

# Designing the Future of Polish Food: How Cosmopolitan Tastemakers Prototype a National Gastronomy

**Abstract:** This article explores the cultural work behind the newly emerging interest in Polish cuisine, culinary traditions, and local ingredients among urban, educated, upwardly mobile middle-class foodies who a decade earlier would distinguish themselves by conspicuously consuming foreign fare. Cultural intermediaries, or tastemakers, have been central to this process of creating new forms of value and meaning in Polish food. Given their reflexivity, the

iterative and collaborative character of their modus operandi, and their focus on the future, we frame their practices in the analytic language of design. They redesign Polish food in terms of space—through the rearticulations and new embodiments of the categories of “local,” “regional,” and “national”—and time, through materializations of history, tradition, and aspiration.

AT THE ROOTS, AN upscale bar in Warsaw, a young, bearded bartender in suspenders is meticulously pouring vodka. He tells us that in contrast to mass-produced labels—commonly made from industrial rye, served ice-cold, and downed from shot glasses in one swallow—this is not only a more rare potato-based distillate but also an altogether unique drink, presented as artisanal. Emblazoned *Młody Ziemiak* (Young Potato), its label features the handwritten serial number of this particular bottle, part of a small batch, with the specific place and time of harvest. Instead of the typical shot glass, the bartender serves the spirit in a long-stemmed snifter. Instructed to slowly sip it at room temperature, we are coached through different aromatic notes in a manner not unlike that used when tasting single-malt whisky. The bartender frequently utters the word “wyrafinowane” (literally, refined; figuratively, sophisticated) when describing the sensory characteristics of the vodka.

Around the corner, a vodka museum showcases artifacts representing the cultural and economic significance of the drink in Poland since the eighteenth century. Next door, at Elixir restaurant, specialty vodkas are served in creative pairings with contemporary interpretations of traditional Polish dishes like pierogi and the sour, fermented barley soup *żurek*. The portions are smaller, the flavors are at times unusual, and the presentations distance themselves from how such traditional specialties would appear on the domestic table.

Throughout the country, potatoes are being classed up. In 2019, chef Joanna Jakubiuk (2019) wrote the book “*Ziemiak*” (“The Potato”), which has achieved national visibility. Potato-centric cookbooks were well known in the past, but they used

to make virtue out of necessity, providing a starchy fix to pre-war poverty or scarcity under state socialism. Jakubiuk, instead, appeals to an audience with a rather hedonistic approach to food and focuses on the sensual pleasures of consuming the staple in all interpretations. In the Forteca farmers’ market and in the BioBazar organic markets in Warsaw, as well as in organic stores and markets in large cities around the country, different premium-priced heirloom varieties proliferate, with vendors explaining the best uses for each kind to shoppers that want to educate themselves and become better home cooks and hosts.

The elevation and refinement of a staple that used to be an icon of unremarkable plainness throughout the region (Ries 2009) is only one instance of a much broader process of reimagining local food and drink in contemporary Poland. How is this repositioning taking place? In this ethnographic essay, we bring together food studies and design studies to bring attention to an emergent category of cultural intermediaries, or “tastemakers,” as a lens to observe shifts in Polish food consumption. In what follows, “tastemakers” refers to those stakeholders whose interventions go beyond words to actually and materially innovate new experiences, flavors, and environments. They include chefs, entrepreneurs, food and wine producers, academics, writers, media personalities, marketers, government officials, and event organizers, among others. We argue that as they produce, cook, and consume food, all while shaping and expanding consumer culture, tastemakers act as designers that engage in sensual worldmaking as they embody and transform social meanings.

## Tastemakers as Cultural Intermediaries

Scholars of culture and society have long recognized the role of cultural intermediaries in framing goods as worthy or legitimate. Responding to calls for more theoretically constructive, diverse, and empirical research on the work of cultural intermediaries, as for instance those expressed by cultural studies scholars Sean Nixon and Paul du Gay, this essay contributes a perspective that is more attentive to the material and sensory dimension of their work as innovative and creative makers, as well as intentional and unintentional designers. Rather than emphasizing the symbolic and discursive aspects of tastemaking, we take both taste and making seriously, and attend to the sensory engagement and practices of transforming the material world through embodiment and affective qualities, or *qualia* (Chumley and Harkness 2013).

The tastemakers we have followed are not just PR experts, consultants, media operators, or sales people in the service sector, although at times they may perform those functions. They are not only middlemen but also makers and consumers, depending on the context. A chef may write an article for a culinary magazine, produce ingredients, turn into a landscaper and interior designer, and participate in a vodka tasting to expand their knowledge. Regardless of the roles they may temporarily assume in the culinary scene, tastemakers are constantly engaging with the materiality of their endeavors. Their activities go beyond the physical acts of cooking, wine-making, or organizing tasting events or farmers' markets, to include forging and transforming artifacts, technologies, landscapes, and built environments. They are concerned with innovation and newness, aspects of culture that anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2013) notes have long been overlooked in favor of durability and stasis. For this reason, we frame their practices in the conceptual language of design.

