



Indier than thou: On creative professions, chefs, and the sacralization of margins

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Soundly situated in obscurityland,
famous in inverse proportion to how cool I am,
and should I ever garner triple-digit fans
you can tell me then there's someone I ain't indier than.

– MC Frontalot, 'Indier Than Thou'

Introduction

The notion of professions and professionalism often assumes a hierarchy of achievement, even a meritocracy (Abbott, 1998; Derber et al., 1990), where the true professionals will rise and the mediocre will at best occupy a vague middle position. For instance, the best oncologist is assumed to be one that all in the business know of, and also one that is most likely to be known by the outside world. Even though we rarely state things so bluntly, the best professionals – the most professional ones of all – are meant to occupy the tip of the pyramid and be the exemplars against which all others are measured. Such a perspective of professionalism, one of pure and generally accepted meritocracy, has as its core the notion that professions can be objectively assessed, regardless of whether this assessment is internal (i.e. done by fellow professionals) or external (i.e. done by laymen, customers or the interested public).

This, however, assumes that the criteria through which professionalism is measured would be homogenous across the internal/external divide in a profession, that these can be understood in at least a quasi-objective fashion, and that positions of centrality, optima and marginality can be meaningfully negotiated between these fields. In any number of professions such an assumption will hold true, to the point of being trivial. For instance, a lawyer that loses cases rather than winning them will be seen by both peers and clients as less of a professional than one who tends to win them. Professionalism in medicine would

dictate that an oncologist who saves many patients is a better doctor than one who does not, and so on. Even though there are cases that go against this – a lawyer may well specialize in hard-to-win cases and few laymen know exactly what makes a pathologist ‘good’ – there often exists an assumption that we can state with some degree of certainty how good a person is at his/her chosen profession, i.e. just how much of a professional they are.

In fact, one could argue that the normal way in which professions are discussed builds on such implicit assumptions. Phenomena such as professional association tests and certifications work from the notion that there is a clear body of knowledge that defines a profession, and thus that the better one is at mastering this body, the more obviously one is a professional. However, this perspective ignores both the possibility of resistance against such norms (Ashcraft, 2005; Achinstein and Ogawa, 2006) and the potential for multiple interpretations of the same. Somewhat differently put, an extended understanding of professionalism would demand not only understanding how professionalism is established internally and legitimized externally, but also how varied perspectives on professionalism and the apex of the same can be negotiated in the internal discourse of a profession.

It is this latter issue that this research note addresses. Rather than professing (*sic*) an interest in the manner in which professionalism is negotiated *in general*, the note instead looks to the much more special case of how success in a profession can be seen as a flaw and a breach of professionalism, and how a marginal position can become sacralized in relation to such a perceived breach. Even more specifically, this note addresses how occupying a marginal position becomes an important sign of ‘real’ professionalism in the field of high-level gastronomy, particularly in the image- and identity-work of chefs, based on an ongoing research project in which I’m studying chefs working in world-class restaurants. I will in this note argue that this case shows the need for understanding marginal categories in professions in a more multi-faceted way, and further that the notion of ‘being indie’ can be utilized to do so.

Being Indie

The term ‘indie’ comes from the world of music, and denotes that a band is ‘independent’. Originally coined for bands that chose either to forego a record contract or to sign up with an independent label rather than with one of the big record companies for fear of becoming creatively neutered, the term has been co-opted in a number of different contexts. If indie music was music that was freed from the format and template thinking of the major labels, and thus at least theoretically more creative and free, similar sensibilities obviously exist in most creative industries. Today one can talk of indie gaming, indie fashion and indie film, and these only represent the more established forms of being independent. In wrestling, there are several independent circuits, brewing and soft-drink aficionados talk of indie beer and indie soda and there is a burgeoning indie porn scene.

