing a specific, art-oriented interpretation (instead of e.g., "type authenticity", see Carroll and Wheaton 2009) of the culturally spread general understanding of authenticity (see Welch and Warde 2017). More generally, they illustrate the linkages between personality, authenticity and art as depicted in the literature concerning the contemporary gourmet food culture (Johnston and Baumann 2010; on the "personal" wine-makers as "artists" see Rössel, Schenk, and Eppler 2018).

Indeed, our data reveals an approach in which the potential appreciation of a restaurant depends on the restaurant's commitment to these kinds of general understandings. Be it the more intellectually oriented discourses (perhaps more closely associated with modernist cuisine) or the general approach of moral authenticity, a creative and genuine way of doing outweighs the perfect end result. A proper diner is the one who identifies and celebrates such "morally authentic" cooking performances and ignores the occasional flaws in deliciousness and execution that might matter more in the traditional fine dining.

When Sasu Laukkonen bends over our table and talks to us, eyes sparkling, about how the potato curl of the dish has been made with an old-fashioned mechanical cutter I cannot but smile inside. It's wonderful to see a person work with such inner zeal and passion.  
(4)

Laukkonen insists that people (proper diners) should learn to appreciate the personality of "chef-driven" restaurants instead of entering restaurants randomly and asking them to adjust to diners' needs and preferences. For example, in his view, skilled consumption at a Finnish restaurant Grön (NNUB in our view), known for main dishes with multiple cold components, entails the idea that "this is what Grön is all about". After a meal at Grön, a diner

with an artful orientation is not supposed to e.g., write a negative review should s/he personally not enjoy the cold components. These insights suggest that going to a NNUB bears some resemblance to going to an art event: one is expected to move, at least partially, beyond instant personal satisfaction and instead attempt to embrace the whole as a total “cultural” experience, generated by the creative chef, and including many sorts of emotions, pleasurable or not.

Lastly, the data contains a few “deviant” cases that further illustrate the foundational premises of artful dining. For instance, some blog writings express partial disappointment about the experience due to C&S’s incapability of executing the traditional virtues of upmarket dining in the form of consistently executed, delicious, and pleasant dishes (cooked from expensive ingredients). But most other performances, naturally in varying degrees, depart from this view and pay attention to aspects that can be seen as interlinked to the teleoaffective formation of artful dining.

### **NNUB dining and the adjustments of artful dining**

Thus far we have demonstrated the similarities of teleoaffective structures in NNUB and modernist practice and argued that NNUB dining can be seen to operate under the influence of artful dining. We now move on to elaborate the potential differences that may further partake in the transformation of artful dining beyond modernist cuisine. In what follows, we discuss artful dining in relation to the themes of nature, sourcing/ethical commitments, staff-diner interaction, and the dialogical relationship between professional and home cooking.

Let us start from the seemingly trivial question of chef Laukkonen as potential artist. Unlike Ferran Adrià and many other carriers of modernist dining, Laukkonen struggles when



asked about his artistry, and states the preference to be rather called as a “chef-forager”<sup>13</sup>.

This art-hesitant talk is in line with Finnish chefs’ general mode of talking about their work in non-artistic terms<sup>14</sup> and with the wider framework of the Finnish food culture, in which simplicity, purity, unpretentiousness and honesty are celebrated (Finfood 2009), and in which talking about food as art associates easily with pretentiousness and conspicuous consumption. Accordingly, in the public talk in Finland, the notion of food as art has been mostly associated with the high-end modernist venues and the unappreciated cooking style that transforms ingredients into something that they are inherently not.

Therefore, we argue that although art is less clearly manifested at NNUB by means of extremely creative and technically complex cooking methods compared to the high-end modernist practice, it is vividly expressed in admiration for the creative work and the invention of new flavors in the garden or nature, outside of the restaurant space. Indeed, following many other contemporary Nordic chefs, Laukkonen has insisted for years on the importance of familiarizing oneself with the multiple varieties of, e.g., a single root vegetable, and built the dining performances around the presentation of such ingredient-level nuances. The approach maintains the connection to the above mentioned essential understandings of Finnish eating and provides a legitimate avenue for the artful dining to emerge. The milk pudding mentioned above is appreciated since it presents nature (wild herbs, milk from the cow) “as it is”. When Laukkonen attempts to capture the essentials of C&S dining, wild nature intertwines with the foundational premises of artful dining.

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<sup>13</sup> Laukkonen defines art in rather extreme terms and asserts that proper artists should be totally freed from the need to please anyone (so that s/he could e.g., “serve the customers with the tables turned upside down”), something that he as a chef must do to some extent to keep the business running.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps to exemplify (and rebel against) this, Finnish culinary audience has recently witnessed the emergence of the figure of Kozeen Shiwan (a former chef at an NNUB in Helsinki), who forcefully positions himself as an artist.