Designers render the material world as a set of problems to be solved or opportunities for intervention, innovation, and improvement. Drawing on globally circulating knowledge and skills, they arrange deliberate and iterative processes, in which things and ideas go through recurring phases of ideation, prototyping, and testing (Schön 1984). For the tastemakers-designers in this study, Polish food becomes a series of projects, not only in the sense of circumscribed, managed, and economized undertakings but also in regard to activities aimed at generating new possibilities and bringing about alternatives to what is. While they deal with the stuff of history and tradition, such designerly practices are thoroughly modern, detraditionalized, and knowledge-intensive operations that seek to use material means to bridge the gap between a diagnosis of the present and a horizon of an

imagined, desired future (Beckert 2016). Just like designers, in their projects tastemakers afford themselves the capacity to select, transform, and recombine elements from the past and the present without the burden of being held to the old or current ways of doing things. Understood in this way, designerly practices of tinkering with materiality to bring about a different future are a form of politics by other means. As such, they are also power negotiations that put tastemakers as designers in a privileged position (Fry 2010).

In what follows, after discussing the research site and methodology, first we look at how tastemakers prototype and iterate (Corsín Jiménez 2014) innovative materialities of reimagined Polish cuisine through spatial dynamics and place-making at different scales: *terroir*, locality, urban, and rural rearrangements. These interventions seek to reposition Poland as a nation on the regional, European, and global arena. They mix semi-peripheral anxieties and complexes deriving from Poland's shifting international role and its uneven integration in the European Union with grand aspirations and imperial nostalgia. These tensions have become particularly meaningful at a time in which Polish politics are torn between a government that embraces a vision of the country that tends toward conservatism, nationalism, and at times xenophobia, and oppositional forces that instead envision Poland as a more progressive, cosmopolitan space. In these political negotiations, clashing interpretations of history and projections of the future influence all aspects of cultural debates and social dynamics. For this reason, we then turn to temporal dynamics — also at different scales — focusing on the uses of the past as a resource for making history edible through the materiality of culinary expertise, shared meals, and hospitality entrepreneurship. These practices, apparently aiming at reevaluating the present, reveal the tastemakers' designerly aspirations at what design scholars Susan Yelavich and Barbara Adams (2014) call "future-making." We conclude by proposing a reflection on materiality and making, using design, valuation processes, and future making as frameworks to address the work of tastemakers and, more generally, as analytical tools in food studies.

## Methodology

The essay is based on ethnographic fieldwork in which we have observed tastemakers in their professional practice and public appearances. As the phenomenon of revaluation of traditional, regional, and local food in Poland is so far mainly concentrated among upwardly mobile, educated urban dwellers (including those who have moved from metropolises

to smaller towns and the countryside to pursue their culinary endeavors), quantitative data about gender, income, education level, and sheer numbers of tastemakers are not readily available. However, recent works of Polish scholars, and in particular sociologists, have offered stimulating insights into current shifts in the local food culture (Domański et al. 2015; Bachórz 2019; Straczuk 2022). In conversation with their work, we are discussing a closely knit community of practice whose participants are linked by acquaintance, observe one another, and meet in such venues as fairs, markets, and conferences where they negotiate shared categories of taste and value while cooking, tasting, and making together.

The two authors have conducted fieldwork over five years (2016–2020, but see afterword) not only in large cities such as Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Wrocław, Gdańsk, and Lublin, but also in smaller centers like Toruń, as well as in rural areas. The fieldwork includes over thirty interviews, participant observations, visits to restaurants (both in the front and the back of the house), markets, farms, and domestic kitchens, and involvement in initiatives ranging from government-led projects to restaurant business and the establishment of a food academy, among other things. The analysis is based on transcripts of interviews, expert panels, focus groups, and descriptive and analytical fieldnotes from observation and participant observation (including sensory notes on meals and dishes). We have used a strategy of open coding, identifying key themes and issues and iteratively deepening them as the fieldwork went on. We have also kept an archive of photographs and audio recordings taken in the field and clippings from relevant online publications and social media interactions.

## Remaking the Polish Taste of Place

We begin in one of Warsaw's two one-Michelin star restaurants, the now-closed Atelier Amaro. Wojciech Modest Amaro, a bona fide celebrity, known among the elites since his early days at the private Business Centre Club in Warsaw and among the general public from local productions of "Top Chef" and "Hell's Kitchen," is a leading practitioner in reinventing the national gastronomy. He welcomes us with an amuse-bouche arranged to look like a tiny garden patch with intensely green hyper-designed and flavor-intense bites sprouting out of pumpnickel black earth. A zen-garden take on a Polish rural plot, its minimalism immediately communicates an elevation of the ordinary. We taste the dish in a room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a park, while our table is set with tableware made of porcelain, stone,

and wood. Both the dishes and the interior are tangible expressions of how materiality and the affect it generates can be activated in reimagining the space and place of Polish food.

Like many of our interlocutors, Amaro gained culinary expertise apprenticing and working abroad after Poland joined the EU in 2004. After the meal, he reminisces that when foreign high-profile chefs would ask him to "cook something Polish," he would go blank, confused and embarrassed, with a few stereotypical and bland dishes running through his head. He felt that nothing in the culinary heritage of his country was worth placing alongside European fine dining. Such a sense of cultural inferiority of Polish cuisine, along with the narrative of the need to "create" or "regain" a sense of national self-worth, is a recurring theme in our interactions with tastemakers. Very often, leading us into a restaurant or an event, people would articulate and seek to self-consciously validate their pride in front of the foreign ethnographer and his local collaborator through a characteristic negation: "There is no shame, eh?" ("wstydu nie ma, co?")

