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Learn the Rules Like a Pro, So You Can Break Them Like an Artist:

How Michelin-Starred Chefs Create a New Robust Tradition*

Simone Ferriani

Department of Management
University of Bologna
&
Bayes Business School
City St George's, University of London
simone.ferriani@unibo.it

Gianvito Lanzolla

Bayes Business School
City St George's, University of London
gianvito.lanzolla.1@city.ac.uk

Gianni Lorenzoni

Department of Management
University of Bologna
gianni.lorenzoni@unibo.it

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Abstract

This study delves into the artful equilibrium elite chefs maintain between tradition and innovation in the realm of haute cuisine, ensuring that heritage thrives alongside fresh creativity. Through 18 interviews with Michelin-starred chefs and key figures from two countries, we introduce the concept of "robust tradition." This idea captures how entrenched culinary practices and rituals not only safeguard the legacy of top-tier restaurants but also provide a versatile foundation for innovation and adaptation. Our findings reveal how robust tradition supports both stability and change, offering valuable strategies for leaders to harness long-standing principles to inspire organizational innovation. We discuss the broader implications of these findings for strategic management and organizational theory, especially in settings where maintaining authenticity is as vital as embracing innovation.

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INTRODUCTION

Gordon Ramsay at Royal Hospital Road, a restaurant owned and operated in London by Gordon Ramsay has been continuously awarded three stars-the highest ranking by the Guide Michelin since 2001. In this restaurant, just as in all haute cuisine restaurants worldwide, the pursuit of culinary excellence is central to ensuring a memorable and consistent experience for each client. Underlying this quest for perfection, whether it be in cuisine, service, or setting, lies an exceptional combination of consistency and creativity, continuity and change. On the one hand, every single dish is unique and hand-made to its smallest detail, even if it is then reproduced similarly for the next guest. On the other hand, once the dishes reach the menu, their preparation becomes a process characterized by formalization and standardization. Not surprisingly elite chefs often describe their job as involving a significant deal of repetition and great focus on executing the same dish every time, not to vary too much from one service to the next. Yet, almost invariably, elite chefs also stress the importance of artistry as an inextricable dimension of their identity which calls for novelty and experimentation (Svejenova et al., 2007) - or as world-renowned chef Adrià would have it: “a commitment to creativity on a daily basis” (Adrià et al., 2003: 7) - as well as the flexibility to maneuver in the event of exogenous or endogenous change of planned and unplanned nature. Performing in haute cuisine means elite restaurants must be able to reproduce excellence every day. This is a process wherein consistency is imperative, yet novelty and uncertainty cannot be ruled out; they are inherent (Austin and Devin 2003). Where does this ability to combine continuity and change come from in a way that allows the consistent reproduction of excellence? What are the processes that enable chefs to standardize behaviors without stifling mindful responses? How do chefs effectively balance the tension between continuity and change?

These questions are not idiosyncratic to the gastronomic domain but pertain to an understudied issue in organizational scholarship: how products and services that present the characteristic of being the idiosyncratic result of human craftsmanship and that need to be reproduced beyond their “original piece” can be consistently brought to a wider audience without the loss of their original features to

preserve superior performance. More broadly, while haute cuisine offers perhaps a particularly vivid illustration of the kind of micro dynamics of organizing we are interested in, the dualism between continuity and change inherent in these questions constitutes a central puzzle of administration. It has long fascinated organizational and management scholars (March, 1991; Nelson and Winter, 1982) and continues to permeate current research (Miner et al., 2003; Eisenhardt et al., 2010; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Turner and Rindova, 2012). It also entails universal questions of order and freedom, discipline and creativity, routine and novelty that are germane to all theories dealing with institutions and adaptive systems (Farjoun, 2010).

The intrigue with this dualism stems from the recognition that while balancing continuity and change “is a primary factor in system survival and prosperity” (March 1991, p. 71), attaining such balance is problematic because continuity and change are assumed to represent two fundamentally opposing and separate imperatives, supported by processes and forms largely incompatible. Exemplary in this respect is the trade-off in organizations between exploration and exploitation (March, 1991). Various theoretical and pragmatic solutions have been proposed that are anchored in this dualistic view, from approaches that emphasize ambidexterity through mutually exclusive solutions that support either efficiency or innovation (Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996), to views that emphasize concurrent balancing of contradictory demands within a single unit (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004) or the shifting from one configuration to another over time (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985). These widely established approaches have made great strides in enlightening the puzzle-inspiring models of learning, design, and innovation. However, as some have noted, the intuitively appealing approach subsumed by these dualistic perspectives may obscure how continuity and change intertwine in the messy world of actors’ actions and interactions.

