Still of *Aftertaste*, Netflix, taken from Youtube

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The Thin Line between Family Inspiration and Culinary Authorship: On the Series *Aftertaste*

My paternal relatives are bakers and musicians. I remember that, when I was a child of around three or four, I saw my father making dinner one afternoon. He pulled a freshly boiled potato out of a pot, peeled it carefully—so as not to burn his fingers—and cut it in half. Then, he took it, still steaming, and sprinkled salt on it before biting into it. He did all that with such delicacy and pleasure that this simple act is probably my earliest memory of my relationship with food and my love of it. It is also one of my first memories of my father.

He baked bread from time to time, but the one who really did it as a way of life was his mother, my grandmother. I didn't have the chance to learn about cooking from her because I was very young when she died; however, for the last thirty years I have made bread and cooked every day. All my cousins, male and female, have baked bread at some time in their lives, some possibly using my grandmother's recipes and others, like me, by pure instinct.

The Ins and Outs of *Aftertaste* (2021)[1]

Aftertaste is an Australian series that recently made me think about culinary authorship. The series also talks about a cookbook, that of Grandma June, and her culinary heirs Easton, her son, and Diana, her granddaughter. In my commentary on the series, I will discuss how I see the influence of family recipes on these two characters' culinary authorship. I offer a synopsis of the series, to then analyze it from the perspective of studies on "signature cuisine" from the standpoint of maternal cooking handed down by means of cookbooks.

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The series portrays the return of Chef Easton West to his hometown of Adelaide, Australia. His apparent intention is to spend time with his family and open a restaurant to support the local economy and promote products from the surrounding region. Easton has earned some Michelin stars, but has suffered a career slump due to his explosive personality, arrogance, and limited business management skills, culminating with an outburst of rage at his last restaurant, which was caught on video and went viral on social media.

In Adelaide, Easton is reunited with his father, Jim; his sister, Denise; and Denise's daughter, Diana. He has come back to reinvent himself, but first he needs to solve lingering family issues. He wants to continue his career as soon as possible and correct some mistakes; however, he still needs to revisit events from his past that will bedevil him in the present and complicate his return to the culinary world: for example, he will learn the true story of his mother, Grandma June.

Diana is a nineteen-year-old woman who has postponed enrolling in college because her real passion is gastronomy. June's cookbook is a central element in this first season, as motor and inspiration for both Diana and her uncle. In fact, Easton affirms that, although he apprenticed in the best kitchens in France, the memory of his mother, who supposedly died tragically, is the real reason he became a chef.

Easton and Diana decide to join forces and open their own restaurant in Adelaide. Their partnership conflicts with Denise's plans for her daughter: first because she wants Diana to go to college, and second because she doesn't want her to become, precisely, what Easton is: a cantankerous, abusive chef who has based his success on his inconsiderate behavior toward others. Denise resents Easton's taking advantage of her daughter's talent and using their family background as a pretext for their reunion, when he knows so little about it.

The characters suddenly discover that Grandma June did not die tragically. She just got fed up and abandoned them; and, worse still, she hated cooking. What is up, then, with the cookbook and why do Diana's desserts trigger gustatory memories in them all, if they're based on a fake story? The characters have created a fiction about June centered on the stereotype of a mother who cares for her family through food. Easton and Denise—as well as Diana—have experienced nostalgia for something that never happened, because Jim, their father, bought the cookbook at a flea market. When Easton discovers the cookbook's origin, in his rage and confusion he burns it in a fireplace.

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The revelation of June's true story, and with it the origin of the cookbook, shapes Diana's future; she is deeply upset and leaves her family to try her luck in London, where an agent promises her a position in a top-tier kitchen or financial backing to open her own pastry shop in the city. Wounded by her family's deceit, Diana bakes a huge cake for Easton and her mother—a hand with the middle finger extended—with the message: "Adios cockwombles (not you Brett)."

Aftertaste and Signature Cuisine

Some aspects of *Aftertaste* can be analyzed in the light of studies on "signature cuisine" or with an emphasis on the transmission of maternal knowledge through recipes. I aim to focus on three themes: the culinary movement with which Chef Easton West identifies, Diana's role as an up-and-coming cook in a male-dominated milieu, and, last, Diana and Easton's authorship in relation to the cookbook.

First, some scenes in the series show that both Easton's behavior as a chef and his culinary style adhere to the canons of *nouvelle cuisine*. Easton is portrayed as an artist, a genius, or a creator who reinterprets traditional recipes with notable originality, which has allowed him to attain celebrity status in gastronomic circles. Obsessed with raising his culinary craft to the level of art, he reduces the maternal figure to the role of "muse" or inspiration, adopting an aggressive masculinity and shunning everyday cooking and anything related with female domestic work and caregiving in kitchens.

Elsewhere, Roy C. Wood, an expert in the field, offers a study of *nouvelle cuisine* from three perspectives: as social construction, social production, and social consumption.[2] I will concentrate on the first two. Wood underscores how

nouvelle cuisine has acquired social value and a sense of refinement due to its focus on technique and its discourse on the quality of ingredients, promoting the image of a healthier, more natural past. It also presents itself as superior by distinguishing itself from traditional and ordinary culinary craft, striving, through innovation and experimentation, to attain the standing of art based on unique, non-standardized dishes, with less emphasis on the use of cookbooks and manuals that promote the repetition of conventional dishes.

In the case of social production, Wood agrees on the importance of individualism in the creative process. Such rhetoric is based on certain firmly held beliefs, such as the idea that *nouvelle cuisine* was born from the efforts of chefs unsatisfied and resentful toward employers who would not let them realize their vision. This in turn led to another important concept, the celebrity chef, who puts his talent above all else, playing the starring role in a narrative of male heroism. And with that we arrive at the second of the aforementioned three themes of the series: Diana's role as an up-and-coming cook in a male dominated world.

