

## The Duality of a Pastry Chef's Creative Process

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## Abstract

This study focuses on elite Malaysian pastry chefs who have participated in the World Pastry Cup. It poses the question, “How do World Pastry Cup chefs experience the creative process?” Specifically, this study explored the rhetoric (identity formation) of pastry chefs during the creative process. Findings show that pastry chefs bounce between two distinct rhetorics during the creative process, ‘the scientist’ and ‘the artist.’ This identity interchange is presented as a ‘duality,’ as one’s way of being revolves around detailed experimentations and rationalism (the scientist), whilst the other around poetry and artistic intent (the artist).

**Keywords:** Culinary Creativity; Rhetorics; Identity Formation; Creative Process; Portraiture; Qualitative Research

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## Introduction

Chefs, their creative demeanors as well as capacities, have increasingly become the center of attention in hospitality studies. This is no surprise, as the ability and freedom to create is described as the pinnacle of a chef’s work, connecting them to the highest prestige of the profession (Robinson, Solnet, & Breakey, 2014; Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhiphongs, 2016). As a result, many scholars propose ‘creativity’ as the key solution to retain chefs in their current workplace and profession (Ariza-Montes, Arjona-Fuentes, Han, & Law, 2018; Robinson et al., 2014). However, the underlying questions of ‘how creativity is manifested’ or ‘what creativity means to a chef’ remain unresolved. Focusing on the elite Malaysian pastry chefs who have participated in the World Pastry Cup, this study examines the creative process by posing the question, “How do World Pastry Cup chefs experience the creative process?” Drawing from the theoretical framework of the sociology of occupations, this study considers the rhetoric of the creative process in the World Pastry Cup as well as the identity formation of themselves as both scientists and artists.

## Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Fine’s (1996) occupational rhetorics as its theoretical lens. Fine (1996, p. 91) defines occupational rhetoric as “the process of fitting work into a meaning system,” whereby a line of work can be related to multiple occupational rhetorics. In other words, occupational rhetorics are idealized images of an individual’s perception of work (Carollo & Guerci, 2017), representing different “repertoires of meanings” or “bundles of images” that helps create a ‘set of images that connects one to an unambiguous work world’ (p. 91).

Fine (1996) identified that chefs in the full-service restaurant setting construct meaning through four key occupational rhetorics – businessman, professional, manual laborer, and artist. The businessman’s rhetoric informs a chef to be ‘bottom-line conscious’ and profit-oriented for the fiscal health of the establishment. The professional rhetoric sheds light onto the technicalities exclusive to the chef profession, linking chefs to perceive a sense of professionalism and expertise in their line of work. The manual laborer highlights the mundanity and repetitiveness of

daily kitchen work. Lastly, the artist ties chefs to the pinnacle of the profession, making them feel like performers of arts. Building on this, we undertook an empirical investigation to uncover the rhetorics of how Malaysian World Pastry Cup chefs represent themselves during the creative process.

## **Methodology**

### ***Portraiture***

This study adopts portraiture as its methodology, which is a qualitative methodology that draws on features of narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and ethnography, with the outcome resembling an evocatively and artistically written ‘portrait’ of a phenomenon, rich in empiricism (Hackmann, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Portraiture is phenomenological in that it is concerned with describing the lived experience. In *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, authors and researchers, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), map portraiture methodology on to the broader terrain of qualitative research that blends artistic expression with scientific rigor, forming an aesthetic whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. xv) explain:

*Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image.*

Using portraiture, this study focuses on the creative processes of elite Malaysian pastry chefs who participated in the World Pastry Cup. The following sections describe the sampling, as well as data collection and analysis procedures.

### ***Data Collection and Sampling***

The primary investigator is Malaysian and has apprenticed with some of the Malaysian World Pastry Cup participants. Thus, his positionality afforded an entrée to an exclusive context. With the chefs he knew well, he employed the “snowball” recruiting method (Patton, 2012) to arrive at a census of sixteen Malaysian World Pastry Cup participants. These chefs were selected specifically because the World Pastry Cup is one of the most prestigious international competitions dedicated to pastry in the culinary profession (Coupe du Monde Pâtisserie, 2016, p. 9). Moreover, the Malaysian Pastry team is a group of exceptional pastry chefs, having won the World Pastry Cup championship in 2019, while also coming close to the podium in 2015, taking home third runner-up. They have also won several titles in the competition, such as ‘Best Chocolate Creation’ in 2015, and were crowned the champions of Asia during the Asian Pastry Cup qualifiers in both 2014 and 2018.