One day, back when he was working at El Bulli in Catalonia under the global celebrity chef of modernist cuisine fame Ferran Adrià, Amaro reframed the issue of perceived inadequacy and began talking about the wonders of Polish ingredients instead. Amaro discovered that, coming from Poland, he could reach for a number of exciting ingredients that Adrià had never heard of, like bison grass blade (*Hierochloe odorata*). "I realized I had ingredients, but I didn't have the symphony," he says. Note the use of a high-brow metaphor: Amaro frames Polish culinary traditions as dispersed elements, or notes, not arranged in any sophisticated, artistic, or culturally consecrated form. It is an image resonating with deep-seated peripheral narratives of backwardness in a cultural and economic space rife, perhaps, with quality raw stuff, but missing the know-how of turning it into value-added products (Leszczyński 2020; Krastev and Holmes 2020). Designing that new composition by using available, but well-selected, meats, vegetables, fungi, and herbs while elevating them through skilled and highly technological transformations would become Amaro's project, all the way to Poland's first Michelin star.

Were traditional Polish dishes palatable as cosmopolitan haute cuisine? The clients from the new postsocialist money and power elite, whom Amaro encountered upon his return to Poland, did not think so, demanding the conventionally positional dishes of lobster, caviar, oysters, and steak. But the chef was energized and determined; he decided he wanted to lead a change in the newly booming Warsaw. Before opening his restaurant, he traveled around Poland for a year in search

of ingredients and suppliers that were offering local and artisanal products, all while improving their quality. In his exploration, he came to see marginal areas and nature outside of urbanized landscapes as almost frozen in time and outside history, ready to be brought back into a reimagined national space and sold back to wealthy Varsovians and tourists at a premium (Amaro 2014).

One of the people from whom Amaro learned to forage is Łukasz Łuczaj, whose book on “Wild Cuisine” (“Dzika kuchnia”) (2018) comes with the chef’s blurb. Łuczaj is a professor of ethnobotany who publishes internationally on sites from Poland through Laos to South America. He has collaborated with many Polish fine-dining chefs, drawing attention to herbs and plants that had been disregarded or fallen out of fashion, while integrating them in his own culinary practices. One of the co-authors, Halawa, followed in the footsteps of the country’s tastemakers as he drove to the village of Rzepnik to participate in a foraging workshop that Łuczaj organized in his private forest. He spent two days camping, cooking, and talking with fifteen other people, a lively mix of well-educated survivalists, gardeners, and preppers. They followed Łuczaj, a Laotian bamboo basket on his back, to the forest.

A long-haired, charismatic presence, and most recently an author of a booklong essay about sex in the forest (Łuczaj 2020), Łuczaj feels more at home around his cabin than at a faculty meeting. An ethnobotanist “gone native,” he used to host a TV show, in which he cooked lunch from foraged ingredients. He blogs, runs a YouTube channel, and promotes replacing manicured lawns with natural meadows. Łuczaj speaks from and for traditional beliefs, but also discusses his own uses of herbs and plants for naturopathic medicine. He is one to push his own body to its limits, exciting or soothing it with plants and roots, taking risks, and often going beyond the reasoning of Western science. In the workshops he leads in his forest, the bodies of participants, the landscape, together with local, ethnological, and taxonomic knowledge become sites for designerly experimentations with what Poland might taste like. In his academic publications, he works with historical records of ethnologists describing customs, beliefs, and lay practices around species of plants and fungi (e.g. Łuczaj and Nieroda 2011). An erudite, he is able to swiftly shift from biology and culture of wild edible plants and fungi in traditional settings to imagining new cuisines in the twenty-first century, discussing René Redzepi’s New Nordic approach, and analyzing the wild plant taxa foraged for his Copenhagen restaurant Noma (Łuczaj et al. 2012).

Łuczaj’s forest, like Amaro’s kitchen, is an important site in which the work of materially remaking the Polish taste of

place happens (Trubek 2008). In such projects of permaculture, recultivation, or work with seed banks (as Amaro is planning), tastemakers are again revealed to be designers of sorts. However, the fact that nature and taste in their hands becomes an artifact of designerly practice should not be seen as inauthentic or imitative, but rather as interpretative and generative (Ulloa 2018). At times, these projects include reshaping landscapes, designing new productive geographies, and implementing long-term economic investments, as in the case of vintners and winemakers, who together with chefs and food producers are among the most visible tastemakers engaged in changing categories of “good taste.”

Outside Wieliczka, on the outskirts of Kraków (Cracow), we park at the foothill to meet Agnieszka Wyrobek-Rousseau, a native of these lands who went on to be one of the first female graduates of the Montpellier oenology school. Rented from the Congregation of Saint Michael the Archangel, the hill houses one of the most respected wineries in Poland, Winnica Wieliczka. Wyrobek-Rousseau chose it not only for its position and microclimate—allowing her to grow the canonical *Vitis vinifera*, rather than hardy hybrids well adapted to cold climates—but also for its proximity to the John Paul II Kraków-Balice International Airport. A successful global consultant for wineries, her impressive CV has clocked twice as many seasons as years, given that she works both in the old and the new world. In one promotional event for foodies on the premises of the vineyard, Kraków-based chef Łukasz Cichy paired Wyrobek-Rousseau’s 2017 Riesling with brown trout recently reintroduced to ponds in nearby Ojców by Agnieszka Sendor, fermented wine leaves found on site, and mirabelle plums from the chef’s own orchard.