The present study seeks to redress this imbalance by examining the organizational processes of organizing that underlie and shape the balancing of change and continuity. By processes, we mean the sets of actions that repeat over time and allow individuals to accomplish some business tasks (Pentland and Reuter, 1994). A study focusing on the processes of organizing is attractive on several

counts. First, while dominant perspectives have largely focused on organizational or unit-level solutions, relatively less attention has been paid to the role of individual and team-level factors in achieving balance (Raisch et al. 2009). Second, the argument for balancing flexibility and efficiency acknowledges the cognitive contradictions inherent in this tension; however, it neglects how this contradiction is resolved beyond the dictum of holding conflicting solutions simultaneously. Moving from a dualistic to a dual (Farjoun, 2010) perspective on continuity and change, we expose multiple processes through which stability and change are made interdependent and complementary. Under this light, we show how these elements, while conceptually distinct, are mutually enabling and a constituent of one another.

The empirical context is the international haute cuisine field, and, in particular, we focus on the organizational processes and practices of haute cuisine restaurants' kitchens. The kitchen, as a research site, is not just the place where cooking takes place but, first and foremost, it is a socio-technical space, a reservoir of cherished historical references and tacit knowledge, a locus of experimentation and learning where time-honored practices coexist with heuristics that emerge as individuals adjust to unique problem-solving situations - in which there is usually very limited information and time - while still retaining coherence and efficiency (Sasaki & Ravasi, 2024). Conceptually, we build on some of the language of existing strategic management theory to frame our research, but without imposing strong assumptions on how it will be applied in the empirical setting. Empirically, we rely on a qualitative case-based inquiry to develop our perspective on the nature of such balancing effort in the context of haute cuisine's elite restaurants, where we conducted 18 interviews with elite chefs and key individuals associated with 13 restaurants located across 2 countries.

Our interviews reveal the powerful role tradition plays in the success of haute cuisine restaurants, serving as both a steadfast anchor and a launchpad for growth. We've coined this phenomenon as "robust tradition"—a concept that captures how age-old practices, rituals, and cultural norms are transformed into a dynamic toolkit. This toolkit not only preserves the rich heritage

of these culinary institutions but also infuses them with agility, allowing them to uphold their storied identity while daring to innovate (De Massis et al., 2016; Dacin and Dacin, 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020). From these insights, we developed a tradition-based model of organising that highlights the core dimensions enabling elite chefs and their teams to sustain excellence over time. The model emphasizes how both individual and team experiences shape a restaurant's ability to adapt to diverse signals—without depending on rigid hierarchies or control. This approach helps strike the delicate balance between flawlessly executing established routines and seizing unexpected opportunities with creativity and precision.

The paper is organized as follows. We draw on prior work and our initial observations to construct a preliminary conceptualization. In the methods section, we summarize the research design, the setting, and the data. We go on to identify key insights from the case evidence and derive our model of how leaders in the haute cuisine field address the fundamental tension between continuity and change to nurture innovation without stifling time-honored traditions. We conclude by discussing the implications for the theory and practice of the study and its limitations and identify important topics for future research concerned with the interplay between tradition and innovation in organizational settings.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The systematic empirical study of multiple organizations over time illustrates a fundamental strategic challenge: maintaining consistency and reliability in execution without stifling innovation and the emergence of novel ideas (Rosenkopf and McGrath, 2011). This tension also lies at the core of the interplay between tradition and innovation in shaping strategic choices and guiding organizational change. Tradition, with its emphasis on established practices and refinement of what is known, fosters efficiency, standardization, and control. It provides a stable framework, ensuring that routines are executed reliably and resources are utilized efficiently. Conversely, innovation demands a break from tradition, embracing uncertainty and encouraging flexibility, experimentation, and exploration of the

unknown. This contrast highlights a core strategic dilemma for leaders: how to balance the need for consistency, which reinforces the benefits of tradition, with the need for novelty, which propels innovation and strategic renewal (March, 2010).

The tension between tradition and innovation is central to strategic management because it reflects the challenge of leveraging the strengths of both stability and adaptability (Dacin and Dacin, 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020; Cancellieri et al., 2022). On the one hand, tradition acts as a stabilizing force, anchoring the organization and safeguarding its identity (Dacin et al., 2019; Hampel and Dalpiaz, 2023), thus facilitating coordinated action and reducing errors. On the other hand, innovation challenges the boundaries of tradition by introducing new possibilities and pushing the organization to evolve, thus enabling it to respond effectively to dynamic environments. How, then, can organizations preserve the value of tradition while simultaneously embracing innovation?