Four chefs declined the research invitation. Three chefs passed away, resulting in a total of nine available research participants. Each participant was approached during the period of December 2017 to January 2018 in person, with followed-up interviews via video calls, text messages, and emails that persisted until May 2018. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted, ranging from one to four hours. In addition, each chef offered several material artifacts, such as sketchbooks and preliminary renditions of their ideas and creations, as well as various documented pictures during their creative process. Each material artifact was photographed and or digitally collected back for further analysis.

The researchers selected this exceptional elite group of competitive pastry chefs for several reasons: (1) to investigate “the extraordinary,” as a purposive sampling method of ‘outliers’ and ‘extraordinaires,’ uncovering the essences of creativity from an exclusive perspective (Stierand & Dörfler, 2012); (2) to consider the creative processes of those who are able to compete at an international level, providing information to those pastry chefs who aspire to participate in the World Pastry Cup and other pâtisserie competitions; (3) to take advantage of an entrée that the primary investigator had to an exclusive group to which few researchers have access and (4) to document the experiences of a group that has not been researched; thus, little is known about the creative processes of competitive pastry chefs at the international level.

### ***Data Analysis***

Harry Wolcott (1999, p. 19) reminds researchers to recognize that the human element is present, adding that researchers should “regard ourselves as humans who conduct our research among rather than on them.” Portraiture, in this way, stands out in qualitative research in requiring that the researcher’s biases and experiences not only be acknowledged, but that it is understood, and in essence, form the lens through which the researcher processes and analyzes the data. Therefore, “the investigator’s voice purposely is woven into the document, called a ‘portrait,’ which is created as a result of the researcher’s interactions with the actors in the research setting” (Hackmann, 2002, p. 52).

The artistic techniques in portraiture allow for interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order in the collection of data and analysis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call portraiture “an iterative and a generative process; the themes emerge from the data, and they give the data shape and form” (p. 185). In this way, we took note of resonant metaphors, poetic and symbolic expressions that revealed the ways the chefs illuminated and experienced their realities. Triangulation was used to weave together the threads of data converging from a variety of sources—sketchbooks, photographs of creations, and one-on-one interviews. And finally, we constructed themes and revealed patterns among chefs’ perspectives that are often experienced as contrasting and dissonant. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call this process “weaving a tapestry,” in which the portraiture “weaves” noteworthy incidents, conceptions, themes, structures, narratives, and details into a cohesive portrait (p. 247). All in all, portraiture consists of combining disciplined, empirical processes of description, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis with the aesthetic process of narrative development (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In the following chapter, we portray one sample theme—The Duality of a Chef’s Creative Identity—with two distinct creative stories (critical incidents): Illumination and

Pandora's Box. Each story was further explicated with pictures of the creative process, alongside different viewpoints, statements, and ideologies of creativity from other participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) term these measures as essential procedures to enhance qualitative research trustworthiness through triangulation, as we took on different perspectives, data categories, and cross-references to portray a report that is diverse in perspective yet deliberate to the central theme.

### **Findings: The Duality of a Chef's Creative Identity**

Findings show that our sample of pastry chefs blend two distinct rhetorics during the creative process: the artist and the scientist. In one of our respondent's own words, "one cannot live without another." We present this identity interchange as a 'duality,' simply because both rhetorics reflect highly contrasting views, in which one's way of being revolves around detailed experimentations and rationalism (the scientist), whilst the other around poetry and artistic intent (the artist). In the following two subsections, we showcase two sample resonant creative stories that explain this duality.

#### ***The Scientist***

One of the most resonant stories that showcases the scientist's rhetoric is '*Illumination*,' an ice-cream cake remains deeply rooted in the creator's mind, requiring the utmost attention to various "sensitive variables." The chef explains:

*An ice-cream cake is more than just ice cream... it's a combination of frozen components layered together artistically. You need to understand and calculate the sweetness and texture... That is why I always put my ice-cream layer on the outside, followed by sorbet, and lastly parfait at the core. Because the parfait defrosts faster... It's all about playing with the sensitive variables of time, texture, and temperature.*

*Illumination* exemplifies how a pastry chef needs to be wary of both "chemical reactions" in production and also "senses management in consumption." It goes beyond flavor combinations, but more to the understanding of time, texture, and temperature.

Figure 1. shows the different snapshots of *Illumination*, a product developed for the 2015 World Pastry Cup. Going through more than fifty practice trials, the cake represents one of the most intrinsically rewarding desserts the creator has ever made. From the development of flavor using Malaysian ingredients, to the candlelight designs inspired by *Lumière* from *Beauty and the Beast*, *Illumination* represents a creation that stems deeply in his mind, reminding him of great difficulty that requires his utmost attention to "all possible sensitive variables."

