

Food Speaks

PAUL PAIRET

(and sometimes has a lot to say ...)

Jojo (a recently appointed journalist who used to be a chef): Oh, so pretty! What's your name? How old are you?

Foie gras: My name is Choco-Passion Foie Gras Opera. I am two years old, born in Shanghai. No sauce, no garnish, I am as geometric as it gets. Solitary and ridiculously small on my big plate, I do not look much like an appetizer. At first glance, between the chocolate-foie gras ganache, the passionfruit jelly, the caramelized hazelnut, and my decorative topping – a little brittle-twisted crystal – you might even think I am perhaps a shortcake that belongs in a pastry display, a mistake, a caricature, an anachronism at this stage of a meal, 'a chocolate opera'. Don't get me wrong – I've been purposely designed for you to think 'sweet' in the short time that separates my little show and your first bite. Why? To neutralize memory's role in the anticipation of taste, so that my appearance won't help much in instantly decoding my taste, so that the "What is this?" will take over the "I know".

Worse, my visual reference plays on sweet tones, and your psychological expectation will hardly offset this unconscious feel, taking the greater risk to upgrade 'What is this?' to its correlating, trivial superlative, 'What the f- is that?'

I should trigger your mind just enough to assume 'sweet', even though you get savoury; to expect 'weird' and pick up the strangely familiar. It is this contrast, this gap between expectation and reality that will instil curiosity and catch up a deeper attention to my taste!

I am an appetizer dressed like a dessert, a 'look alike / taste unlike', a transvestite, seeking love. Et voila!

Jojo: Well, young foie gras, don't get too over the top. Do you really believe that people who come to the restaurant eventually to eat, but also to simply have a good time, enjoy their company and the view are sensitive to this kind of complex theory? Aren't you being a bit presumptuous?

Foie gras: I would be presumptuous if I was expecting people to decode my theory. But I don't. The effect of my design is subliminal in most cases, I shape a subconscious expectation. I am not elitist, not about cultural relevance; my reference is mainstream in any Western culture – knowing what a true 'opera' cake is might help ultimately, but regardless, most people have a small chocolate cake reference to match with my design.

In other words, you do not need to *know* but you might *feel*.

Jojo: Should not you be on therapy? Isn't food just about taste?

Foie gras: I have answered this question many times. Yes, of course food is essentially about taste – and you do not need any food pedigree to eventually enjoy my taste... but food is definitely not *only* about taste, and denying this would be extremely naïve. Beyond biological necessity, I'd

say that food is about pleasure, culture, memory, fun, curiosity, discovery... food is about emotions.

All this said, I am myself mostly about taste, as I was built around the challenge of taste balancing. Originally, my composition, or reason to exist, was based on the bitter taste similarity between raw foie gras and dark chocolate. It might sound like a perilous, enforced exercise, and you might rate this taste-bridge as odd, but think again. Bridging chocolate and foie gras is, in fact, not much of a discovery. I am, historically, a classic combination. The Olmec, ancestors of the Mayans, used cocoa as a savoury drink and flavourful sauce thickener for its energizing properties and taste. Even today, South Americans make Mole Poblano, a spicy cocoa-based turkey stew. In modern cuisine, the association between cocoa powder and pan-fried foie gras is already a 'new classic'.

So, you see, although this might be a cultural matter, my originality does not so much lie in a new taste sensations; rather, in lies in balancing the taste of a savoury composition based on classically stamped 'sweet' products. The passionfruit's sour zing cuts my fatness and, to an extent, my poise. The sweetness of the port reduction offsets the bitterness of the 100 percent bitter chocolate foie gras savoury ganache.

Ultimately, taste leads design, and the search for this very subtle balance between each sweet, salty, sour, bitter and complex tastes have imposed my precise, to-the-millimetre, layered geometric look.

We might have obtained a very interesting and different effect in atomizing all the tastes in four separates entities in a salad style: crushed foie gras, passionfruit jus, sherry reduction, and grated chocolate. Each bite would then be conditioned differently depending on the eater's own dosage, and why not?

But do not think for a second that my father did not go through that trial before adopting me. *[Yes, at this stage I might have to remind you that the Foie Gras Opera who is talking thinks I am his father – don't disappoint him.]*

It was too much of a taste shock to set it free to customer dosage. The combination required a set proportion to be repeated on four 'monotone' – the literal sense of one-tone – bites: the first to surprise, the second to confirm, the third to comfort, and the fourth to remember. So, you see, I have been purposely designed to serve the purpose of taste, but my design was not the purpose; and yes, you can read that again, because this is the very core parameter of food design philosophy.

And, no, the word 'design' is not too strong in food. Design diverges from décor and goes far beyond presentation. Please let me explain... finished? What do you mean 'finished'?

Ahhhhaaa oooohhhiii..... *[I hope you recognize the sound of foie gras getting ingested.]*

Jojo : SLURP!...BRRUPPP!...MMMUMMMH! Not bad.

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