The Chef and the Supplier: The Role of the Supply Chain in Fine Dining Creativity

Paper first received: 30 October 2023; Accepted: 30 December 2024; Published in final form: 30 March 2025
http://doi.org/10.48416/ijsaf.v31i1.556

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Abstract

This article studies the relationship between culinary creativity in fine dining restaurants and the supply chain that supports them. Fine dining has experienced a renaissance in recent decades, with chefs pushing the boundaries of culinary innovation. However, little attention has been given to the pivotal role that suppliers play in this creative process. Based on the exploration of four case studies of Michelin-starred restaurants in Denmark, the paper uncovers the ways in which the supply chain influences the dynamics of high-end restaurants, proposing a social-material perspective on culinary creativity. Results show how sourcing practices impact fine dining creativity, and highlight the role of nature and quality as the foundations of the relationships between chefs and suppliers. This research innovatively sheds light on the behind-the-scenes processes that drive fine dining and shows how different restaurants think differently about the role of suppliers in the creative process. The strategies involve more traditional chef-centred approaches to culinary creativity, as well as ambitions to become self-sufficient. Results also show that the restaurants put the farmers first, seeing the supply chain and the food system as central to culinary creativity. We argue that these approaches seem to be essential to the development of more sustainable forms of Michelin restaurants.

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Funding

This research is partially funded by the University of Girona under the grants for the mobility of researchers (MOB 2022).

Introduction

The iconic 2010 Cookbook *NOMA:Time and Place in Nordic Cuisine* (Redzepi, 2010) is remarkable for its unique minimalist aesthetics, its tissue cover, the included maps and travel diaries from the Nordic region. Even more remarkable is the impressive catalogue of artistic photos of food, people, and materials essential to the restaurant. The catalogue produces a quintessential 'new Nordic' feeling. In this regard, it is noteworthy that it attributes substantial space to the restaurant's suppliers. In the photo catalogue there are several portraits of fishermen, foragers, and famers, always portrayed in 'their element' where they fish, forage or farm. There is also a section in the book called 'The Raw Material' written by NOMA's head chef René Redzepi, which is composed of nine portraits of the most important suppliers, including Roland Rittmann, Swedish collector of wild herbs and mushrooms. He started collecting mushrooms to make ends meet when unemployed, and now is one of the leading experts. Another example is Roderick Sloan, a loquacious Scottish fisherman operating in the northern part of Norway. NOMA was his only customer when the book was published. Yet another example is the Danish farmer Søren Brandt Wiuff, the 'king of asparagus'.

In recent decades, fine dining seems to increasingly acknowledge suppliers and use their name as a sign of quality, local connectedness, and sustainability (Batat, 2020; Bertella, 2023). In some cases the suppliers' personalities are important for the restaurants, and the special bond between the two is a salient feature in a restaurant's storytelling, as the NOMA cookbook example illustrates. This development is particularly significant as some scholars have started to talk about a kind of 'celebrification' of farmers (Phillipov and Goodmann, 2017). While much has been written on the role of local food in food tourism (Hjalager and Richards, 2003; Roy et al., 2017; Leer, 2020, Ren and Fusté-Forné, 2023) and the increased focus on food suppliers among foodies and chefs (Johnston and Baumann; 2014, Roy; 2016), very little has been written on how chefs consider the supplier as a part of their creative process (one of the few examples is Fusté-Forné and Noguer-Juncà, 2023) in the context of luxury gastronomy in food tourism (Batat, 2021). This is the main contribution of this paper which focuses primarily on the relation between chefs and suppliers, with a view to understanding the behind-the-scenes in fine dining creativity. More specifically, we are interested in exploring the role of suppliers in the creative work of the chefs (see also Madeira et al., 2022). Hence, our research question is: what role do suppliers play in fine dining chefs' creative processes? By suppliers we understand the system of people and businesses providing produce and products to the restaurant, and by creative processes, we understand the design of dishes and menu as well as the development of the restaurant's identity and storytelling.

Our empirical data was generated in the context of the Copenhagen restaurant scene which has undergone radical transformation since the early 2000s with the rise of the new Nordic movement conceptualized in 2004 (Skårup, 2013) to protect and promote a Nordic *terroir* (Gyimóthy, 2018). Before this movement, Copenhagen restaurants were to a large extent replicating French gastronomy and often the most prestigious restaurants sourced their produce in France. One of the dogmas of the new Nordic cuisine was to exclusively use ingredients from the Nordic region. This cuisine thus generated renewed interest in local food and Nordic suppliers (although these were sometimes not very local as the Nordic region is vast), a trend also observed in other areas such as the Mediterranean (see Noguer-Juncà and Fusté-Forné, 2022). Additionally, many chefs in the movement have promoted local, Nordic ingredients that were often foreign to fine dining, such as beets, herbs, and novel protein sources (shells and ants), and a novel minimalist creative expression (Leer, 2016). The region was celebrated by international food guides and by the global food intelligentsia (Müller and Leer, 2018).