One approach is through strategic structures that shape behavior and decision-making in ways that support both consistency and change. When designed thoughtfully, structures can stabilize operations, ensuring reliable execution and minimizing variability, while leaving room for creative deviations and emergent strategies (Eisenhardt, Furr, and Bingham, 2010). For example, the adoption of moderate structures has been advocated to balance these competing demands, suggesting that some level of formality is necessary to anchor routines, but too much rigidity can suffocate creativity and responsiveness. Yet, research also shows that organizations tend to drift towards greater structure over time (Rosenkopf and McGrath, 2011), often at the cost of stifling innovation. This drift happens because adding structure is often seen as a solution to emerging challenges and because structure becomes ingrained as it aligns with performance incentives and power dynamics (Adler et al., 1999).

In stable environments, this increasing emphasis on structure may not pose a problem, as it helps align organizational activities with predictable patterns, enhancing efficiency. Much of the traditional strategic management literature, in fact, views routines and structures as essential tools for reducing uncertainty and ensuring consistent performance (Nelson and Winter, 1982). However, when organizations operate in dynamic or unpredictable environments that reward agility and

variability, leaders must counterbalance the gravitational pull towards structure by introducing mechanisms that promote flexibility and responsiveness. This often requires deliberately “overcorrecting” in favor of change to keep innovation alive. From this perspective, tradition and innovation are not merely opposing forces but are dynamically interwoven in shaping organizational strategies. This interplay is particularly visible in industries where the balance between preserving heritage and embracing modernity is key to maintaining competitive advantage, including product design, fashion, food, musical instruments as well as many creative industries. For instance, elite chefs often face the challenge of preserving the rich culinary traditions that define their reputation while simultaneously experimenting with new flavors, techniques, and presentations to captivate their audience. These chefs leverage tradition as a foundation, using it as a springboard for innovation rather than a constraint. By doing so, they transform their kitchens into “laboratories” where traditional methods coexist with cutting-edge experimentation, showcasing how consistency and change can be dynamically managed to ensure smooth operations and long term adaptability.

Such an approach resonates with the view that routines are not static entities but generative systems capable of producing a diverse range of outcomes, from predictable performances to creative variations (Pentland and Feldman, 2005). The capacity to toggle between traditional stability and innovative flexibility depends crucially on leaders’ ability to manage the dual pressures of continuity and change. They must foster a culture where tradition is valued not for its own sake, but for how it can be reimagined and recombined to enable innovation. In what follows, we delve deeper into how elite chefs, as exemplars of balancing tradition and innovation, address this core strategic tension. By examining their practices, we shed light on the nuanced interplay between maintaining consistency and embracing change, offering insights into the micro-foundations of organizational excellence.

METHODS

Research design

The research design rests on an interpretive approach to grounded theory building based on theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection whereby the researcher simultaneously collects, codes, and examines the data to decide what to collect next. Theoretical sampling is both directed by the emerging theory and directs its further emergence. It is the “where next?” in collecting data, the “for what?” according to the codes, and the “why?” from the analysis of memoranda (Glaser 1998). The research setting is Michelin starred restaurants in the haute cuisine field. The literal translation of haute cuisine is “high kitchen” or “superior cooking”. Haute cuisine is characterized by elaborate preparation and presentation methods, often served in small portions but also comprising of an extensive number of courses. As a field, haute cuisine developed in post-revolutionary French society when the resulting cultural formation carried “French cuisine” well beyond a circumscribed repertoire of culinary products to comprehend the practices and products, values and behavior, rules and norms, institutions and ideas that are attendant upon the preparation and consumption of food in this particular social setting (Parkhurst-Ferguson 1998). It entails various actors and organizations engaged in the world of elite restaurants: the chefs, their employees and clients, food critics, cooking schools and guidebooks.

Elite restaurant chefs are the dominant players in this field, especially after the advent of the nouvelle cuisine, when many of them became chef-owners, but most importantly when the role of culinary innovation became increasingly important (Rao et al. 2003: 806–7). The premium that nowadays’ intellectual discourse places on innovation aligns gastronomy with the arts more generally by virtue of the many attributes shared with other artistic fields. As observed by Parkhurst-Ferguson (1998, p. 637): “The simultaneous susceptibility and resistance to change, the drive toward innovation against the force of tradition, aligns gastronomy with other modern arts that occupy fields that are similarly among multiple production sites, each of which negotiates invention and convention”. The tension between the search for novelty and conformity to established canons and traditions in haute cuisine restaurants is notable at different levels. At the institutional level novelty has an intrinsic value in cuisine because it is understood as an indicator of artistry and is expected by relevant audiences