The logic of indie is founded on there being something to be independent from. Looking to the development of the notion in the field of music, we can see that the key element was the exceptional market control wielded by the major music labels in the 1950s onwards. With a near monopoly on both retail and media space, labels such as EMI or Warner Music Group have a history of using their corporate coffers to effectively shut out non-affiliated artists and exerting tremendous power over artists who wanted to break commercially. Artists and labels who did not want to conform to this became labeled as ‘independent’, i.e. independent from the demands (and the resources) of the ‘majors’. This established indie as a counter-position to the usual way of doing business, an alternative to corporate interests, and more often than not a moral position in relation to an assumedly reductionistic mainstream. A consequence of this was often the establishment of professional norms that deviated from those adopted by the majors.

As a result, the identity of being indie became a moral one, a way to show that one could be, say, a professional musician without adhering to the norms of the mainstream, even if this often meant accepting a significantly greater business risk (or significantly less chance of large-scale success). Something similar can be seen in other cultural industries. Indie games rarely get the kind of marketing campaigns that major games do, and as a result show significantly smaller profit potential. Indie wrestling is rarely broadcast on TV, and thus seldom enables performers to make lucrative sponsorship agreements or build a movie career. Indie porn, which often uses performers who do not live up to the stereotypical image of porn-stars, sells far less than the products of, for example, Vivid but is often viewed as a worthier form of pornography, particularly as it highlights the reductionism in the field. In all cases, performers and companies in these fields tend to argue that they have chosen to remain small(er), and that they do not even wish for the kind of success that their field’s major actors have achieved.

What this creates, thus, is a kind of bifurcation in the notion of what it means to be an artist, a porn-star, a wrestler, and so on. You can be a major performer, or you can occupy the margin known as indie. The former will build their legitimacy on easily ascertainable measures of success and professionalism, such as sales of records and T-shirts, attendance at shows, and number of media hits. This also enables them to be hierarchically rated, for example by being crowned as the World’s Best-Selling Rap Artist or Best-Known Porn Star. Indie performers will not be able to compete in these kinds of rankings, or show comparable measurements (although some have claimed that social media is evening out the playing field) and thus often turn their relative obscurity and lack of success into badges of honor.

Looking at this from the perspective of professions and professionalism we could talk of a dual structure in how a creative industry views itself. From one vantage point, the one adopted by people affiliated with the major corporations, professionalism is striving for ever-greater sales and attendances. From the other, the vantage point of indie, professionalism is more of a moral category, and can be defined in much more fluid and flexible ways. Here, opting to create, say, a concept album that one knows will never get

any greater radio time may well be proof of one's professionalism and adherence to professional norms. Or, as nerdcore rapper MC Frontalot breaks it down:

I'm so indie that my shirt don't fit.
You wonder out loud, 'Frontalot, yo, why you come so ill-equipped?'
B-b-b-because...uh, being all prepared to get on the mic is selling out
and I ain't even about to relinquish indie clout.

While this represents a well-known fact in the performing arts, I will here argue that this extends to professions assumedly more controlled than rap, wrestling or porn, and that the increasing tendency to ascribe performative and experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) aspects to more and more professions will make indie an increasingly important category for understanding post-industrial professions. As an example of this, I will now turn to the profession of chefs, particularly those involved in high-level gastronomy.

Chefs: Profession and professionalism in the kitchen

From the perspective of studying professions, becoming a chef is something of a cipher. Where doctors, lawyers and accountants need to show formal qualifications and often belong to a professional association, and a number of the 'marginal' professions highlighted in this special issue do not follow such formal paths of certification, chefs represent both/and. One can become a chef by partaking in formal education, for instance at the Culinary Institute of America (see Ruhlman, 1997) or Le Cordon Bleu, and later joining one of the many professional associations, such as the American Culinary Federation or one of the other societies that comprise the World Association of Chefs Societies. The latter also has certification programs, such as the planned WACS Recognition of Culinary Professional Program, through which 'professional chefs can be recognized by WACS for having obtained a certain level of mastery in the field of professional food service and culinary education by documenting their experience and education' (<http://www.wacs2000.org/>).