We believe that this transformative food scene with a renewed attention to Nordic and local ingredients, along with a high influx of creative figures in gastronomy, make this context particularly relevant for our study of the role of the supply chain in fine dining creativity. This is notably so as the scene has diversified in recent years, with new generations of chefs (Leer, 2021; Krogager and Leer, 2022) who are often less inclined to embrace the exclusive Nordic focus and are often more globally oriented. Yet sustainability and local food are

still important buzzwords, and we feel that it is particularly intriguing to explore the role of the supplier in a scene that is so dynamic and filled with negotiation around local-global dimensions of food.

The paper opens with a theoretical section, followed by a method section where our four cases are presented along with the research design and the data. The analysis follows and finally, in our conclusion, we discuss the distinct ways in which chefs think and work with the suppliers.

A social-material perspective on culinary creativity

The fine dining sector has garnered keen attention in the media in recent decades and chefs are often highlighted as inspirational creative figures in contemporary Western cultures (Leer, 2016). With this increased interest, the specificity of culinary creativity in the fine dining sector has fascinated many scholars from various perspectives and for different reasons. Analysing Michelin restaurants in Spain, Vargas-Sánchez and López-Gusmán (2020) stress among other things the need for systematic and formal processes to achieve innovative creativity. They argue that innovative creativity in restaurants refers to the ability of chefs to craft dining experiences, based on the combination of artistry and originality through elements such as business models, the design of the menus, experiential dining formats, or sustainable practices. Drawing on a social media analysis, Aubke (2013) has highlighted the importance and nature of social networks in restaurants' creative process. Abbate et al. (2019) emphasize that, beyond internal creativity and external sources, the economic side should not be forgotten, if culinary creativity is to be successful. Highlighting the similarities between chefs' creativity and other artistic practices, Madeira et al. (2021) explore how Portuguese Michelin chefs work creatively. They present a model with three stages: the inspirational moment (mostly individual), the team moment (collective development and testing), and finally the moment of truth where the creation meets the guests in a commercial context.

One of the most elaborate studies of culinary creativity is by Vanina Leschziner (2015) who carried out an in-depth exploration of the creative processes in American Michelin restaurants, focusing on New York and the San Francisco areas. The study highlights the complexity of the creative process that might be perceived as highly individual but depends on many individuals and is shaped by various economic logics. Leschziner also identifies the dynamics of the tradition/innovation and purity/impurity dichotomies as a tool to understand the differences in the chefs' creative processes. The study is informed by a Bourdieusian perspective, using the idea of field as a central prism. In the creative processes, the rules of the field are affirmed and negotiated, and the chefs position themselves in the field to capture the meanings attached to the processes and the actors, from production to consumption.

It is interesting that these studies on culinary creativity do not fall into the cliché of the individual genius. All of them stress, to varying degrees, that culinary creativity should be understood in relation to economic, cultural and social context. In our paper and with our focus on the supply chain, we want to build on this approach and perhaps push it even further away from the lonely genius romanticism by proposing a social-material theoretical perspective. Here, we are inspired by Hvidtfeldt (2019), a study of creativity in the music industry, and Tanggaard (2015). In particular, Tanggaard (2015) argues that a social-material perspective on creativity 'consists in following not only the individual thinking processes or the influence of context on the individual creative process, but more precisely the movement of ideas and the continuous and productive re-associations found in the relational spaces during a creative process' (p.111). In the context of culinary creativity and the role of suppliers, this means that we focus not on the individual, but on the social and material basis of a creative process. Creativity is thus not a matter of individual and isolated acts, but of social and collective ones that are concrete and materially grounded in specific spaces, rather than being theoretical and abstract.

This perspective is particularly important as we consider the role of suppliers in culinary creativity, for they represent both the material ground for the creativity and the social bonds to the people and places involved

in the process. Analytically, this theoretical lens means that we, in our study, have been looking beyond the individual level and focusing on the material and social context of our four cases. In particular, we have explored the material and relational entanglements between the chefs and the restaurants, the materiality of the food, places and practices, and the suppliers.

Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative research design focusing on the perspectives of the chefs to understand the role the suppliers play in fine dining chefs' creative processes. The city of Copenhagen was chosen as the context because it is well-known for its innovative fine dining scene, notably as the epicentre of the new Nordic movement in which rethinking the sources of products was central. In the most recent Michelin Guide (2023), the city has fifteen restaurants that have earned a Michelin star. All of these Michelin-starred restaurants were invited to participate in the research, and four of them consented. The first researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the chefs from these restaurants, three of them at the venues and one of them online. Table 1 below shows the restaurants. At Alchemist, the head of development was interviewed. At Alouette, the two co-owners (one of them the chef) were interviewed. At Kadeau, the sous chef was interviewed. At The Samuel, an assistant chef and the co-owners (one of them the chef) were interviewed.

Table 1. Description of the restaurants (adapted from the Michelin Guide, 2023)

Restaurant	Michelin Stars	Type of Cuisine	Description in the Michelin Guide
Alchemist	2 (+ green star)	Innovative	"An immersive and perfectly choreographed experience, eating here is a highly theatrical affair at the pinnacle of destination dining. Dinner is divided into acts and set across several locations, including a balcony, a play area and a spectacular planetarium-like dome with images projected onto the ceiling. Dishes are technically complex and highly creative with dramatic contrasts. Chef-owner Rasmus Munk believes food is a great way to communicate with people, so accompanies his cooking with statements and ideas about the world."
Alouette	1 (+ green star)	Modern cuisine, Creative	"There's an underground, rock 'n'roll vibe to this modern restaurant hidden away in the old industrial part of town, which is housed inside a former envelop factory and accessed via a graffiti-covered lift. The experienced chef works closely with local farmers to ensure ingredients are at their peak, and dishes are pared-back, balanced and sublimely flavoured, with sauces being a highlight. The open fire is used to great effect."
Kadeau	2 (+ green star)	Creative, Modern cuisine	"This beautiful restaurant offers a memorable, multi-course dining experience; the chefs are on display in the open kitchen and often serve and explain dishes themselves. The owner hails from Bornholm and he and his team are passionate about the island's ingredients, which are dried, cured, preserved, smoked and pickled to maximum effect in complex, skillfully crafted dishes. Serene, well-paced service and a warm atmosphere help to make this an occasion to remember."
The Samuel	1	Creative, Modern cuisine	"Named after the chef-owner's first-born son, this red-brick villa has a herb garden, a vintage interior and a superb on-view cheese cabinet. The set, multi-course menu offers dishes which might be simple to look at but are full of creativity and distinct natural flavours."

In total, seven interviews were conducted, together with a visit to the facilities of three of the restaurants (Alchemist, Kadeau and The Samuel). These visits were important, given our social-material perspective, and allowed for detailed and concrete accounts of how culinary creativity was performed in these specific settings. The interview questions were designed by the researchers, drawing from existing academic literature mentioned in the previous section, and with particular attention to concrete examples of practices of creativity and the suppliers' role in these processes. In particular, the chefs were asked about the supply chain management, the process of designing the dishes, and the promotion of restaurant values through the

relationship between chefs and suppliers.

Data collection and analysis

The interviews and the visits were conducted in the months of November and December 2022 and January 2023. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and all conversations were conducted in English, except one which was in Spanish and later translated into English. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. As part of the analysis of the interviewees' responses, a thematic analysis was performed. The quotations from the interviewees were employed by the researchers to exemplify the results in the next section, together with visual materials obtained from the first researcher while he conducted the field work at the restaurant facilities. In particular, guided by the research objective and the relevant literature, the results derived from the interviews were organized into three thematic categories to structure the findings: (1) the notion of agriculture as the starting point of restaurant menus; (2) the meanings of quality as per their role in fine dining supply chains; and (3) the connections that arise between a chef's creativity and the origin of the ingredients.

Results

Agriculture is the starting point

The restaurants that participated in the study showed a deep appreciation for the origin of the products. Yet the importance they gave to locavorism clearly differed. Kadeau was one of those focusing most explicitly on origin and locality in their concept. It has a sister restaurant (the original first) on the Danish island of Bornholm, where most of the produce comes from and where the team gets its inspiration, as the Kadeau participant explained:

> *What we do in Kadeau Copenhagen is to show what we do in Bornholm. We are a restaurant that is deeply rooted [in the Bornholm identity]. We have our garden that has evolved over the years, which is quite large and what we do is to preserve. That's what it's all about, the product. The garden always comes first.*

Kadeau's sous-chef affirms that 'if you want to have the identity of a place, you have to cook with local products'. In this sense, the menu design relies heavily on nature, and the preserves they prepare in Bornholm are available at the restaurant (see Figure 1):