Or you eat a dish with 14 different wild herbs, and when people try to describe it, they say 'I can't say what this tastes like, it's bitter and this and that', and I tell them this is what Finnish nature tastes like right now!

The shift from the kitchen to nature interrelates with Raviv's (2017) notion of "growing/manufacturing" as an integral part of the Nordic dining experience and as a central theme in how New Nordic Cuisine transports food-art beyond modernist cuisine. More generally, the interest in the sourcing of food manifests the important role of ethical commitments in the contemporary gourmet food culture (see DeSoucey and Demetry 2016). In other words, restaurants must stand for something in "morally authentic" ways (see DeSoucey and Demetry 2016), and the ecological-ethical aspects essentially participate in the creation of artful experiences. For example, the following excerpt depicts a blog post demonstrating the (perhaps surprising) role that avoiding food waste (see Raviv 2017) might play in generating art-like aesthetic and emotional experiences.

Before the dessert we freshened our mouths with a wonderfully flowery sorbet, which was again one of Sasu's brainwaves, which make me appreciate this guy more than any other chef. Namely, he was fed up with throwing away all these edible and decorative flower buds and withering leaves, so instead of the dustbin they ended up in the sorbet. The end product was as delicate as it sounds. (11)

Embedded in artful dining as perceived through the lens of the modernist practice is the notion of dining as a dialog between the interested and informed diner and the creative chef. Kaufman (2016) suggests that modernist restaurants nonetheless fail to execute the ideal of chef-diner dialog due to the modernist chef's dominance. However, as Opazo (2016) notes in her study on the elBulli restaurant, the massive amount of documentation about the restaurant equipped diners with knowledge that facilitated such dialog. Similarly, we can argue that the public discourses around the New Nordic Cuisine have provided the (Nordic) diners a

framework that generates additional depth to NNUB experiences and supports the creation of chef-diner dialog (on the chef-foodie relationships see also Abbotts 2015).

The NNUB as evidenced by C&S appears to establish the dialog in very concrete terms. For example, Laukkonen personally greets the quests and shakes hands when they leave, brings pots to the table in the middle of a dinner to engage the diners in the production of flavors, asks comments about the dishes, responds personally to the guests' e-mails about e.g., recipes in order to enhance their everyday cooking (for understandable reasons not a possible procedure at restaurants with a million yearly table requests), and as bloggers admiringly wrote, e.g., discusses with potential diners through a window that opens up to the street and personally calls the diners a taxi. Many bloggers list the interaction as the best part of the dinner, again outweighing the flaws in dishes. At C&S, the concrete interaction remarkably facilitates the consumption of the dinner as a dialogical, artful whole.

The nicest thing about Chef & Sommelier is that a significant part of the experience is talking to the waiter, the chef and the sommelier. This is not the restaurant to go if you want to have an intimate dinner in private (or at least it's worth saying if you wish so...).

(12)

Sasu, Johan and everyone else made our significant evening an immemorial experience. When Sasu brought the dish to the table we got a true lecture about the origin of the ingredients and the preparation process of the dish. We could have listened to him forever, even at the risk of the food getting cold. (10)

Further enhanced by the tiny restaurant space, diners are thus constantly connected to the production of the experience, instead of just passively consuming it. It may be, although e.g. the habit of chefs personally greeting the entering customers is common in many high-end Nordic restaurants and although meals at any modernist venue might contain remarkable moments of concrete interaction (see Kaufman 2016), that the "everyday" NNUB format supports the creation of staff-diner relationships, as well as intensifies and increases the amount

of interaction while dining. The chef does still dictate the script on one hand, yet on the other hand acts like an equal friend, museum guide, or a humble servant, helping the guests to achieve full immersion.

Moreover, although NNUB embraces foraged ingredients that are not part of the everyday Nordic experience and that challenge and surprise the diners, the “everyday” nature of dishes is also valued. With the help of the (relatively!) simple dishes, a dialogical relationship between professional cooking and home cooking occurs. Diners discuss the dishes with the passionate staff, and the beauty of a restaurant visit revolves around the idea of dishes being capable of remarkably inspiring everyday cooking, or that “everyday” cooking methods applied in the restaurant may enhance the artful consumption of the dishes. For example, and intriguingly, the dialog between the restaurant and home cooking (supported by the chef-diner interaction) may build on the special diets or personal food ideologies, important for an increasing number of consumers (Niva 2017). Although these are commonly perceived as troubles for restaurateurs, at C&S the personal restrictions turn into artistic assets. A (vegan) diner might be intellectually and emotionally surprised through a simple ice-cream dish prepared without eggs, an essential ingredient of traditional ice cream. This inspires lengthy conversations between the chef and the diner, introduces a technique to be adopted at home, and encourages intellectual thinking of the essence of ice cream (after all, is it ice cream if made without eggs). In theoretical terms, the celebrated relationship between NNUB dining and the domestic cooking practice exemplifies how teleoaffective formations permeate multiple practices. That is, “everyday” practices of upmarket dining of which NNUB dining is an example, might be interpreted as important mediators in the development in which artful dining is, perhaps increasingly, realized beyond the confines of (high-end) restaurants (see Raviv 2017; Furrow 2016).