(peers and critics). So “every new season brings a new ingredient, ingredient pairing, or a new technique, driving culinary creation in a constant flow of fads and fashions” (Leschziner, 2007: 81). The external pressure towards novelty is especially strong in the two and three-star segment, where restaurant critics but also clients expect the restaurant to continuously conjure up new ideas, as vividly captured by this quote from a three-star chef we interviewed: “Last week we had a guest from London, who in the course of two days ate lunch, dinner and lunch. He was served a total of 42 dishes, and of course expected us to give him something new every time”. But novelty must also fit with built-in expectations about culinary traditions and aesthetic conventions that are encoded in the field’s understanding of what is legitimate and what is not. At the individual level the tension is also evident because most elite chefs are constantly on the lookout for novel creations to satisfy their artistic drive or as a Michelin-starred chef summarized “we are searching for light bulb moments” (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2007, p. 452). Yet one of their most important tasks is also to safeguard cherished traditions while ensuring culinary and service consistency- i.e. that dishes taste and look the same over time and delivery standards are not compromised. Such a complex routine varies from one restaurant to another, as the frequency with which menus are modified (whether partially or fully) ranges from a day-to-day basis to only four times a year (Leschziner, 2007, p. 81).

Consistent with prior research characterizing elite restaurants based on critics’ judgments, we focused exclusively on restaurants that had received a star rating from the Michelin Guide. The Michelin Guide is widely reputed as the most authoritative ranking system for fine gastronomy and cuisine (Johnson et al., 2005). As explained by Joel Robuchon, one of the world’s most celebrated chefs “The Michelin guide is the most important. You can say whatever you want, nothing compares to Michelin. For us, there is nothing above the Michelin three stars” (Nanteau, 1999 :75). Restaurants granted with stars are systematically visited by anonymous Michelin “inspectors” who evaluate them multiple times a year (three stars restaurants are each visited nearly seven times a year) on the quality, mastery of technique, creativity, and consistency of the food (Surlemont and Johnson, 2005 Bouty and Gomez, 2013). As a result of these inspections every year restaurants are awarded from none to

three stars. One star is considered “a very good restaurant in its category”, two stars reflect “excellent cooking, worth a detour”, while three stars display “exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey” (Michelin, 2006) for outstanding quality.

We chose restaurants that, at the time of data collection, had gained at least two stars, which helps ensure that excellence (our focus) is the key sampling criterion. More precisely, we sampled 13 elite chefs with restaurants from two distinct countries - Italy and the UK – with diverse cultures to increase relevance and generalizability. We sampled firms that had maintained (or enhanced) their two or three-star status over a period of at least three years which helped ensure a study in which we can explore the foundations of consistent excellence.

Data

We used three types of data sources: (1) qualitative data from semi-structured interviews; (2) archival data (press articles, books, biographies, media coverage); (3) direct observations conducted in the kitchens during two full sittings.

Table 1 here

The primary data source is face-to-face on-site semi-structured interviews. Overall, 18 interviews were conducted in two countries over 38 months in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2014 with 13 different informants. The informants were all the Head Chefs. Head Chefs are at the top of the restaurant hierarchy, they are responsible for setting the menu and the overall leadership of the kitchen.

Each interview focused on gaining data on the practices underlying the creation, organization, and delivery of excellence in each restaurant. Our interview protocol covered 4 general themes. The first set of questions asked chefs to share their thoughts and ideals related to the pursuit of excellence in the light of their personal and professional experiences. For example, we asked such questions as: What is excellence for you? How long did it take to move from one to two stars? And from two to three? (if applicable). Were there particular turning points in your journey to excellence? How did

you learn your craft? Where did you work before joining this restaurant? What were the lessons learned during these experiences? A second set of questions asked chefs to reflect on their creative process and their approach to managing uncertainty. When and how do you introduce new dishes in the menu? What are the sources of inspiration for your culinary artistry? How frequently do you renew your menu? Could you tell us the story of a new dish emergence? Where and how do you experiment with new dishes? How do you cope with unexpected demands (i.e. a key ingredient is unexpectedly unavailable; clients ask for dishes not on the menu)?

A third set of questions focused on the organizational actions and practices underlying chefs' day-to-day pursuit of excellence. How do you organize daily activities? Do you have a formal organizational structure in place? How do you select your collaborators? What strengths and weaknesses do you seek in them? Does the kitchen work smoothly when you are not there? Do you have some "golden rules" for managing the kitchen? And how are these rules socialized into your brigade? To what extent do you tolerate organizational "exceptions"? We triangulated our interview data with extensive archival data, including books and several press articles. Press articles are especially relevant sources for analyzing haute cuisine as a field (Parkhurst-Ferguson 1998; Rao et al. 2003: 817). We complemented these data with direct observations during two full-length sittings in the kitchen. We observed the preparation of ingredients in the kitchen, the briefing, the scanning of the client list, and the associated specific cooking and service requirements. We then observed the team while working under pressure for the lunch rush. This fieldwork gave us a more nuanced understanding of kitchen work and coordination, helping to improve accuracy and completeness.