> *We try to make everything fresh. We have one of our chefs who became our gardener a few years ago, and he has a garden-wide programme, and we have all the preserves on Bornholm. So, the way it works in Copenhagen is, once a week we have a delivery from Bornholm. The gardener tells us 'well, we have so much, so much, so much left'. And then we base the menu on what we have. Also, through the years, we learned that if something ends, it's not the end of the world, we just go for what we have. So, I think that Kadeau's idea of using preserves during the winter, plus what's in season, for example, now that it is November, the mushrooms are running out a bit, but the ducks are there. Then you combine what you have in season plus all the work that was done in spring and summer.*

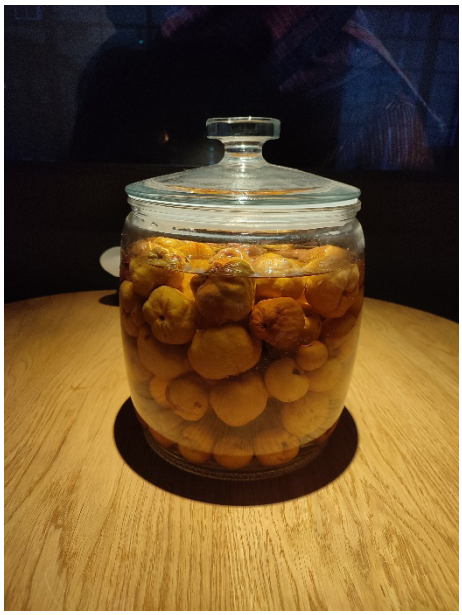
Figure 1. Preserves at Kadeau

Source: Fusté-Forné

Seasonality connects intimately with the rhythms of nature, and the staff at Kadeau are encouraged to stay in Bornholm for some time to learn about all these processes firsthand, with the intention of improving the experience at restaurant's table. It is vital for creating the Bornholmian experience that not only the products come from the region, but also that the staff have a strong sense of the place of Bornholm and the environment in which the products are sources; the staff should to a certain extent 'be rooted' in this milieu. As the sous

chef commented, 'when you talk to people about something you did, it's very different from something you learned how to do by reading, right?'. This is observed in Japanese quince cultivated in Bornholm, which is on display and served at the restaurant (Figure 2). Handmade preserves show the importance of 'doing' through a commitment to culinary authenticity and craftsmanship. These preserves not only reflect the restaurant's origin but also how the restaurant supports local food heritages and traditions. In Kadeau, this product appreciation is also manifested in the use of the black currant, as the sous chef explained, 'I think there is no other restaurant that uses it as much as we do, we use the leaves, we use the berries, and we also use the wood to make oil'. In this sense, black currant is the identity product of the restaurant which comes from the knowledge skills they obtain at their own growing facilities in Bornholm.

Figure 2. Japanese quince



Source: Fusté-Forné

The owners of Alouette also highlight the importance of the knowledge the restaurant gathers from the farmers with whom they work. They explain that their relationship with the farmers and producers is quintessential for their creative work:

> *We see the passion of people, they are very passionate about the land, and we always want to put farmers first. We want to use our dishes as an opportunity to draw focus to individual farms and celebrate sort of the diversity and terroir of Denmark.*

The restaurant was actually founded on their indignation as to the difficulties faced by alternative biodynamic farmers. The owners mentioned that one of their favourite farmers, a small biodynamic business, had to close, because certain clients failed to pay for their products. This episode saddened them, and they decided that the mantra for their business would be to always 'put the farmer first'. Hence, in Alouette's modus operandi there is almost a political ambition for changing the food system: 'We want to use our dishes as an opportunity to draw focus to individual farms and celebrate sort of the diversity and *terroir* of Denmark'. They stress that they are deeply engaged with all their suppliers, and they visit all the production spaces, explore what farmers have and what they may have. Sometimes they even interfere with the production, for instance by providing the seeds of what they would need in the restaurant and then purchasing the produce back after harvesting.

The way they shape the creative work in restaurant menus is manifested through the connection with farmers. Alouette's chef gives an example of what it means 'to put the farmer first':

> *a farmer called me and said, 'we have a hundred kilos of plumbs that don't have a home, because you know farming is… you start the season and don't know how much you're going to produce, you don't know how the season is going to be, you don't know who will buy it', and if we want to try to make farms more sustainable and efficient businesses we have to be very active actors in that, and so with that farm we took all the hundred kilos and we found a solution for them in house, so we got a wonderful product, they don't have any waste, they don't have to pay for a freezer or cooler or store… and sustainability is an opportunity to not just look at what we do in house but to look one step further in the full chain and try to create solutions for full systems.*

Here, the social bond and the material surplus lays the ground for an unusual creative process which is driven not by the chef's singular vision of a dish, but by a material and social context which is embedded in a collective agreement. The menu of the restaurant is changed because of this context, as plumbs became the dessert for a period, which was not the plan. Hence, the relationship between chefs and suppliers is also about the interconnectedness of the restaurant and its suppliers, beyond their role as actors in the market. They are members of the same food system and share a responsibility for making it sustainable. While this material aspect explains the farmers' relationships with the land and the produce that reaches consumers, the socio-material approach also includes the machinery, the physical spaces of farms, and the natural elements that the suppliers engage with daily, such as soil or water, and weather conditions that shape farming practices

and decision-making processes through the food supply chain.

