Christell Lane

*The Cultivation of Taste: Chefs and the Organisation of Fine Dining*

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As Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon enjoy the delights of fine-dining in popular BBC TV series ‘The Trip’, we are given fleeting glimpses of the chefs and waiting staff responsible for preparing and serving the elaborate dishes. In Christell Lane’s book, it is the chefs that take centre stage. In this richly detailed empirical study, Lane reports on the demanding (and often gruelling) work practices of 40 Michelin-starred chefs from Britain and Germany. Tracing the development of fine-dining in countries without an indigenous haute cuisine, she embarks on a journey that leads us through debates about varieties of capitalism, rural cooking cultures, skills and vocational training, emotional labour, cultural consumption and the power of taste-making intermediaries, like *The Michelin Guide.* Drawing on in-depth interviews with chefs, diners and the arbiters of taste at Michelin Guide UK and Germany, she offers unique insights into the ways particular expectations are both placed upon and generated by chefs seeking to achieve fine-dining accolades.

In an age where we are surrounded by celebrity chefs, cooking television shows and the growth of ‘food porn’, it is surprising how little research has been conducted with those pursuing a career within the culinary industry. Lane’s book thus fills an important gap. She reveals the difficult pathways into the fine-dining industry, with chefs spending many years training to develop their craft, often working very long hours, in authoritarian environments for little pay. It is not uncommon for chefs to work 12-hour days and 60-hour weeks, with only a select few ever gaining the recognition that a coveted Michelin star bestows. This is an industry that is almost exclusively dominated by men, owing to ‘a work culture which assumes full availability of its members in kitchens’ (p110). It may surprise readers to learn that making a fine-dining venture profitable is a difficult task with restaurants having to invest heavily in training, staff, high-quality and fresh ingredients, retail rents, and kitchen fittings. Lane reveals that many chefs must search for alternative forms of income, like appearing on television, because ‘without supplementary earnings it is only possible to run an independently owned restaurant with a high degree of self-exploitation’ (p100).

One of the central features of Lane’s book is to draw out the key differences between the fine-dining cultures in Germany and Britain. In Germany, there are more established training routes into fine-dining and more qualified chefs than meets the current demand, whilst in Britain the converse is true. In Britain, Michelin starred restaurants are concentrated in London, whereas in Germany there is a broader geographical distribution, reflecting distinctive rural cooking cultures. Many of the starred restaurants in Germany are attached to hotels meaning the chefs are partially shielded from the vagaries of the market although this does make it more difficult for these individuals to develop and expand their businesses, as British chefs have done. The cultures of consumption are shown to differ significantly also, with German consumers tending to prioritise value for money thus leading to a less enthusiastic embrace of fine-dining. The exploration of these deep-rooted national differences is a key strength of this study.

Although Lane’s work is empirically rich and fascinating, the theoretical backdrop to her discussion would have benefitted from more development. Much of her material is viewed through the lens of Boltanski and Thevenot’s six discrete ‘orders of worth’ (inspired, domestic, market, industrial, civic and opinion) each of which ‘provide a distinctive moral philosophy which shapes mutual expectations about the right conduct’ (p7). In her opening pages, Lane states that these orders do not necessarily have to be seen as incompatible or in conflict with one another but she doesn’t explicitly return to the theoretical framework summarised in the Introduction nor does she spend time unpacking this initial claim. I would have liked to have seen a broader discussion of the interaction between these different orders of worth and their shaping in different cultural settings. The question of how different institutional formations generate different moralities and understandings of value is a key concern of her work, and a potentially significant contribution to sociological understandings of the constitution of moral economies, yet it is underdeveloped in this work. This issue could have been addressed with the addition of a summarising/concluding chapter – something the book lacks. Such a chapter would have brought together in one place the key differences between fine-dining cultures in Britain and Germany and highlighted the complex arrangements/shaping of their respective orders of worth.

Despite these reservations, Lane offers an un-rivalled in-depth account of the fine-dining industry, written in an extremely accessible style that will be vital reading to those interested in comparative culinary cultures.