Data analysis

Our data analyses were structured according to established procedures for theory building from inductive research, working recursively between data and theory. We coded the data as they were collected and used a grounded theory approach to analyze them. This approach is well suited for an

exploratory study such as this where little is known about the subject at hand and where the aim is to develop further understanding of existing theoretical perspectives (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Our goal was to expand knowledge on the balancing of efficiency and innovation and to build new insights into the micro-foundations of this balancing act. A set of general questions (How do elite chefs cultivate excellence? How do elite chefs balance the need for novelty with the demands of consistent execution?) inspired our research, but as we moved through the data, we were open to “possible theoretical directions” and emergent coding categories based on our interpretation of the data. We ran the analysis by developing a set of codes that emerged from the interviews and fostered provisional themes. Some of these themes eventually earned their way into the theory by being repeatedly present across data sources. Precisely, we derived the main thematic categories presented in our analysis by linking related sub-themes in our codebook. This analysis created the basis for the conceptual framework that is presented at the end of the following section.

Figure 1 here

FINDINGS

In our conversations with Michelin-starred chefs, it became immediately clear that tradition and artistry form the bedrock of their culinary philosophies and organizational strategies. These chefs didn’t just talk about food; they evoked it with reverence, weaving stories of time-honored principles, the legacies of mentors, and sacred rituals that define their world. Their commitment to authenticity stood as a moral compass, guiding every decision. This deep respect for the past—what we call **‘tradition-based maintenance’**—acts like an anchor, grounding their work in heritage through disciplined organizational practices.

At the same time, tradition is not a constraint but a creative spark. These chefs treat it as a foundation from which innovation can blossom, like a tree with deep roots and far-reaching branches. We term this balance **‘tradition-based innovation’**, where tradition fuels creativity rather than stifling it. This dynamic allows chefs to navigate between conservatism and creativity in a process

we call **'robust tradition'**—a synergy where innovation is both informed and inspired by deep-rooted culinary heritage. Jocelyn Harland noted, "*You must start from what you know—your tradition—but then you have to begin interpreting it in a modern way.*"

Bret Grahame elaborated on this interplay, likening tradition to a solid foundation that anchors expectations, while creativity injects new energy:

"You need to have a point of difference, so while you stick to classical recipes, you mix them with modern ideas to give them a twist. Food at this level needs to be interesting." (personal interview).

We now present our findings, offering a framework that illustrates how elite chefs manage to balance the demands for innovation with an unwavering commitment to tradition, ensuring adaptability and loyalty in their culinary practices.

Tradition-based maintenance

Extensive research reveals that people in organizations operate with different senses of time, and this diversity deeply influences their decisions and actions. In the many restaurants we explored, this temporal diversity manifested in the chefs' profound respect for tradition, which they approached as a sacred duty. For them, cooking wasn't just a craft; it was a form of custodianship, a responsibility to preserve time-honored principles and organizational practices. This reverence was palpable in their frequent acknowledgments of their mentors and the rich culinary legacies that shaped their kitchens. Some chefs even described their role as protectors of not only recipes but also local ecosystems—the distinctive ingredients tied to their regions—safeguarding the cultural and agricultural heritage that shaped their identity.

This devotion to preserving the past is reflected in their almost obsessive commitment to sourcing original, authentic ingredients. Alain Ducasse, for example, journeys to Modena to hand-select the finest balsamic vinegar, while Pino Cuttaia convinces local farmers to resurrect long-forgotten varieties of artichokes. Others, like Lassard, cultivate their own gardens to ensure the highest quality produce makes it to their plates. This dedication to authentic ingredients is not merely

about flavor; it's a profound respect for local agronomic traditions and a renaissance of often-overlooked elements of culinary history. While chefs certainly embrace modern techniques—whether it's vacuum sealing, aging, or other culinary innovations—the foundation always rests on raw, natural ingredients that anchor their creations in the past.

Many chefs spoke of a strong connection to their roots, the places and traditions that have shaped them, and their cooking in ways that are never forgotten. Mauro Uliassi, founder of his three-star Michelin restaurant, reflected on how deeply the kitchens of his mother and grandmother influenced his culinary vision. He poignantly described how their resourcefulness and ability to create extraordinary dishes from the simplest of ingredients, harvested from the sea and wild greens growing along local shores, formed the bedrock of his culinary identity:

"My culinary roots, like those of many Italian chefs, trace back to home cooking—specifically, to the kitchens of our grandmothers and mothers. They were superb cooks who could create extraordinarily delicious dishes with just a few simple ingredients, harvesting the fruits of the sea and the wild greens that grew along the local shores. Their resourcefulness and skill laid the foundation for what many of us in the restaurant industry cherish and strive to emulate today."

For many chefs, the early years spent in their parents' kitchens became a formative experience, providing a wellspring of knowledge that they now pass down to their teams. In this way, the spirit of tradition is not only preserved but continuously renewed.