In particular, we also noticed that in all the restaurants, seasonality plays a part to the design of dishes and how they change throughout the year. At The Samuel, although it seems a little more 'chef centered' than Alouette and Kadeau, it is the chefs' and the sommeliers' vision, rather than local available produce, that shapes the menu. However, they do remain sensitive to seasonality. An example is seafood, as an assistant chef at The Samuel explained 'There are certain times of the year when scallops are better than other times, for example, it can be hard because in Norway when there is bad weather it's hard to get scallops and then we need to work it out and change the menu a bit'. While seasons play a role for everyone, it is clear that Alouette and Kadeau are the most ambitious in this regard and let seasons dictate the menu to a far greater degree than for instance The Alchemist and The Samuel. The chef at Alouette explained that:

> *We like to joke that Denmark has like 20 micro seasons and each of them lasts about two weeks except for one which lasts you know three four months, which is winter, but the reality is that when products come into season here in Denmark that window is quite short and we want to work within that moment, so we are constantly transitioning our dishes, we have a five course menu plus snacks, sweets and bread, a total of ten servings, we transition some dishes per week on a constant basis, that means that often when guests come, anything from eighty to hundred per cent is different from one month to the next.*

The appreciation of local products and local landscapes also comes from the Nordic movement manifesto, as described by the head of development at Alchemist. However, there are not many references made to the New Nordic in the interviews, mentioned as the foundations of the current Copenhagen culinary scene.

> *We have amazing producers all over the country, small producers that make amazing cheese or meat, or amazing vegetables, and I think maybe thirty years ago you were not as aware of these things as you are now and I think that is how the Nordic movement really has made all our chefs aware of the origin (Alchemist).*

This signals that although the new Nordic movement and its focus on locavorism have changed the awareness of local food in the Copenhagen context, it is used in different ways by the restaurants and to generate very different types of restaurant identity, creative processes, and storytelling.

Balancing sustainability, quality and locality

The restaurants work with proximity products, and even they have their own cultivation spaces, such as Kadeau and their garden in Bornholm. However, even in this case, it is underscored that

> *realistically not everything can be from the island. Then we work with suppliers on… many organic farms around Copenhagen. And if the products cannot come from Denmark, they always come from the Nordic region. There is a lot of seafood that you don't have in Denmark. It needs much colder waters such as Norway, Iceland (the interviewee at Kadeau).*

In this respect, all the restaurants affirm that they look for quality products, which is also observed in the narrative of The Samuel which, with its strong connection to French cuisine, is probably the least locavore of the restaurants in our study. The chef affirmed that they are restricted by quality only (not locality): 'where we can get the best food, and also wine'. There are multiple players when it comes to food and beverages, and quality and sustainability often go hand in hand.

> *When you look at ten different caviars of foie gras suppliers, eight of them are well, now it has become easier to do the right thing, because a lot of the producers have learned if you do this right, if you do not use pesticides and if you take care of the animals when you have them, then you get a good product and that is basically what we want (the co-owners at The Samuel).*

The restaurants are also concerned about the environmental practices of their suppliers, and that they work 'not just for business', as our interviewee at Kadeau pointed out:

> *For example, spider-crab. That is not available in Denmark because it needs much colder water. So there we go directly to Norway. There are also some types of clams that are not here. We worked with a gentleman who was going to do the diving by hand.*

This approach with regard to the suppliers also contributes to having unique products which are normally inaccessible. 'I mean, it's not that they can't be found elsewhere, but also the way they're treated is all super… just for the restaurant. It's not like they're doing this work to sell it to the world', commented the sous chef at Kadeau.