Diana's Journey

While a narrative like that seen in *Aftertaste* does not undermine the centrality of the "heroic" story of the male chef who struggles to overcome obstacles and regain his place in elite gastronomic circles, it does convey an ironic view of the situation. Moreover, the show also focuses on Diana's effort to make a name for herself in Adelaide despite the barriers her uncle Easton imposes with his male-dominated perspective on female domestic work and caregiving in kitchens, added to his disdain for his niece's professional work. We see the latter in his attitude toward the dessert she proposes as part of the menu for the restaurant's opening: a replica of the dessert with which Easton won his first Michelin star many years before.

For this occasion, Diana creates a fruit tart with a flower formed by thin slices of apple for the topping, resembling a clitoris, because she has lost her virginity the same day. She accompanies it with a *créme anlgaise* to be placed over the apple topping. In her words, "This is a hills fruit tart with a Fruity Hoops cereal *créme anlgaise* on the side and you put it in the hole on top and that symbolizes… Well, you know… This is a coming-of-age-story… you know, moving from childhood to adulthood."

Proud of her narrative, and despite its being an original idea inspired by a highly personal and transformative experience in her life, Diana meets with Easton's disapproval, as he refuses to give credit to his creative and talented partner and disparages her artistic merit. "Is this some kind of a joke? I asked for something original, not some crass, millennial confessional vulgarity… This

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is the culinary equivalent of drawing a cock and balls on your school desk… We are a fine-dining restaurant!" Diana apologizes and promises to do better next time.

Diana's next edible creation is a dessert called Pop My Cherry Ripe, likewise linked to the loss of her virginity, which she Diana defines as follows: "Tonight's dessert is the story of my deflowering and it is called Pop My Cherry Ripe. So, we have for you a chocolate vagina. Inside a crème brûlée base made with milk… We have roasted coconut, a cherry gel made from local produce and orgasm popping candy."

Fascinated by the dessert, the diners ask where the utensils are, but to eat Pop My Cherry Ripe, they must place their faces in the bowl and eat the chocolate vagina directly with their mouth or hands. Easton considers the dessert unprofessional because it clashes with the rest of the menu and fails to reprise the episode that led to his winning his first Michelin star. However, for Diana, what matters is to make food no one has seen before, food that really means something, not the pathetic rebirth of her uncle or his dull French menu.

Easton's disdain for Diana coincides with the exclusion of women not only from *haute cuisine*, but from the culinary world in general, on top of the lack of appreciation for domestic cookery. Nevertheless, for many, cooking has been a vehicle for resistance and a space from which to speak not only from duty but from pleasure.

Showing Diana in a professional space, cooking for customers in a restaurant, challenges many narratives in which female cooks are placed in a domestic environment cooking only for their families. And her protagonism is the very reason why Easton often addresses his niece with demeaning comments about her body, perpetuating a prejudice that ties cooking with female corporality, placing it in opposition to male intellect.

Finally, I want to examine the relevance of the cookbook that Diana follows with such devotion and Easton burned on learning that his mother was not the author. According to professor Felipe Acevedo—who takes as his example the work of Claudia Roden, a cultural anthropologist and cookbook writer—, a cookbook can function as a biographical narrative embellished with family anecdotes, but not just that; it can also preserve the flavors and knowledge of a people or a community.[3] On the other hand, a mother's cookbook produces an experience of belonging due to the transmission of sensory experiences; smell and taste can be vehicles to revisit the world of one's childhood, one's memories, and ties to the past.

Now, it is true that the cookbook had no effect on Easton during his time away from Adelaide, because he was not even aware of its existence; however, memories of flavors probably made his time in London, China, or Paris more cheerful. And in Diana's case, she always saw "June's cookbook" as a point of departure to recover her knowledge and sample those flavors, in addition to sharing them with her family. Nevertheless, when the truth about the supposed family cookbook is revealed, both Easton and Diana are forced to embrace their achievements as the true authors of their creations, the artists behind their culinary works.

In conclusion, *Aftertaste* speaks of a male practitioner of the "signature cuisine" movement in unflattering terms, as Chef Easton attempts to impose his authority on a young woman who wants to forge her own path in the industry. It also speaks of an Easton who, despite craving renewal, is unable to do the right thing. He seems to have nothing more to say through his cooking because he has destroyed so much throughout his career.

Grandma June may have been the source of the culinary talent her descendants possess, but her beloved recipes are mostly fiction and fabricated memories that say more about the origin Easton and Diana are searching for to explore their own present. Regardless of her grandmother's story, Diana is an accomplished pastry chef, with a bright future in London.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned that I never learned anything about cooking from my grandmother, but even so, I have baked bread and cooked meals for thirty years. In that sense, part of me identifies with these characters, since my love of food has led me to create interesting dishes. VM

Notes

1 The author refers to the series *Aftertaste* directed by Jonathan Brough (Australia: Closer Productions, 2021). Two seasons have been released to date. [Editor's Note.]

2 See Roy C. Wood, "The Shock of the New: A Sociology of *Nouvelle cuisine*," *Journal of Consumer Studies & Home Economics*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1991, pp. 77-92, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.1991.tb00672.x

3 Felipe Acevedo Riquelme, "Trayectos y diáspora de una culinaria femenina: una lectura de *The Book of Jewish Food,* de Claudia Roden," *A la Este. Revista de Teoría Literaria y Literatura Comparada*, no. 2, 2022, pp. 173-189, https://www.ucm.es/alaeste/file/11-the-book-of-jewish.