The attempt at a novel engagement with Polishness through the material remaking of local and regional specificities is visible in the wine industry, which started only a few years ago in the warmest regions of Poland. Small wineries have been making claims to tradition in areas previously belonging to the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires. In the narratives we heard repeated by most of our interlocutors, socialism was faulted with erasing a localized production and a bourgeois fine-dining style that was perceived as elitist and as such was replaced with more affordable and popular products, such as mass-produced (and relatively delocalized) beer and vodka. Today, vineyards cover only small areas, with low yields. The reestablishment of winemaking is a deliberate project that requires the acquisition of new skills and techniques that range from taming soils to handling grapes. New and seasoned entrepreneurs plant vineyards, modify landscapes, build or adapt production and tourism infrastructures, and design labels. Their role as tastemakers is thus deeply

entangled with the materialities of the wine industry. These, in turn, both symbolically and economically resonate with a new interest of the emergent bourgeoisie in creating dynastic wealth and ensuring their family status beyond one lifetime, once again making food and drink a site for imagining futures.

Unlike Wyrobek-Rousseau, many small producers are at times self-taught amateurs and enthusiasts (one of them matter-of-factly told us he had learned how to make wine from YouTube). Others go abroad to gain experience and establish professional networks, or hire expert consultants that can transfer their know-how to Poland. As they build the industry, winemakers create new alliances with marketing agencies, wine stores, supermarket chains, sommeliers, and restaurateurs. Thanks to them, Polish bottles (often priced higher than French or Italian ones) now come recommended not as a novelty but as a convincingly legitimate choice in establishments stocked with premium labels and included in the selective local edition of the Gault&Millau guide (now discontinued). The newly gained consecration and prestige of Polish wine is the tangible effect of an assemblage of places, practices, and materialities deliberately arranged by tastemakers.

## History as Product and Seasoning

The previous section has shown how placemaking, articulated through locality, terroir, and nature has become an important component in redesigning Polish food along new cosmopolitan and urban values and priorities. Landscapes, soils, plants, fungi, and animals are tangible materials through which the new Polish bourgeoisie sensually engages with questions of identity—culinary and otherwise. However, the focus on place does not take food out of history. Following the ongoing search for eternal Polishness in the conservative narratives of the nationalist discourse of the government, the interpretation of history has paradoxically turned into a crucial arena of heated political debates about the identity and destiny of Poland, from which tastemakers cannot possibly be isolated. As a consequence, not only narratives but also raw materials from the past have emerged as resources used to remake the present in its sensory dimension toward a redesigned future.

Going beyond simply leveraging history as decoration, tastemakers have taken to selecting and reassembling scattered, often unfamiliar fragments—recipes, techniques, ingredients, and flavors from exotic spices meant to counter what they often see as the blandness of Polish food in its

contemporary form. Popular media avidly pick up stories about the past of Polish cuisine being “based on spicy flavors and resembling Indonesian more than anything else” (Dumanowski and Czarniecki 2009). Chefs around the country use old recipes, as well as histories and geographies of commodity exchanges, to enact a more worldly Polish identity, spiced with pepper, saffron, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, and curcuma. In the promotional materials for its recent redesign, the Mercato restaurant in the Hanseatic port of Gdańsk (Danzig) explicitly frames its Polishness as “cosmopolitan.” The staff we interviewed used the colonial term “Spice Islands” to speak of the linkages between the city and Maluku Islands through the maritime *Via Mercatorum*. Many tastemakers identify politically as liberal, progressive, pro-European, and cosmopolitan, which puts their incessant search for tradition in an awkward relationship with the nationalist “historical politics” (“polityka historyczna”) of the nationalist government. How can one place the ultimate value in the local soil and its products without at the same time becoming aligned with exclusionary politics?

If design as future-making is always redesigning from pre-existing stuff and environments (Latour 2008), the tastemakers of Polish food are definitely manifesting design approaches when dealing with time, especially when it comes to using the past to shape the present and imagine preferred future outcomes. They work not with some abstract materiality but with literal materials: plants, flesh, fungi, soil, mortar. Tastemakers either bring them back into circulation or train a designerly eye at the stuff that is taken for granted—say, the color, consistency, and other properties of a raw potato—and ask: What else might be done with that? What other things is a potato capable of? (Ingold 2007).

An object ever present in our fieldwork illustrates these dynamics well. It is the critical edition of the 1682 recipe collection “Compendium ferculorum,” the first cookbook printed in Polish (Czerniecki, Dumanowski, and Spychaj 2012). The volume is co-edited and promoted by Jarosław Dumanowski, historian and professor at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Dumanowski et al. 2016), a public food intellectual who has been inducted into the Chef’s Club of Poland (Klub szefów kuchni) (Dumanowski and Kasprzyk-Chevriaux 2019). In collaboration with the museum of the King Jan III’s Palace in Wilanów, Warsaw, Dumanowski has undertaken a philological examination of culinary manuals from the 1600s to the present that had fallen out of culinary practices and had been lying unexplored in libraries. His work, based on a careful textual reading of the recipes, also addresses their social and political context, as well as the material culture in which they appeared. His methodology



in analyzing historical texts has provided cultural legitimacy and authority to cuisine, which chefs are happy to embrace, at least as a starting point for their creative processes.