They also establish meaningful relations with the suppliers. The narrative about the product and its origin is important, but so are the facts as to who is behind it and how they work and how they care about the environment and everything that creates added value: 'With farms we are always talking to farmers, to people who have… we go to see places. Also to tell you an experience, we want to see how the whole process is and how the animals live', explained the sous chef at Kadeau. In a similar way to other restaurants, the representative from the Alchemist reports that

> *we work together with a fishing company that really strives to do sustainable fished fish so it is also very important for us that we can kind of say that all the fish we use in the restaurant is sustainable that we do not overfish, also the techniques (head of development at the Alchemist).*

There are of course various considerations in relation to sustainability. The sustainable practices of the supplier around the product is one. Transportation is another. Here it seems that although local food is a strong ideal for Kadeau, this ideal can be bent due to concerns for quality, by getting the fish and shellfish from the northern part of Norway. In doing this equation, Alouette seems always to prioritize locality: 'We only use cheese that is grown locally and organically, we have one farm, keep cows in the field, you take only ten litres of milk per cow per day, so you get the best milk'.

Figure 3. Cheese cabinet at The Samuel

Source: Fusté-Forné

By contrast, Alchemist and The Samuel prioritize the quality of the product regardless of its origin, although they do aim for local or regional products. They also insist that the sustainability of the product remains central. The participants from The Samuel furthermore explained that sometimes they could change the ingredients to secure quality: 'If you don't get first class scallops you change the scallops for another ingredient'. She also commented that 'it's the same with cheeses, it's also again about the weather, what the cows eat, like how the milk is, and how the cheese will be'. This is illustrated in the restaurant with a cheese cabinet that includes many different cheeses, most of them from France (see Figure 3), which again demonstrates that what they see as quality is more important than locality. Alouette, on the other hand, exclusively serves local cheeses.

The sustainable choices are not only visible in relation to the suppliers, but also in the management of the restaurants.

> *We are really a small team and we are a small restaurant, for us it's easier than others I assume to be sustainable, not using too many tea towels, and the greens, we use all the scraps, the leftovers, we use all that stuff, for us it's simple to keep it the right way (The Samuel representative).*

Alouette worked with Copenhagen University to create a carbon emissions report for the restaurant. This

environmental quality awareness is also illustrated by the head of development at Alchemist:

> *some products we get from France, like pigeons, or Spain, like ham, if we find that products are better than the ones you can get in Denmark, we strive to do seasonal regional food here at the restaurant as much as possible because it just tastes better and is also kind of the philosophy that we do not want to have avocados flying from South America if we can get a similar product in Denmark, that is better (Alchemist).*

This is also reflected in a variety of products from Denmark, as the Alchemist representative affirmed in relation to seasonality, getting back to agriculture and nature as the starting point of the culinary experience:

> *All the fish we have and shellfish are amazing here from Denmark, we have amazing asparagus in the season, we have amazing potatoes, we have incredible celery and stuff like that in the wintertime. I think it's just seasonal, we have a lot of very interesting products that we can offer here.*

The chef's creativity between tradition and inovation

At The Samuel, 'tradition and innovation are in the chef's mind', affirmed the assistant chef interviewed. While tradition is evocative of the inspiration in French gastronomy, as explained in the introduction, innovation represents the incorporation of new products and culinary techniques. The chef at Alouette explained that the expertise also comes from knowledge about the local environment and context, which again relies on the relationship between the restaurants and their suppliers:

> *I had to learn a lot about the way that people worked in Denmark, the way that people ate in Denmark, the way that products were grown and appreciated or not in Denmark, so I spent the first three or four years in this country really having to research and understand the land, the people and the systems, and I did that by working in a couple of different restaurants in the role of chef but also doing some consulting, not just in Copenhagen but all over the country, in a full range of restaurants.*

Although they have distinct starting points, the restaurants all emphasize the whole value chain, from production to consumption, in the design of the menus, including the meaningful connections with the territory as explained in the previous sections. This means that they need to rely extensively on nature and its changes, in terms of the products provided and how they change not only over the seasons, but in some cases almost from day to day. This shows the whole value chain and acknowledges the pivotal role of the environment. The sous chef at Kadeau commented that 'you also have to have a little open mind, so that you also work with nature. And there are [unexpected] things that happen'. This means that there is a need to be able to adapt to the situation, for example, a lack in supply, which may also encourage creativity and innovation.

The owners at The Samuel explained that if there was a shortage, they saw this not as the exception but rather as an integral part of their ongoing work process:

> *If you see what the menu is and you come back next week, and there are some changes in the dishes, that is due to our creativity and path changing, nature, instead of buying something in a pocket, that is part of our DNA …the ability to always adjust and change. When you book it says changes may occur on the menu, and it may not even be a storm [that changes the availability of a product] but his mood can change, it's part of our DNA, we're not fixed, it has to be this menu for next month, no.*

In some cases the dishes could change to pair a specific wine. It stands out from the Kadeau interview that the product that is available is the source of the menu and is then developed through a collective process with the possibility of adapting to contexts and situations. This represents a dialogue between tradition and innovation, a conversation rooted on the distinct creative processes that, either traditionally or innovatively, inform the relationships between chefs and suppliers.