**Figure 1.** Illumination: Coconut streusel base, vanilla and kalamansi lime parfait, mango yuzu sorbet, strawberry confit, and coconut ice-cream (World Pastry Cup, January 2015)



In addition, to the story of *Illumination*, each pastry chef from this study strongly differentiated the stature of a pastry chef from those of cuisine and hot cooking. The world of pastry requires greater mastery of the science behind the making of art. There is a reverberating scientific rhetoric that pastry chefs embody during their creative endeavors. One of our participants notes that while cuisine chefs are always engaged in the “art of cooking” where intuition guides the “seasoning to taste” or “the finishing of a sauce,” pastry chefs on the other hand, are more scientific in nature, requiring much knowledge behind “how different ingredients and different weightages” influence the final outcome. This school of thought explains that the process is reliant to the theories and foundation of pastry as a science, relying on “scales with one or two decimal points,” rather than “judging intuitively by instinct.”

### *The Artist*

Despite paying homage to the science behind the making of art, each pastry chef adds that ‘an artistic touch’ is what separates a chef’s stature from another. In the creation of desserts, it comes in the form of poetry and storytelling. This was vivid in one respondent’s creation of Pandora’s Box (see Figure 2), which won the title of ‘Best Plated Dessert’ in Asia. The creative process involved the chef “playing with senses” and adding an “emotional touch” to the various components of the dessert, all in which was dedicated to creating an experiential value for those who consume it. There was a story behind the dessert, signifying something mystical, in which he described,

*The entire idea was that I have a plate with shaved dry ice at the bottom, and I will pour some hot yuzu puree onto the dry ice, activating a misty effect... I encapsulate it in a small glass-like cover... The concept is to have the judges open Pandora's Box, and to create an experience that they not only smell the aromas of the yuzu, but also see it...*

Pandora's Box is an example of a dessert with a meaningful story, possessing a harmonious representation of flavors packaged in an experiential mystical appeal.

**Figure 2.** Pandora's Box: Caramelized banana emas, mascarpone, and yuzu aromas (Asia Pastry Cup, April 2014)



Each chef closely compared their works to those of the fields of arts, such as poetry, music, architecture, and filmmaking. They view their creations as detailed compositions of various sensorial and chemical components parceled together by an overarching meaning (e.g., stories & poetry). They rhetorically assure themselves as an artist by viewing oneself as a poet and a storyteller in their creative process, analogizing themselves as the “bringer of stories” and “the balancer of melodies.” The notions of ‘play’ and ‘the tinkering of emotions’ are what heightens the highly scientific process of pastry creation into one with poignant attachments and meanings. As implied, the analogies used to describe each pastry chefs’ engagement with creativity often echoes the work comparisons of those in the field of the arts, analogizing those of poetry, music, and filmmaking. In essence, despite each pastry chef contemplating that the pâtisserie is a work of science, it still resonates as a product of art.

## Conclusion and Implications

It is implied that both personifications, the scientist and the artist, come together as part of the World Pastry Cup chefs’ creative process. The artistic personification is informed with scientific rationalism, while the scientific personification is portrayed by one’s innate desire to create through one’s inner senses. Both rhetorics are inseparable from one another insofar that

“one cannot live without the other.” Fine (1996) has already depicted that artistic rhetoric is what ties restaurant cooks to the pinnacle of work itself, portraying creativity, glamour, and entitlement. Building on Fine’s conceptualization, this study contributes by adding an additional rhetoric in addition to ‘the artist,’ as it is informed by a contradictory, yet inseparable rhetoric of ‘the scientist’ during the creative process.

This duality comes together harmoniously during pastry chefs’ creative process, in which the artistic persona is grounded by scientific rationalism, and likewise, the scientific persona is externalized and portrayed in an artistic fashion. It is perhaps because of this complex duality that many scholars recognize pastry chefs as a more profound and difficult classification of cookery as compared to those of hot cooking (Ferguson & Zukin, 1998). This endorses the consideration that there is much interaction between the two personifications and that there is much to consider about the science behind the making of art, and the art in the development of science.

Future research on culinary creativity should further probe the creative processes of other chef extraordinaires of the culinary profession, as their ideas, thoughts, and creative philosophies may yield fuller interpretations on creative phenomenon. While this research provides a window into an elite culinary culture that has rarely, if ever, been investigated, as researchers, we acknowledge the limitations of this specialized group. The findings are not meant to be generalizable. Rather, as with most qualitative research, the findings are a source of ideas to consider; knowing that context and human behavior will vary. In addition, this study was limited in participation by females, and thus future research can seek to understand if there are gender differences in the creative process.

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