Copies of Dumanowski's edition of "Compendium ferculorum" tend to pop up wherever we go to explore the redesign of the national cuisine, from the side of a rural road as Łuczaj picks up a leaf of ground elder (*podagrycznik*, *Aegopodium podagraria*) and contextualizes it with a historical recipe, to the most refined urbane kitchens in fine-dining establishments. Andrea Camastra, an Italian chef whose now-closed Warsaw restaurant Senses boasted the other one of Warsaw's total of two Michelin stars, offers an example of such use. The volume stood on a shelf in his starkly lit lab above rotary evaporators, which would not be out of place at a biotech facility. Tinkering with air pressure, temperature, and the chemistry at the molecular level, Camastra boldly traverses all registers of Polish cuisine, from the contemporary to the country's past and from the noble to the peasant. He would spend days cooking a pot of bigos (a common hunter's stew of chopped meats with both fermented and shredded fresh cabbage) only to later centrifuge it to extract the essence of the perfect flavor—light and ethereal, with the sourness of kraut balancing out with the umami of forest game and mushrooms—and reintroduce it into other dishes.

In this case, the designerly elevation of Polish food is achieved in two steps. First, the chef physically extracts the classed qualia of fatness and heaviness, perceived as embarrassing leftovers from peasant culture enduring in today's popular class kitchens. Then, he transposes the sensory essence of bigos onto the trappings of cosmopolitan modernist haute cuisine with its airy foams and small portions at a premium price. Camastra's *mizeria* (a traditional everyday and humble cold salad of thinly sliced cucumber, sour cream, and dill) takes the form of Pantone-green perfect spheres with a liquid center, which carries all the expected flavors of the dish, albeit more intense and concentrated. As the first sphere exploded in his mouth, the Polish co-author, Halawa, was instantly transported back into childhood meals at his grandma's.

As is the case for many other chefs, "Compendium ferculorum" is a source of both inspiration and legitimation for Camastra's experiments. The chef's very contemporary use of fragments from the past of Poland is clear in a historical recipe for sea trout (*troć wędrowna*) with almonds, green peppers, and saffron, which he considers an homage to the role that Poland played as a crucial cultural hinge between East and West, and as a transit point for spices and other exotic riches flowing into Europe. Here Camastra joins many Polish foodies in purposefully using flavors and ingredients to

have patrons embody a version of Polish history redolent of imperial nostalgia and projected onto the sixteenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which included areas now part of Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine ("from the Baltic to the Black Sea"). This historical sensibility reveals a certain regret for the destruction of a lively and refined (although largely imagined) culinary culture and the desire to elevate Polish cuisine to its rightful higher status "alongside that of the French." As more than one of our interlocutors has remarked, there was a time when the French talked about cooking something *à la Polonaise* and not the other way around, a time "before we [Poles] have turned our eyes to France."

Tastemaking forays into the deep past of the Polish polity are not only a way to legitimately add exciting spices to what is seen as the blandness of the contemporary Polish cooking but also a way to design sensory engagements that counter the actual racial, religious, and ethnic homogeneity of the society. In the practices of tastemakers, the distaste for the qualia of monotony often stands in for a social critique of the lack of diversity in the postwar republic. They sometimes explicitly frame their explorations in national history as work toward a more cosmopolitan ideal of citizenship against the government propaganda that stokes xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment. Redesigning the dishes and telling new stories, practitioners engage their patrons' bodies in an affective politics of inclusivity and diversity in a largely monoethnic country, seeking to materialize a multicultural Poland with Jewish, Tartar, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian presence, although sometimes imagined along colonial sensibilities.

Such interest in historical matters is also present in the work of Aleksander Baron, a chef with an artistic background who had his own TV show and was named the 2019 "chef of tomorrow" in the now discontinued Polish Gault&Millau guide. Baron, who once collaborated with Łuczaj, and enjoys a rugged, meaty, open-fire approach to cooking, is committed to experimentation and the materiality of fermentation, yeasts, and unusual ingredients. He constantly prototypes and tests his culinary projects with audiences and investors who at times do not seem sufficiently receptive. An avid student of culinary history, Baron even blogged for the Polish National Library's online repository of digitized historical texts called "Polona." In an interview, he compared browsing the archive to "falling into a rabbit hole," as so much inspiring material from the past was available at the tip of his fingers. Elsewhere, he declared: "to understand Polish cooking, you must first understand the history of our country" (Baron and Madej 2018), somewhat understating his agentive role in

reimagining Polish cooking and enacting new histories of Poland in food.