As should be obvious, this is very much in line with how we normally see professions and advancement in the same. Some chefs take this very seriously, and collect certifications and awards from professional associations as badges of honor. On the other hand, this is only one of the ways in which someone can create a career as a professional chef. A great deal of chefs – including some of the most highly regarded ones – have instead of formal schooling partaken in a less structured but more traditional form of education. This, which might be referred to as an apprenticeship, often starts by an aspiring young wo/man walking into a restaurant – which may or may not be owned by a family member – and simply starting at the bottom of the kitchen hierarchy. Starting out as a kitchen boy/girl, with tasks such as peeling potatoes and washing dishes, the aspiring cook will over time progress to take on more demanding roles, involving working the different stations of the kitchen (such as salads and other cold items, fish, and meat). In some kitchens, one may rise to the level of mastering and thus permanently occupying one such station, and

eventually rising to the level of *sous-chef*, i.e. the position just under the chef of a kitchen – his/her second-in-command. Even though there are cases where one can progress in this manner directly to chef (Ferran Adrià, who many consider the greatest chef of all time, started as a cook at *El Bulli* [later *elBulli*] at 22 years of age and took control of the kitchen 18 months later, but as he is considered something of a demi-god in culinary circles, this is not to be considered normal), the usual way is to do a series of ‘stages’ at other restaurants. For those who wish to become star chefs, this is seen as almost a prerequisite. To work as a *stagiaire* often means to do an unpaid internship at a famous restaurant, and the competition for such spots at the most prestigious ones is fierce. Many do several stages, attempting to learn from each restaurant/chef in turn.

While this system does not bestow any formal accreditation upon the individuals who follow such a path, it is highly regarded in the culinary system – certainly more so than the more formal one. The reasons for this are many. Even though it is by no means easy to gain acceptance into one of the elite schools, it is still far easier than getting to be a *stagiaire* for one of the most famous chefs. Formal education is also seen as easier in itself, seeing as it doesn’t necessarily involve the hectic everyday activities of the professional restaurant. Further, where a formal education legitimizes you as a culinary professional by way of one institution, the system of stages acts a more complex legitimizing function – by having partaken in it, one is made into a legitimate professional both by having passed through a number of well-regarded kitchens, and by having partaken in a system that has been in place for a very long time. Thus, traditional legitimacy is supplanted by something we could call co-branding legitimacy. Having for instance done stages at *Arzak*, *Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester* and *Noma* signals to the larger culinary field that you have a complex set of experience and that you’re prepared to do hard work to get ahead, both things that are valued greatly by other chefs. While no-one, and certainly no chef that I’ve interviewed, would state that all forms of formal education are worthless, the overall view is that the older, less formal system is preferable and even mandatory for those wishing to make their mark on the field.

If you want to become a cook, certainly do not fall for one of these fucking three-year Culinary Institute of America scams. Tens of thousands of dollars later and you sill still have to start of as a third appetizer cook. A six-month program might be good to learn some basics, but culinary school can teach all types of bad mannerisms. (David McMillan, interviewed in *Lucky Peach*, issue 3, Spring 2012)

What this suggests is that there are at least two forms of professionalism that chefs consider. One is the formal one, with certification and similar accolades, and is more or less transparent to outsiders. The other – the informal one – is much more opaque, and the manner in which professional development is understood is based much more on a negotiated order within the field. This can also take a number of forms, and the subtle differences in how something is valued can be complicated for someone outside the field to parse. For instance, the most highly regarded top restaurant of the last decade is undoubtedly *elBulli*. As the stage upon which the already mythologized chef-of-chefs Ferran Adrià created some of the most influential and outlandish dishes of recent culinary

history (his ‘deconstructed’ gin and tonic is justly famous), it has also served as a training kitchen for many of the contemporary top chefs. In personal communication – as I took part in a round-table discussion arranged in Stockholm, summer 2011 – Adrià stated that basically every restaurant that is promoted as being among the best in the world had an *elBulli*-alumnus. While this is somewhat hyperbolic, a very large number of particularly European top chefs have done stages for Adrià, and this affiliation is often highlighted on CVs (Abend, 2011). The competition for such spots has also been exceptional. For an outsider, it would seem that this, then, represents a quasi-formal accreditation, and a universally accepted one. The reality is however more complex. While no-one would discount the value of working at *elBulli*, many chefs bristle at the notion that this in itself would be enough. Instead, an often stated suggestion is to *first* do a stage at a much more traditional restaurant, such as for instance one of Joël Robuchon’s restaurants, in order to get classic technique drilled in, and only later do a stage in a more avant-garde kitchen.