> *First you think about the ingredients, about what you can have, and then, when you have these things, you think about what you can do. Here comes the product first and when you have the product you say what we do (sous chef at Kadeau).*

What they do is from what they have, after a brainstorming of ideas among the staff. This identity reflects the leitmotiv of the restaurant.

> *You know what Nikolaj [the chef] always says that sticks in my mind, he always says 'perfect imperfect', and it's very difficult, like it has to be perfect, but I don't know, it can't be, it doesn't look perfect, but it's perfect. That's Kadeau, he always says perfect imperfect.*

There can always be something better or something different, especially when you work with nature, which is unpredictable.

> *And it is always adapting and the things that are done are not closed, do you understand me? So it's not the end. That is what I always say: here what we do is not the end of the world. When you create a dish and one of the ingredients is missing, it's not like you have to create another dish, no, you adapt to the situation with what you have. If you need acidity, you've got vinegar, you've got berry juice, you've got, you've got pickle juice, then you've got a billion chances to play with that.*

Innovation also comes from day to day practice which is observed in the test kitchen at Alchemist, where they also work with unusual ingredients, such as butterflies (Figure 4).

> *We use so many products… we let's say for instance we have a dish with the eye, we changed it four to six times a year with seasonal produce exactly to ping pong the season for example with asparagus or long fish haul, it is difficult to choose one ingredient that would be typical for Alchemist because there isn't any locally because we change as much as we can seasonally. (head of development)*

Figure 4. Butterflies at Alchemist

Source: Fusté-Forné

In this context, he affirms that innovation is also crucial, which emerges as a bidirectional process between chefs and suppliers.

> *We always try to innovate, you can change tradition with taste, I think that for all the dishes we do here at the Alchemist it always originates from some that we think tastes really good, feel people like to eat, it can be challenging but it has to taste good.*

This brings us back to the quality of the products discussed in the previous section.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study of the role that suppliers play in fine dining chefs' creative processes shows that all the case studies, the chefs appreciate, and celebrate, quality products and are interested in the origin of the product (see, for example, Fusté-Forné and Noguer-Juncà, 2023). While the results reveal the relevance of the suppliers in the creative process of gastronomy (Madeira et al., 2022), the relationship between the chefs and the suppliers differs, notably regarding the centrality of suppliers in the development of restaurant menus and storytelling. This contributes to the understanding of the processes that lead to innovative creativity (Vargas-Sánchez and López-Guzmán, 2020). For example, Kadeau is evocative of an island's (Bornholm's) micro-cosmos, and its narrative inspires a dream of self-sufficiency illustrated by its own garden on the Danish island. This self-sufficiency is also exemplified in unique products, such as the black currant. Similarly, the focus of Alouette is on agriculture, and the restaurant's philosophy shows that it does largely allow the farmers' products to dictate the creative process, and sees it as the chef's social responsibility to adapt to the available material. This accentuates the role of seasonality. On the other hand, for Alchemist and The Samuel this seems to be

less essential. While they demonstrate interest in origin, the role of quality is central to their selection of products. Here the creative process seems to start in the kitchen with an idea of the chef, and then it is a matter of finding the best quality products and the best suppliers, bearing in mind prices as well (see Abbate et al., 2019). In this approach, the supplier is secondary in the creative process. This does not necessarily mean that the supply chain is less relevant. At Alchemist, for instance, several dishes comment on unsustainable practices in the food system, like their dish with langoustines from the Danish Island Læsø, famous for this delicacy. The dish both celebrates this local Danish food, and also criticizes certain fishermen's trawling that destroys the seabed.

Our main contribution is to point out that while all the chefs in our study see the supply chain as extremely important for their restaurant, they perceive its role in the creative process very differently. If we resume the four different restaurants and their positions about the relationship between suppliers and the creative process, we have to bear in mind that all the restaurants are within a paradigm that values sustainable and local products. At one end of the spectrum we have Alouette that represents what could be called 'locality and farmers-first' approach. The restaurant is driven by a wish to support small producers, with particular concern for the environment. It seems that its goal is to help small producers and then adapt everything else around that goal. For instance, it could 'adopt' a batch of 'homeless' plums, even though it did not have plums on the menu. Thus, the supplier shapes the creative process.