Baron also consulted “Compendium ferculorum,” other historical cookbooks, and Dumanowski in person to design a sumptuous dinner the two men organized at Zoni, the restaurant where he was the executive chef at the time. Celebrating a food history conference that took place in October 2018 at the Wilanów Palace, the dinner was called “Dzika historia” (“Wild history”) and was inspired by the “forgotten wilderness” and the “wild nature of our ancestors,” while characteristically eliding peasant food. The menu included veal brains, beaver tails, and a stunning composition of roasted pheasants, partridges, and quails arranged to look like seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings. The references to wilderness, hunting, and the lifestyle of the great households who could afford such luxuries in the past is activated as a ruse to bring spectacle and wonder and to allow guests to embody an alternate Poland. It is also a gesture of gentrification, symbolically including members of the new middle class, often with peasant heritage two or three generations back, into an imagined post-aristocratic community of szlachta (nobility) and ziemiaństwo (landed gentry) or, much more rarely, mieszczaństwo (bourgeoisie).

During that same conference, Maciej Nowicki, the resident chef and head of culinary education at the museum of Wilanów Palace, also planned two meals composed of dishes from historical cookbooks, again collaborating with Dumanowski. Like Baron, Nowicki is among the new generation of library-going chefs-cum-historians. While small in scale, the phenomenon is quite influential and visible in the media. In raised beds in a section of the palace grounds, Nowicki is also growing archaeophyte plants such as elecampane (*Inula helenium*) and skirret (*Sium sisarum*), used in historical eighteenth-century recipes. The past is not only remembered but materially brought back through the design of the beds, the use of gardening tools, and the sensory experience of smells and flavors. A walk through the garden is an essential component of a typical reconstructive cooking workshop held at Wilanów. In the now-closed Gothic Café in the Teutonic Order castle in Malbork, in northern Poland, chef Bogdan Gałazka examined accounting books and warehouse lists found on site to reimagine the dishes the knights ate, based on the staples and ingredients they bought, as well as to create entirely new dishes from this starting point, such as almond milk rice pudding with caramelized violet petals. Beyond his interest in cooking the history of the castle, Gałazka was inspired by “Compendium ferculorum” and Dumanowski to pursue a PhD in history.

In Poland, where cultural power is still largely held and distributed by the intelligentsia, the field of fine dining seems intent on building legitimacy by cooperating with academics, a less common phenomenon in culinary powerhouses such as France, Denmark, or the United States. In 2017, Dumanowski collaborated with several local chefs to organize a celebratory event during the European Festival of Taste in Lublin, featuring dishes—from spiced sturgeon to blancmange—that could have been consumed at the time of the Union of Lublin, the political agreement signed in 1569 that established the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Such events are curious elite mirroring of historical reenactments (*rekonstrukcje historyczne*) recently popularized in Polish middle-brow culture.

Recipes in “Compendium ferculorum” overflow with apparently conflicting spices and lack detailed cooking instructions (a common feature in the courtly cookbooks from the past). During a meeting before the dinner, Dumanowski (together with one of the co-authors, Parascoli) helped cooks put the recipes in historical context, explaining the evolution of taste, the shifts in flavor preferences, and the cultural and political functions of banquets in the sixteenth century. By doing so, the academics provided some framework for chefs to elaborate from scratch techniques and novel uses of unusual ingredients. Chefs and scholars were sitting around a long wooden table on the second floor of Lublin’s restaurant Trybunalska. The conversation was lively and informal, with the chefs clearly pleased to be communicating as peers with two academics and exchanging different kinds of expertise while planning the event. At the event, the priority was to design dishes that could be successfully tasted and tested against the contemporary palate. The chefs working on historical recipes used them to legitimize their work and to solidify their prestige as professionals; they hoped the charm of the culinary past could be leveraged as a driving force for their successful future.

The meals we described show how tastemakers have been mining the past to craft a version of the culinary history of Poland, in which recipes that may come across as unfamiliar or at times almost inedible to contemporary Poles are turned into palatable prototypes with new depth and resonance. However, besides specific dishes, what is actually tested and developed in restaurants and private dinners is a new Polish cuisine that builds on selected elements of the past.

## Cosmopolitan Tastemakers

Our observations suggest that Polish tastemakers constitute a tightly knit community of practice despite their diverse

backgrounds in terms of experiences, education, and class. Acquired or inherited privilege in the form of cultural, social, and economic capital, especially cosmopolitan exposure, international connections, and a keen sense of the changing cultural landscape, offers these tastemakers opportunities to design. They are afforded, or have fought for, this field of possibility. Tastemakers help localize the growing appreciation for eating local, traditional, and artisanal food that has been emerging among the urban middle classes around the world—first in the post-industrial societies of the Global North but increasingly also in countries like Brazil, India, and China (Parasecoli 2017). “Foodie” has become a new, transnational identity that Polish tastemakers have tentatively embraced (Johnston and Baumann 2014).

As these shifts take place in a post-traditional and highly mediated context, these practitioners have been trying to reshape the Polish culinary landscape by introducing sensory practices, interpretive frameworks, and aesthetic categories already circulating and prevalent in the global circles of food professionals and enthusiasts, including elaborate tasting rituals and the vocabularies that come with them (Parasecoli and Halawa 2021; Tsigkas 2019).