Through this, the notion of professionalism among chefs is neither tied to the idea that there would be one, formal path to greatness, nor to the idea that one can simply set out and make things up as one goes along. Instead, the negotiation of what is considered professional behavior, and what is seen as laudable, is part of a highly complex set of negotiations, many of which can seem idiosyncratic or even incomprehensible to outsiders. Thus, the sensibility of the culinary ‘scene’ is one, which plays to a certain indie logic, but without being stable. Rather than presenting a clear-cut picture of what counts and what doesn’t count as laudable in the profession of a chef, the field showcases a number of discourses through which the idea of ‘the good chef’ is processed. It is towards these I will now turn.

The in crowd: Victories and vilification

One of the most complex issues in the interpretation(s) of professionalism among chefs is connected to the role afforded to success. As the culinary economy is a very challenging, hit-driven one, and as the development and management of a top restaurant is exceptionally risky, success is not necessarily measured in the same manner internally in the field as it is externally. To understand the underlying complexity, it is important to note that top restaurants very rarely make a profit, and often run at a considerable loss (see e.g. Chelminski, 2005). In order to, for example, gain three stars in the *Michelin Guide*, a restaurant not only has to be able to serve outstanding food, it needs to keep up exceptional service and quality standards that most corporations would find excessive if not impossible. Even when things are running smoothly, a three star restaurant or one that aspires to be one, will have almost no profit margins, simply because the costs for food and personnel are very high and can only be adjusted upwards. Chefs thus often see their main restaurants as loss leaders, flagships that are sponsored by the more lucrative business of catering, consulting and the like.

In the world of top chefs, then, top restaurants aren't necessarily seen as vehicles for personal enrichment. While there certainly are top restaurants that run at a profit – however small this may be – the understanding in the field is that just trying to make as much money as possible of a restaurant, even a very good restaurant, is not necessarily professional. Many top restaurants can thus be found in somewhat unlikely places, particularly if one were to consider things from strictly a business perspective. *Arzak*, a three-star restaurant in San Sebastián, is still located at the site where Juan Mari Arzak's grandparents opened a tavern, which is now next to a rather busy street but still removed from the more fashionable quarters of the city. When I interviewed Juan Mari and his daughter Elena (who run the kitchen jointly), both stated that it would be impossible to consider moving the restaurant merely for convenience or commercial reasons. Both also bristled at the idea of opening more restaurants. Similarly, when David Chang, the young Korean-American chef who is often considered to be one of the most important new voices in the culinary field, opened up his most ambitious restaurant, *Momofuku Ko*, he ensured that it had only twelve seats and took reservations only six days in advance, online only, first-come-first-served. From a commercial standpoint this might be seen as sheer insanity, but within the field it has been viewed as an almost spiritual move. By echoing the ideal of the hole-in-the-wall restaurant, democratic yet somewhat difficult to approach, David Chang signaled to the field that he was not prepared to dumb down or go for the easy buck.

This, then, can be compared to the internal reception and appreciation of chefs who may be more famous among laymen. A case in point would be Jamie Oliver, who is beloved by the TV-viewing public and either hated or treated with indifference among serious chefs. While few consider him important enough to comment upon, Marco Pierre White (the epoch-defining chef who's cookbook *White Heat* (White, 1990) was a defining moment in making chefs rock-star cool) has referred to him as 'a fat chef with a drum kit', while Gordon Ramsay has stated that he doesn't consider Oliver as a chef, but as a mere cook. According to the tabloids, White has also said: 'When he gets his first Michelin star I'll take him seriously'. Jamie Oliver is obviously much more commercially successful than either of his aforementioned critics, even though Gordon Ramsay has amassed a considerable fortune as well. This has made him a figure of ridicule in the culinary community, where he is seen as a sell-out and as someone who panders to the lowest common denominator. Interestingly, something similar is said about Gordon Ramsay, whose penchant for appearing in TV shows and trying to establish a plethora of top restaurants is seen as the mark of the less-than-serious chef. The difference in how the field views the two is, however, marked. While no-one can question that Ramsay is a skilled chef with a serious background – his work with *Aubergine*, *Restaurant Gordon Ramsay* and *Petrus* is very well regarded – the same cannot be said for Jamie Oliver. His cooking has always been geared towards a mass audience, and he has never shown an interest in working as a *stagiaire* at what top chefs would consider a serious restaurant. His success, then, is internally interpreted as a sign that he is not prepared to enter into the profession in a manner that would show seriousness towards the craft, but rather that he is happy with cooking mediocre food for less-than-discerning audiences.

