

MARGARINE SCULPTURES: HISTORICAL ODDITY OR AN AWESOME WAY OF ADDING VALUE TO THE CUSTOMER DINING EXPERIENCE?

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ABSTRACT

Margarine sculptures have a long and illustrious culinary history, yet in changing times they are rarely seen in modern hotel and restaurant settings. This paper considers the historical and cultural significance of margarine sculptures, reports on a brief convenience sample of Auckland hotels and summarises an interview with one of the few specialists still regularly creating margarine sculptures for functions and events. The paper will include the visual display of the process for creating a sculpture of an iconic New Zealand symbol (Ryan, 1997). The process will be illustrated with photographs and reflections of the artist. The final work of art will be displayed in the 'ideas factory' element of CAUTHE 2013 and delegates are invited to discuss their responses to the sculpture with the artist.

KEYWORDS: Margarine sculpture, New Zealand, culinary art, history, adding value

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the history of the margarine sculpture art and reflects on the reasons for its decline in the 21st Century. It outlines the medium of margarine before discussing some of the most famous chef artists and then concludes with the issue of the benefits of margarine carving and a synopsis of some exploratory research carried out for this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The medium

The history of margarine dates back to 1869 when the French chemist Hippolyte Mège-Mouriès patented it. The government was looking for a cheaper replacement for butter (which was scarce and therefore very expensive) which could be used to feed the poor and the armed forces. Margarine has the reputation as being one of the most harshly treated food stuffs in the world, with bans on its sale, regulated production and strict restrictions on the use of additives (Dupré, 1999). It was not until 1971 that margarine became legally obtainable in New Zealand – and then only with a doctor's prescription to prove you suffered from heart disease. In 1972 the government amended the law to make margarine available to all, but demand was so high that all of Australia's initial export to New Zealand was consumed in Auckland (Steel, 2005).

The masters

Perhaps the most famous food artist was the 'King of Chefs' Marie Antoine Carême (1784-1833) who changed the perception of the role from domestic cook to that of professional and celebrity chef. Haute cuisine was the term given to the 'high art' of French cooking favoured by international Royalty and the nouveau rich of Paris. He was famous for his architecturally-inspired elaborate showpieces (piece montee) that he created to adorn banquets in the grand houses of Europe, whose owners had the money to impress people with lavish banquets. In New Zealand the 1980's era was the pinnacle of the buffet style of service that many large hotels, restaurants offered. The development of improved food safety standards and the ever changing food trends meant the popularity of buffets

diminished as the food industry evolved. Hill & Hill (1988) attribute the decline of interest in margarine and in general in showpieces to the marginalisation of the art by economic imperatives and declining commercial opportunities as the demand for banquet buffets waned and became viewed as “old fashioned” and by association food art. A traditional bastion for “food art” in New Zealand is the annual National Culinary Fare (Salon Culinarie) competitions held in Auckland. Tim Aspinall¹⁶ head margarine showpiece judge to the national competitions, a margarine mentor and competitor since 1974 has witnessed a decline in competitor numbers from the height of 36 competitors in one year in the late 80’s to an average of 6 competitors for the last 4 years in which all are from the same establishment. Static food art classes have been slowly disappearing from the culinary competitions and as such may be a modern reflection of the culinary industry’s attitude towards food art forms. Classes that are no longer seen at competition due to lack of entrants are wax flowers, ice carving, salt carving, salt dough sculpture and sporadic displays of pastillage modelling and vegetable carving. Other classes are kept alive by the endeavours of a very small group of dedicated people. Dorn (1993) suggests that one of the key values of having art education as part of the curriculum are that it enables the students the ability to articulate in a way that might not be easily expressed academically. The thinking processes that are inherent in creating art enhances the power of analytical thinking, and encourages a flexible mind-set to solve problems and find solutions. These attributes facilitate the learning of new skills.

METHODS

This paper uses a case study in a pictorial form of the actual creation and construction of a margarine sculpture, supported by a literature review on the history of the medium and craft, and comments from the 2000-strong TRINET online community of academic researchers. It also carried out a brief convenience sample telephone survey of seven large hotels in Auckland to determine the demand for buffet showpieces and an interview with Ice Creations, the only remaining major supplier of ice carvings in New Zealand. The research is obviously exploratory and qualitative and the author makes no claims to generalisability (Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2009).