At the heart of this commitment to tradition often lies the concept of terroir—the deep connection between a dish and the land from which it is born. For chefs like Ducasse, this concept is pivotal. When announcing his plans to open restaurants in Rome and Naples, he emphasized his unwavering commitment to using traditional, locally sourced ingredients, making terroir a cornerstone of his culinary philosophy. Similarly, Ducasse has taken over old bistros, preserving not just the physical spaces but also the traditional menus, evoking culinary memories that honor the past. Chefs like Lassard and Nadia Santini have even created personal gardens at their places of origin to maintain a tangible, rooted connection with their culinary beginnings.

This deep-rooted reverence for their culinary heritage influences every decision chefs make, ensuring that each dish they create is not just a meal but a tribute—a seamless integration of the past into the present. Every plate tells a story, where tradition guides innovation, and memory meets the modern palate. Through this ongoing dialogue with their heritage, chefs ensure that the essence of their culinary identity is preserved, even as they explore new possibilities

Tradition maintenance through organizational stability

Throughout our conversations, chefs frequently emphasized the enduring power of tradition in shaping the way their kitchens operate. For them, tradition isn't just about cooking techniques—it's the very backbone of their organizational philosophy, a constant amidst the day-to-day shifts and challenges of running a restaurant. Many informants repeatedly invoked the mantra "*respect tradition*" as a guiding principle, especially in the apprenticeship process. Just as a house is built brick by brick, the foundation of any great kitchen is laid through the meticulous transmission of tradition. From the crafting of recipes to the art of plating, and even down to the core principles of managing a team, tradition permeates every layer of kitchen life.

In this environment, no creative spark can truly take flight until the apprentice has first absorbed the entire lexicon of tradition. Without a deep understanding of the basics, innovation lacks structure. This immersion in tradition fosters a sense of organizational stability, where the daily rhythm of work becomes predictable and secure. In the same way that a ship's crew must master their roles before setting sail, a kitchen thrives on this stability, built on repeated procedures and routines that anchor the team in a shared purpose.

This emphasis on discipline is reflected in almost every choice made in the kitchen. Many chefs spoke of their nearly obsessive attention to detail, scrutinizing dishes from every angle and testing and retesting recipes until perfection is achieved. Before a dish makes it onto the menu, it undergoes countless iterations, ensuring that the restaurant maintains its impeccable standards. As Clare Smyth put it:

“The precision in our kitchen hinges on a meticulously crafted system refined over the years. It starts with me and cascades down through the sous-chefs to the chef de partie. Each dish undergoes rigorous checks and tastings, not just once but repeatedly, before it ever reaches the guest. This constant vigilance ensures that every plate we serve is flawless. Our managerial structure isn't just about maintaining standards; it's about embedding a culture of excellence and attention to detail so profound that errors are almost impossible. Everything is integrated into this system, designed to catch and correct any slip before it can affect the experience of our diners” (interview).

Quality control is not just a task; it's a way of life. Two chefs likened this organizational rigor to *“military-like discipline,”* where leadership is highly structured, and every action is precise and intentional. Graham underscored the importance of this stability by stressing that excellence is achieved through repetition, efficiency, and adherence to rules. In his view, greatness comes not from sporadic bursts of creativity but from the disciplined consistency that tradition instills:

“You have to consistently cook at a very high level, and to achieve that, it is important that the brigade members can do (follow the recipe) every day exactly the same.” (interview)

This relentless focus on consistency and tradition allows these kitchens to operate like well-oiled machines, where every member of the team knows their role, and every dish emerges with the same excellence day after day.

Tradition maintenance through strong leadership

Several chefs we interviewed emphasized how the tradition of authoritarian leadership serves as a cornerstone of continuity and excellence in haute cuisine. For them, the concept of leadership is not open to debate but is embedded in the very fabric of the kitchen. This model of top-down command, seen as both ‘proper’ and necessary, has been passed down through generations of chefs. It's the time-tested formula for ensuring that the pursuit of perfection flows smoothly at every level. As one station chef bluntly put it, life in the kitchen is often characterized by a *“robot-like discipline,”* where everyone is expected to *“simply do as you are told and execute tasks exactly as the head chef wants*

them done.”. Olivier Limousin vividly captured the intensity of such environments through his experiences with master chef Joel Robuchon:

Joel visits every few months to oversee the restaurant. During these inspections, he meticulously checks everything, ensuring that each detail aligns perfectly with his strict standards. (interview)

Through authoritarian leadership, chefs exert control over processes and creativity, as Graham explained to us:

I do not tolerate creativity in the middle of the process. I do ask for comments from chefs, but they cannot do anything without my authorization. It is not disruptive if someone suggests something new; I want them to be interested. But I must be in control. (interview)

This approach may seem rigid, but many chefs defend it with a simple yet powerful rationale:

“Discipline is order, and order is tradition in a good kitchen.” This phrase reverberates through kitchens like an unwritten rule, a mantra passed down from chef to apprentice as essential to the culinary arts as any recipe. The logic is that without discipline, there can be no order, and without order, there can be no excellence. It’s an age-old belief that in elite kitchens, leadership must be firm, unwavering, and precise. As another chef put it, “That’s the way it is, and it has always been.”