## Conclusion and discussion

This study explored the blurring boundaries between food and art from the perspective of restaurant consumption. Specifically, the study has insisted on the importance of exploring the blurring boundaries between food and art beyond the clear, high-end manifestations of modernist dining. The study adopted a practice theoretical viewpoint, conceptualized artful dining as large-scale cultural formation (teleoaffective formation) and elucidated the configurations of the formation at a New Nordic Upmarket Bistro in Helsinki, Finland. The paper portrayed NNUB dining as a practice at which restaurant enthusiasts have carried the foundational art-leaning understandings of modernist dining. Yet the paper also demonstrated the adjustments of these understandings to the Finnish/Nordic context. These include the celebration of a shift from the kitchen to nature, sourcing and ethical commitments, concrete chef-diner interaction, and the dialogical relationship between NNUB and home cooking.

We find Raviv's (2017) call for exploring artful dining "beyond modernist cuisine" timely and suggest that the more "everyday" formats or practices of upmarket dining, such as NNUB dining, have noticeably contributed to the diffusion of artful dining (and continue to do so)<sup>15</sup>. NNUB dining may be interpreted in the framework of restaurants and chefs that carry the artful/modernist/elBulli restaurant revolution (on the substantial community of "ex-elBullinians" see Opazo 2016)<sup>16</sup>, or in other words, as one of the many dining practices operating under the influence of the teleoaffective formation of artful dining. At the least, in the

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<sup>15</sup> Another example of the interweavement of upmarket bistro food and art may be found in France, where the Le Fooding movement and gastronomic guide emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century as a form of "culinary futurism" and a reaction against the rule-based Nouvelle Cuisine (see Gopnik 2012, 262). As one of Gopnik's informants and an exponent of Le Fooding puts it, "a good meal is a rich experience, of any sort".

<sup>16</sup> Although Opazo's (2016, 172-173) "raw measure" of the global dispersal of elBulli-staff excludes Finnish chefs, e.g. restaurant Ask's (one Michelin star, NNUB) head chef/owner Filip Langhoff

Finnish/Nordic dining scene, NNUBs has remarkably paved the way for artful dining despite the practitioners' hesitancy for bridging such restaurants and art in explicit, discursive terms. Concerning the latter, we might add that the practice theoretical view of social life as consisting of both tacit and discursive elements has allowed us to make claims about the unarticulated understandings and goals of activity (see Warde 2016, 40). It must be noted, however, that had we not approached the practice primarily from the viewpoint of passionate restaurant consumption, we might have unveiled more critical viewpoints about artful dining. This is something that the upcoming studies on artful dining could focus on.

It remains to be seen whether the high-end restaurants and other emerging, extreme gastronomic events (such as the one provided by the acclaimed and disputed Vespertine in Los Angeles) continue to dominate the public discourse and inspire scholarly research around artful dining. In our view, under the times of art-influenced creativity as a guiding principle of late modern society (Reckwitz 2017) and dining out (Ribbat 2016), foodie-ism as an ubiquitous and omnivorous movement that may be understood from the perspective of art (Furrow 2016), and the evolving understandings of the concept of art itself (see e.g. Raviv 2017, Furrow 2016), a strict focus on modernist or other high-end dining concepts will likely not suffice in producing more in-depth understanding about the intersection of dining and art. Furthermore, looking beyond restaurants, the perspective of home cooking might offer remarkable insights into the linkages between food and art (see Raviv 2017).

The notion of artful dining as a large-scale and influential teleoaffective formation of late modern dining bears resemblance to the central accounts on the foodie culture (Johnston and Baumann 2010; de Solier 2013). If foodies (mostly as members of the educated middle-

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has worked at elBulli. Furthermore, in the Finnish dining scene “the Adrià-effect” has been recently mediated through Noma. For example, from the late 2016 on (including one of the observation visits), Kim Mikkola, previously a sous-chef at Noma, worked a few months at C&S as a “co-head chef”.

classes) are afraid of being accused of superficial status-seeking and if they appreciate talking, learning, and knowing about food in addition to the instant pleasures derived from it, witnessing the teleoaffective structure of NNUB as celebrating a move beyond the instant pleasures appears only logical. In this sense, restaurants of the type described in this article may be perceived as emotional-intellectual foodie-hubs that do not ignore deliciousness, but which essentially revolve around the exchange of ideas, emotions and gastronomical learning.

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