These forms of cosmopolitanism—often developed through tastemakers’ lived experiences of migration and apprenticeship in world cities like London—embrace elements rooted in the local context, such as the potatoes in vodka and the fermented rye in *żurek*. As they prototype locality and tradition through materiality, Polish tastemakers paradoxically do so by forging new relations between eclectic elements found worldwide or arranging and reworking the local so that it fits global sensibilities of refinement and quality, like the Michelin star, the Gault&Millau seal of approval, or foreign foodies invited to tastings. Situated in the relative peripheries of the world food trends and the hospitality industry, they also end up emulating others, a move sometimes framed in temporal terms as “catching up” or “making up for lost time” or in spatial terms as Westernization, an integration with core circuits of taste and prestige (Krstev and Holmes 2020).

Such interactions between global phenomena and the specificities of the local context make Poland an extraordinarily interesting case study. Factors that influence Polish tastemakers’ decisions and visions include the impact of the massive demographic relocations that took place after World War II and the legacy of the socialist regime and its attempts at industrializing and modernizing the food system. We can add the contented status of ethnic and religious minorities and their foodways, the sense of geopolitical siege that Poland has developed since the partitions in the eighteenth century,

and the ongoing tensions between a conservative, nationalist, and at times xenophobic government that can count on strong support in rural areas and in the East of the country, and the more progressive, pro-European, and mostly urban opposition. All these elements create a unique brew in which culinary topics acquire political and social meanings that inevitably influence tastemakers’ choices and activities.

Positioned between the East and West, torn between processes of Europeanization after its access to the EU and the backlashes against them, Poland enables us to study the turn to traditional, local, artisanal foods through an ongoing dialogue with other sites—often perceived as more prestigious from a culinary point of view and more advanced socio-politically—and the realities of advanced neoliberal globalization as experienced in a post-socialist cultural space. Observing global dynamics from a semi-periphery also allows us to look at aspects of such phenomena that may not be as visible elsewhere, especially in countries where the embrace of local, traditional, and artisanal foods is already established. Having seen these trends develop and become mainstream in Italy in the 1990s and in the United States in the 2000s, we believe that the Polish case, more recent and still nascent, can provide useful information about food globalization and the resistance it generates, the interest in local food as—paradoxically—an expression of globalized food culture.

Although they vary in terms of educational and social backgrounds, Polish tastemakers share significant commonalities in terms of attitudes and purposes. Their cultural reevaluation of traditional, artisanal, and local food happens largely in the cities. Most of them may belong to the intelligentsia, with its distinctly regional self-colonizing notion of a “mission to civilize,” both educating the population (whether they want it or not) and imposing a rigid social stratification based precisely on education. However, some dispose of those attitudes, framing instead their contributions in middle-class terms of applied abilities and practical skills valued in the market as new professions. Among Polish urban middle-class cognoscenti, showing off one’s knowledge and access to imported specialties is no longer the only legitimate way to display refinement and status. In the first years after the fall of socialism, at the time so often framed as “catching up with the West,” affluent Poles would express their desire for cosmopolitanism and reach for a Western identity through the consumption of foreign fare such as pasta, risotto, and later sushi. Now, thirty years later, much like in the case of the New Nordic Cuisine and Peruvian gastronomy (Leer 2016; Matta 2016), the local forms of culinary capital (Naccarato and LeBesco 2012) are changing. Wealthy urbanites have started to look inward, to their own culinary background, all



while enjoying pizza and kebab. We argue that this shift is not a simple return to the past or the rediscovery of the local, but rather a thoroughly contemporary artifice achieved through a process that tastemakers attempt to painstakingly control through designerly practices based on materiality and the sensory.

Our interlocutors are concerned with good food and “eating well” aesthetically, ethically, and politically. As intermediaries, they care not only about what they eat but also about the food of others, whom they seek to inspire, educate, or entice. In terms of imaginaries and actual experiences, the practitioners we follow in this essay express a desire for embourgeoisement, which resonates with the histories of local modernization projects pursued by the intelligentsia (Zarycki, Smoczyński, and Warczuk 2017). They carve out a future-oriented cultural space of aspiration, rooted in an unevenly distributed sense of opportunity produced in late-stage postsocialist transformation, Westernization, and economic boom (Halawa 2015).

## Conclusion: Redesigning the Future of Polish Food

Based on this ethnographic case study, we argue for a design-inflected understanding of creative, sensual, and worldmaking practices of cultural intermediaries in order to better theorize their engagement with materiality, beyond symbolic, discursive, or organizational aspects. They innovate by making use of the objects, the sensory environments, and the physical structures and infrastructures they find through exploration, research, and collaboration with other intermediaries. By transforming preexisting stuff, they prototype and test culinary materialities to create new social connections and new forms of semiotic, ethical, and economic value.

We argue that recognizing the designerly aspect in expert practices sensitizes us to modes of action where thinking and doing, or head and hand, are collapsed into one, rather than a mere method for the production of new items for consumption (Sennett 2009). Tastemakers’ approaches are reflexive, intentional, and knowledge-intensive; through them, ideas and values appear in the world as material and sensual prototypes—be it a dish, a pop-up event, a “gastro-nomic concept,” or a commercial enterprise—that are then all tested, refined, and reissued through iterative engagements with the public. Of course, as design theorist Ezio Manzini notes, not all social practices can be considered designerly: “Many of them we carry out unconsciously, routinely, within

tried and tested conventions, or with reference to such a limited field of possibility that there is no freedom of choice” (Manzini 2019: 39). Tastemakers, however, like designers, attempt to place themselves outside of the routine and the conventional in order to rearrange them for others. To design, not least around and with food, is not to pull things out of thin air. It is to always redesign, working the old together with the new, embracing an ethos of open-ended experimentation and tinkering (Latour 2008). Often, this is design by way of bricolage: “reassembling preexistent objects, which [the designer] identifies, decontextualises, and reinterprets modifying their meaning and some of the details” (Manzini 2019: 50).