This top-down, authoritarian style has become so deeply ingrained that it is no longer questioned; it’s simply the way things are. These accounts illustrate how the practice of authoritarian leadership has solidified into a normalized expectation—a tradition in its own right—that defines the very essence of working in elite kitchens. Just as haute cuisine is built on centuries of culinary wisdom, its leadership structures are a legacy, ensuring that the pursuit of culinary perfection is always governed by order, precision, and a steady hand at the helm.

Tradition-based innovation

Though many chefs initially hesitated to stray from the well-trodden paths of classic cuisine, most revealed an undeniable urge to unleash their creativity through experimentation. For these chefs, the thrill of creating novel dishes or refining production techniques became irresistible. Yet, they

consistently underscored the importance of mastering traditional culinary arts as a prerequisite for true innovation. It's akin to a musician who must first learn classical scales before composing symphonies; only by fully absorbing the language of tradition can one bend and reshape it into something new. As one anonymous chef aptly put it:

"True innovation in the kitchen starts with a deep reverence and mastery of the classics. Only then can one creatively evolve these traditions to craft new culinary delights." (Chef cited in Balazs, 2001, pp. 136–137)

This notion of innovation springing from the well of tradition was echoed by Chef Santini, who emphasized that a deep understanding of culinary heritage is essential for meaningful advancement. Like a painter who studies the masters before creating their own style, chefs must first immerse themselves in the foundations of their craft before embarking on creative explorations. For Santini, innovation is not about abandoning the past, but rather about elevating it:

"Chefs aim to blend tradition with innovative approaches, enhancing dishes to delight modern palates while staying rooted in the richness of their culinary heritage." (interview)

This approach frames tradition not as an anchor that holds one back, but as fertile ground from which innovation can grow. It is the deep roots of culinary history that provide the stability and nourishment for chefs to push boundaries, ensuring that even the most avant-garde dishes remain tethered to a rich, time-honored legacy. This delicate balance—where the past informs the future—allows chefs to both respect and reimagine their culinary craft, always with one foot firmly planted in the classical and the other stepping boldly into the unknown.

Viewing tradition as conducive to renewal

While the disciplined replication of haute cuisine standards—those precise, interlocking patterns that define a kitchen's rhythm—is crucial to its organizational structure, chefs we spoke with consistently emphasized that being a chef is far more than just following a well-rehearsed script. Beneath the discipline lies a vision, one that sees cooking as an art form. And like any great artist, a chef must first immerse themselves in tradition before daring to innovate. Tradition, they say, is the foundation,

the raw clay from which creative masterpieces are sculpted. As one chef explained, a junior cook, or "commis," couldn't craft a new dish because they hadn't yet mastered the fundamental principles. Without the essential knowledge, innovation is impossible. In this way, "*learning the traditional templates*" becomes not just a skill but a precondition for renewal.

Interestingly, none of the chefs described themselves as pure artists, untethered by convention. Instead, they engaged in artistry only after mastering and internalizing tradition, much like a jazz musician who riffs off classical scales or a poet who first learns meter before experimenting with free verse. This dance between revering the past and reimagining it was a recurring theme throughout our interviews. For Mauro Uliassi, this interplay is embedded in his restaurant's research lab, a space designed to merge memory with imagination. It's a forward-thinking endeavor, yet, as Uliassi notes, "*our past is ingrained in our DNA.*" He describes a menu titled '*Childhood Memories and Mariella*,' a 40-year culinary journey named after his wife, that brings the past to life. Another menu, '*The Sea Garden*,' recreates a scene from the seaside promenades of the 1960s, conjuring memories of his grandmother collecting wild herbs, like the bitter "*grugni*," which she would transform into magical dishes. It's this ability to tap into the past while projecting into the future that fuels his culinary innovation.

Massimo Bottura, a fellow three-star chef, shares this sentiment, framing the chef's role as that of a bridge between eras. "*The role of a chef is to take the best from the past into the future and filter it with contemporary techniques and ideas,*" he remarked. His vision of '*Cucina Povera*'—a revival of the resourceful, frugal recipes of past generations—reflects his belief in looking at familiar ingredients with fresh eyes. Bottura suggests that the old techniques passed down from grandmothers can teach modern chefs to make every part of an ingredient valuable, ensuring nothing is wasted—from "*nose to tail.*"

Through these reflections, we see how these chefs honor tradition not as a static entity but as a dynamic source of inspiration, a starting point for culinary adventures that stretch far beyond the known horizon.