A somewhat similar case can be found in the appreciation of people such as Emeril Lagasse. Lagasse, who in the US is better known as just ‘Emeril’ or ‘That guy that went “Bam!” on food shows’, has a background in fine dining, but became famous through the Food Network. As one of the first modern celebrity chefs, he is known for his jocular media personality, as well as for a mode of cooking that celebrates Cajun and Creole influences. While it is a simplification to say that Emeril creates home-cookin’ with an aura of *haute cuisine*, he has still become something of a joke and a punchline in the culinary fraternity. Although exceptionally successful (even if this success has waned as of late), with a conglomerate of food-related businesses – part of which was sold to Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia for a reported \$50 million in 2008 – he is rarely mentioned as anything except a bad example in the internal discussions in the field. Much of this is for the same reasons as the field shuns Jamie Oliver. While it is true that Emeril has shown far more serious kitchen prowess than the at best mediocre Oliver, the fact that he has aimed for commercial success rather than culinary excellence has marked him as representing something other than professionalism – at least in the manner top chefs understand the same.

It is here that the category of indie may be helpful. As the business of high-end food is fraught with commercial risks, the only way to ensure economic success is to appeal to a broader, blander taste. This is, implicitly, understood both as trying to follow a more formalized path and as being prepared to compromise one’s culinary vision. In this way, following formal structures, be they the path of formal education or corporate interests, becomes a source of potential corruption. The Culinary Institute of America may teach technique, and the Food Network may make you rich, but at a cost. Affiliating with either kind is to invite a logic that is seen as alien or corrupting, as it can be assessed externally. More simply put, success often means putting the audience ahead of the craft and being interested in succeeding – which often means caring about other things than those deemed important internally in the field.

For a person aspiring to become a top chef, and to be seen as such by other chefs, being dependent on things such as the TV viewing audience or formalized techniques means being controlled by an outside force. In order to show that one is to be taken seriously, a chef must be able to demonstrate that s/he is prepared to go through the initiation of being a *stagiaire* (or do this initiation in another form – as long as you get your burns and scars (see Bourdain, 2000)) and show that one can also be indie.

The indies: Aspirations and authenticity

The village of Axpe Marzana, in the Basque countryside, has (according to the Basque edition of Wikipedia, the only source I’ve been able to find) 238 inhabitants. It also has a restaurant with a Michelin star, *Asador Etxebarri*, which according to Newsweek’s (Aug 13, 2012) survey of 53 leading chefs is one of the 101 best places to eat in the world. Here, chef Victor Arguinoniz serves his special grilled *cuisine* – everything, including caviar

and ice-cream, is prepared over an open fire – in the upstairs dining room while local farmers drink in the sparse street-level bar. Foodies come from far and wide, as do many chefs. It exists in a highly marginal location – it can be tricky to find even with the help of GPS – and follows no known foodie trends. Arguinzoniz simply grills the food he wants to grill, aided by a few trusted collaborators, among them his father, who despite being over 70 years old grows the vegetables served at the restaurant. The *sous-chef* at the time I visited and interviewed at *Etxebarri* was Lennox Hastie, who had worked at several two- and one-star restaurants before going to cook in the middle of nowhere (at the time he started, the restaurant held no stars). As I query him why he'd made the change, he professed that working in more formal and controlled (read: French-style) kitchens wasn't enough of a challenge, and further that it kept him 'out of contact with the raw materials' and that working at this more marginal restaurant allowed him to 'stay in touch with the cooking'.