This brought us to examine the designer-like attitudes displayed by tastemakers—and more widely cultural intermediaries—through the perspective of temporality, which deeply influences their sense of self and their experiences. Polish tastemakers employ approaches to materiality that shape their practices to bring about a desired future. They invest in well-planned projects designed to create a novel, contemporary sense of place deeply filtered through layered temporalities, in which the spatial interpretation of the nation is rearranged through new approaches to locality, often emerging from fuzzy and experiential geographies. In the case of tastemakers and their relatively affluent or cultural-capital-rich publics, these new forms of placemaking reorganize relationships among nature, farms, and the table. They mobilize history as a resource to be physically experienced and enjoyed, alongside moralized and politicized temporal ideas of progress, narratives of crisis or fissure. At the same time, they may refer to ahistorical and unchanging food traditions, the extended ethnological present of “custom,” and alternate expectations of a Europeanized or isolationist future. These perspectives are deeply embedded in the transformations of Polish society following the end of the postwar socialist regime. Our informants constantly credit this period with creating havoc, or at least rupture, in food traditions, the material culture, agrobiodiversity, land use, and food-related productive practices of the different areas of the country, thus causing Polish food to lose variety and sensory complexity.

Through making and planning, Polish tastemakers become significant actors in value transformations. They elevate or refine previously lowly things by repositioning them in an existing regime of value that is itself shifting, by arranging new relationships between things previously disconnected, like home-style pierogi and the Michelin guidebook, or by attempting to design new valuation schemes altogether. There emerge also tournaments of value (Appadurai 1986), as domestic flavors, practices, and recipes are moved out of the private sphere into the public and the “proper” or “tasty”

ways of making things are newly debated. Characteristically, one of this essay's authors, Parasecoli, approached for his perceived cachet as a "foreign food expert," was asked to judge not one, but three food competitions, for czernina (duck blood soup), pierogi, and nalewki. Organizers were interested in his opinion not despite, but because of, his lack of embodied Polish taste norms; he was asked to stand in for the cosmopolitan palate (Bachórz and Parasecoli 2020).

In this essay we have suggested that focusing on tastemakers' material engagements with the world reveals previously unexamined aspects of the work of cultural intermediaries in the field of eating and drinking. We have examined the emergence of tastemakers in Poland through the lens of design and design thinking, in the sense of planning, prototyping, and testing the materialities and sensory characteristics of a Polish culinary landscape that is still to come but already tinkered with through curated events, recipes, gardens, and farms. We have also explored how these designer-like attitudes and practices leverage temporality as a modality of relating to the material past and the present of Poland in order to intentionally shape the futures of Polish cuisine and drink, as well as its visible and invisible infrastructures. Tastemakers' choices are guided by visions of competing futures that may not be equivalent: choosing one preferred future over another is a political and ethical gesture. Such gestures, although projected into the future, are actually carried out in the present by using space and time as resources to create new values or to transform existing ones. The tastemakers of future "good food" look for raw material, including places, geographies, traditions, historical documents, family memories, nature, farming, foraging expeditions, and biodiversity projects. It is with this material that they build not only imaginaries but also realities that may be creative, attractive, and innovative, but still legitimately framed as Polish.

## Afterword

Our fieldwork for this essay was concluded before COVID-19 hit the food, drink, and hospitality sectors in Poland. During the worst of the pandemic, many restaurants closed while others shifted their business to delivery and pick up, often with simple bistro-style menus that include jars, preserves, and other "homey" dishes that could provide a sense of comfort. Food festivals and food events were cut to minimum, reducing the opportunity for tastemakers to meet, cooperate, and launch new initiatives. As we continued research, however, we found that significant efforts toward redesigning Polish food has taken hold well enough to not be undone.

Although the most elite venues discussed in our essay, such as Amaro's and Camastra's, have closed—with plans to reopen or reinvent themselves—new values in Polish food reimagined along the lines of space and time have already become more mainstream. Popular supermarkets and online stores now feature local and artisanal food, showing clearly that marketers are catching up with the trend. Bloggers and online content seems also to move toward a certain democratization of what tastemakers had started. In spring 2020, food critic and TV host Robert Makłowicz moved his media presence to a YouTube channel dedicated to the exploration of the new Polish cuisine, from breweries to food producers, achieving immediate success. Even as people had to retreat indoors, back home, the cultural instructions they received were already in line with the trend. A case in point is that Marta Dymek, a popular blogger, TV host, and book author, devoted her recent bestselling cookbook (*Jadłonomia po polsku*, 2020) to vegan interpretations of well-known Polish dishes. The coming years will be crucial to assess whether the tastemakers we followed in our fieldwork will maintain a leadership position in determining the direction in which Polish food will be redesigned, or whether the process will be further democratized, with more diverse contributions by a wider range of stakeholders. 🍷

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