DISCUSSION

Under the Garde Manger banner, food art skills could be taught in culinary schools. The Garde Manger section of the kitchen is where cold food was preserved, stored and prepared. This section is also where cold buffet and banquet work is done to artfully display cold items of food (The Culinary Institute of America, 2000). To further enhance and display the skills of the Garde Manger chef, decorative non-edible food art are placed with the presented cold foods (Sonnenschmidt & Nicolas, 1993).

The telephone survey found none of the Auckland hotels contacted offered any food-based showpieces, and it was rare for clients to have arranged them themselves. Two respondents said they could not remember seeing a commercially-produced food sculpture in 10 – 15 years. Flower decorations were the most common, followed by a few who mentioned ice sculptures. These had all been produced by the same sculptor at ‘Ice Creations’, the business he has been working at for twenty-seven years.

This paper developed out of a passion for margarine sculpting, so it is appropriate that this section discusses the benefits of the craft, whether those are for the individual or the organization employing them.

Smith (2012) explains that ‘food art’ is a way of personalizing an event and can add the ‘wow’ factor that many hospitality businesses need to generate in order to ensure customer satisfaction, loyalty and

¹⁶ (Aspinell, T., 2012)

positive word-of-mouth in the press, on facebook, twitter or just over the dinner table to friends. He suggests the few who choose to specialize in the medium are either creative chefs or artists who have used food as their material. However he advises,

‘The satisfaction can be immense when it comes together. Sometimes the fee charged can be worthwhile but rarely represents the amount of work that goes in to a one off piece’ (Smith, 2012, p2).

This sense of satisfaction is one the author identifies with. The author of this paper has been sculpting margarine since he was 18 and in the past thirty years has also competed in culinary competitions for over ten years, earning bronze, silver and gold medals for his creations, usually of people or faces. This recognition from his peers is very rewarding. Another benefit is that the creative expression of margarine sculpting provides the opportunity for reflection.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The original aim of margarine sculpting was to act as a showpiece for elaborate buffets in the homes of royalty and the rich, a trend that was mirrored in the Grand Hotels. There is little doubt that practitioners of this craft are becoming rare. The author would be interested to discuss with conference participants their own experiences of margarine and other food sculptures, their role in the 21st Century and an internet-engrossed ‘always on’ culture, and their personal response to the piece created for this conference. The choice of the carving for the piece this paper is based around is felt to be very appropriate as it symbolizes hospitality (Lashley, Morrison & Lynch, 2007).

Further research

In the course of carrying out this research, a number of fellow academics have suggested possible further avenues for research. South Central College in Minnesota, USA offer a specialist option in culinary arts ‘designed to give the student advanced knowledge, skills and practical training in tallow/margarine sculpting and ice carving’ (SCC, 2012). Although it is about butter, one academic from the University of South Australia, Adelaide remembered that Wisconsin, as ‘The Dairyland State’ used to have butter carving displays at the annual State Fair. An academic from Exeter University in the UK mentioned the Devon County Show in a region famous for its dairy produce and mentioned that a pastry margarine called ‘Flex’ was sometimes used on cold buffet tables in hotels. Apparently Tibetan monks use yak butter sculpting as an aid to meditation. Finally, one mentioned that cruise ships (where buffets are still common) would be a good place to investigate the use of margarine sculptures and people’s reactions to them. All the responding academics are recalling historical information and no current observations were cited.

In investigating this topic I found an abundance of historical data pertaining to food art. However there have been limitations in obtaining sufficient research data to document food art as a show pieces in the recent past (1980 onwards) to the present time (2012).

Due to the scarcity of recent data the following topics could be pursued for further research:

- The current level of use of food art in the industry at a national level and compare these findings with international involvement.
- An in-depth analysis of the culinary competitions data as an indication of industry involvement and a potential indicator of industry trends.
- A comparison of domestic to international culinary competitions, focusing on competitor numbers, class distribution and standard of workmanship.
- Culinary education: Investigate the interest nationwide for food art in curriculum content and possible restrictions on or reasons for inclusion or exclusion.

These research topics would allow a more in depth analysis to gauge the interest in and value of food art within New Zealand at an industrial, educational and competition level. With this information a comparison could be made to the international involvement in food art.

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