Etxebarri is revered among chefs, as it represents the polar opposite of the typical corporate high-end restaurant – often attached to a hotel, close to areas with a suitable density of high-net-worth individuals, and with a kitchen where closely managed processes and a regimented hierarchy reigns. In other words, *Etxebarri* represents an indie alternative to a process in the culinary business that chefs find challenging. While many chefs work in establishments that are in one way or another affiliated with corporate interest or are positioned to benefit from the same, this does not mean that they do not dream of other things. As a result, many of the restaurants that are most often mentioned as truly outstanding by top chefs are places that live up to this kind of more independent existence.

Looking to the restaurants most often mentioned by the chefs (and also the foodies) I've interviewed, most if not all of these are places with a definite indie sensibility. The most often mentioned is *elBulli*, which was (it is no longer a restaurant but, according to Adrià, a 'think-tank') placed in a very hard-to-get-to location, ran at a loss throughout, turned away almost everyone trying to get a table as bookings ballooned, and never compromised with its culinary integrity. Other often mentioned restaurants are *Mugaritz* (situated some way outside San Sebastián), *The Fat Duck* (located in a village in the English countryside), *Momofuku Ko* (which is well-situated but compensates by being impossible to get into), *Noma* and a number of places that are referred to in highly circumspect ways – one of my informants insists that the best restaurant in the world is a on-and-off place run by a friend of a friend, which may or may not ever open again (and which assumedly only serves in-the-know chefs).

The marginal space, the one that requires work to get to – literally or otherwise – is thus held up as a symbol of that which codified professionalism is not. The margins, rather than the core, become the icons to be emulated and celebrated, as the core is too easily corrupted by external influences. In a manner of speaking, the margins become sacred, both in that the people working in them are prepared to forgo more material gains in favor of striving for higher ideals and in that they knowingly do not follow the logics and the rules of more secular-corporate businesses.

By emphasizing the importance of places that do not necessarily live up to the usual criteria of professional success, chefs emphasize a professional identity that exists *outside of* the process of formal professionalization, much like indie music sprung out of a need to break with a highly successful and professional mode of creating and selling music. In this manner, the understanding of professionalism in creative industries requires understanding a counter-point to the professionalism that can be understood by others, and the reaffirmation of a ‘deep professionalism’, one that can only be fully comprehended by those internal to and embedded in the field.

On the sacralization of professional margins

What, then, might we learn from a developed understanding of how chefs view professionalism and negotiate notions of achievement in their field? In part that professionalism in creative industries can be negotiated in a number of ways, and that the manner in which this is interpreted will shift depending on whether one adopts an insider’s perspective or not. Further, that the notion of core and periphery, mainstream and margin, may need to be studied more extensively. In order to fully understand the processes through which a professional field is constituted, it is not enough to assume that the margins are occupied by people who have not managed to live up to the norms of the field. In the case of top chefs, I would instead argue that the opposite is the case – and I suspect that the same goes for a number of other creative industries.

For people engaged in creative work, the interesting thing is not simply to be good at doing something. Instead, the driving impetus is to excel, and to excel means to break with existing norms. A young chef can only go so far by doing only what s/he’s been taught. Yes, s/he may well make a good career out of it, and probably make more money in this way, but if s/he wants to get the respect and the accolades of his/her peers, a certain indie sensibility is needed. Doing food that is universally accepted and understood is to pander to less knowledgeable eaters, to stay fixed in the secular realm. To truly shine, the chef must explore the margins, the unknown.

The notion of margin, as the astute reader surely has realized, has a double meaning in all this. To exist at the margins of a profession can mean that you’re not fully a part of it, or are at risk of ‘falling out’. This is particularly the case in professions that have very clearly delimited areas of expertise. But the notion of margin can also point to the realm of the not-yet-explored. In creative endeavors, this is of course the most important – and thus most professional – area of all. To stay merely in the already known, the codifiable, the standardizable, the certifiable, that is to stay in the non-creative. In a creative field such as cuisine, to stay there is to be something less than a professional – a cook rather than a chef. A Jamie Oliver, if you will. In order to shine as a professional, the creative worker needs to explore margins, even inhabit them. This is the movement that chefs sacralize and celebrate, the indie movement from the marginality of a profession to a professionalism of the margin.

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