Kadeau's position could be called 'self-sufficiency, local storytelling and collaborative creativity'. The restaurant's uniqueness is the powerful storytelling linked to the identity of Bornholm, even though it is situated in Copenhagen, and the ambition to be self-sufficient, at least to some degree. The Kadeau chefs also emphasized that when they used products from other suppliers, it was essential to visit them, not only to secure quality and sustainability in the production, but also to enhance the storytelling around each dish (see, Orea-Giner et al., 2024). Storytelling linked to the local area thus seems to play a more explicit role than for Alouette. In the creative process, the ingredients are the starting point, which are then explored in a collaborative creative process that materialises at the table (Madeira et al., 2021).

The Samuel and Alchemist have a more 'quality first' approach. Although both are engaged in local and sustainable food, they are not as dogmatic about it at Alouette. For instance, The Samuel mostly prefer to serve French cheeses over local Danish ones, because they have found French cheese to be of higher quality. This also represents a combination between national and international cuisines, which in turn evokes a dialogue between tradition and innovation (see Leschziner, 2015). Both restaurants are open to replacing a product with another one, according to season and supply. Many of the dishes at Alchemist have a strong conceptual and performative dimension; for instance the emblematic 'tongue kiss', a tartar that is served on a silicone tongue and has to be licked off by the guest without the use of forks or any other cutlery. The actual ingredients of the tartar change frequently and according to season, but the concept and the storytelling stays the same. This is notably because the most important element is the transgressive nature of the dish, rather than the ingredients or their origin as in the case of Kadeau and its Bornholm identity.

At Alchemist, the starting point for the creation of dishes is very often not the ingredients (although they might be, as in the example of langoustines from Bornholm), but rather a concept or an idea, as in the case of the tongue kiss. The restaurant then tries to adapt the idea to seasons and supply. At The Samuel, the wine plays a central role in the creative process and is often the starting point; hence, the aim is to make a dish that fits a specific wine. This is also a unique approach which does not take a local terroir or product with various potential applications as inspiration; rather, the inspiration is found in a 'finished' product originating far from the Danish shores. This reflects not only the complexity of the creative process, as stated by Leschziner (2015), but also the dynamic and collective nature of creative processes (Tanggard, 2015), which informs and is informed by the relationships between people, places and practices.

We argue that a socio-material approach in the context of restaurants affords a framework to understand how human and non-human elements interact to shape the dining experience. This perspective moves beyond human agency – such as that of chefs and suppliers – to consider the role of materialities, including kitchen equipment, dining spaces, ingredients, and sensory elements that are part of the spaces and contribute to the co-creation of experiences in restaurants. The socio-material perspective highlights how the provenance and the sourcing of ingredients embody connections to agricultural practices and sustainability discourses, which brings attention to overlooked structures of restaurant experiences, such as the relation between food stakeholders.

This leads us to call for more research into the interaction between chefs and farmers in fine dining and the restaurant industry more broadly. As the fine dining industry is increasingly faced with sustainability agendas and criticism for being environmentally and socially unsustainable, it seems important to look for ways that, through the creative culinary process, are a 'raison-d'être' for the industry to become more sustainable. In our study, these were particularly manifest in the examples from Alouette. This case can possibly help us to see how creativity can be integrated into sustainable development of food systems (see Gössling and Hall, 2021). We acknowledge that this also demands a shift from the chef-centred ideas of culinary creativity that are often popularised in food media's portraits of culinary geniuses, to the development of a more systemic and holistic understanding of culinary creativity.

In this regard, it seems pertinent to develop the social-material theoretical perspective to underscore the importance of understanding creativity in connection with social and material entanglements, and how closer attention to these dimensions might inspire more sustainable practices. We have demonstrated that culinary innovation is not solely the result of chefs' inspiration but is also co-created with suppliers and the ingredients that nature provides. In addition, the paper introduces an angle to investigate the different sourcing strategies within the context of culinary creativity, and highlights that these might be negotiating tensions between different ideals such as *local farmers* and/or *quality*. Hence this relation is not easy, and is of course highly dependent on local context. For example, the context of urban Copenhagen is obviously distinct from that of the isolated Faroe Islands (Fusté-Forné and Leer, 2023).

From a practical perspective, this research holds several implications for fine dining establishments. The findings emphasize the pivotal and somewhat overlooked role of the supplier-chef relationship in shaping creative restaurants. Moreover, the study highlights the potential of sustainable sourcing practices in fine dining, and restaurants' ability to adopt responsible sourcing methods and integrate these into their creative processes, which also responds to a growing demand for ecological dining options. The paper's findings also call for more research to explore the chef-supplier relationship in other contexts, including beyond the Michelin restaurant scene, where chefs are more at liberty to experiment and try new concepts to produce more sustainable food experiences.

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