Exposure to different traditions as an enabler of creativity

In the world of restaurants, knowledge is passed down like a treasured heirloom from one generation of chefs to the next. Every chef stands on the shoulders of those who came before them, learning from senior mentors, absorbing techniques through intra-restaurant rotations, and exchanging culinary wisdom across generations and borders. Nadia Santini, for example, speaks of her own journey being deeply shaped by the women in her family:

"My culinary journey was deeply influenced by Bruna, Antonio's mother, who entrusted me with cherished local and historic recipes. At Dal Pescatore, the kitchen has always been a woman's realm, initially shaped by grandmother Teresa and mother Bruna. I've gathered their wisdom and passed it on to Giovanni, Alberto, the kitchen team, and ultimately to our guests, as a heartfelt gift of love and affection." (personal interview)

In this way, top chefs often serve as the "anchors" Ferriani et al. (2020) of the culinary world. They foster a rich apprenticeship culture, sharing both their creations and processes through dense, interconnected networks that link the finest chefs. These networks are vibrant with activity, where elite chefs like Massimo Bottura and Ferran Adrià not only invite peers into their kitchens but also travel to learn from others, constantly exchanging ideas, refining techniques, and elevating their craft. This collaborative web, buzzing with innovation and inspiration, drives the art of cooking to ever greater heights.

Through this dynamic learning process, chefs don't just deepen their appreciation for their own traditions—they broaden their horizons by immersing themselves in diverse culinary worlds. It is this exposure to a multitude of traditions that ignites their creativity, offering fresh perspectives to experiment with. Tradition thus becomes a versatile tool—ingredients are reimaged, traditional techniques find new contexts, and familiar dishes are deconstructed and transformed. By blending elements from various cuisines, these chefs create entirely new recipes that remain grounded in traditional ingredients but enriched by cross-cultural innovation. This constant interplay between

tradition and diversity propels culinary creativity forward, creating a fertile ground for new, exciting possibilities.

Robust tradition

Informants seemed to reconcile the dual obligations they felt to maintenance and change by conceiving innovation as instrumental to ennobling tradition through its custodial reinterpretation. While chefs, in some way, embodied the sacrality of traditions in their constant reference to cherished cooking methods, ingredients, recipes, or time-honored principles on how to run a kitchen, they also invariably recognized the importance of letting new ideas float in to carry the tradition into the future, without “being trapped” by it. This duality is paramount to the pursuit of excellence:

Earning three Michelin stars is a testament to the relentless pursuit of perfection in cuisine, service, and ambiance, blending tradition with innovation. Each day, our team engages directly with our guests, striving to exceed their expectations over 250 days each year during our nine months of operation. This accolade also reflects our ongoing commitment to crafting new dishes that honor the integrity of local ingredients—a continuous challenge to reimagine both classic and contemporary recipes to astonish our patrons every time they visit (Moreno Cedroni, interview)

From an organizational perspective, this dual call was reflected in the prevalence across our research sites of a strict form of hierarchical leadership combined with collaborative teamwork and camaraderie. A combination we termed “organizational plasticity”. From a product perspective, we found this duality to emerge in the incremental and cautious approach to enacting the tradition via the introduction of novelties. We defined this form of enactment as “inhabited tradition”, to signal actors' deliberate attempts at translating tradition into action

Organizational plasticity

In every restaurant we visited, the rhythm of the kitchen was centered around the head chef, whose authority shaped the cooking activities and the overall service. Like the captain of a ship, the head chef determines the timing, oversees the execution of dishes, and directs the sous-chefs, keeping a firm grip on the most complex preparations. This hierarchical structure creates a framework of

stability, where each member of the brigade knows their role, and the head chef aligns the team's actions with the high standards expected in the kitchen. Under this system, the flow of service moves like clockwork, driven by the precise orchestration of the leader.

However, despite the clear hierarchy, the kitchens we observed were not rigidly top-down environments. Chefs emphasized the importance of collaborative culture, where teamwork is prized as much as discipline. Phrases like “*the team is everything*” and “*excellence is a collective endeavor*” echoed throughout our interviews, revealing a deeper dynamic beneath the surface. In practice, this means that while the head chef holds the reins, the team sometimes takes precedence—particularly when responding to unexpected challenges, such as a sudden influx of orders or last-minute requests. When the kitchen heats up, it's not just the head chef but the entire brigade that adapts, working together to maintain excellence:

Creativity often springs from unexpected moments, such as when we receive an exceptional batch of fish or oysters. These moments become a crucible of learning and innovation for our entire team as we craft the next day's menu. Each chef brings their own preparatory ideas to the table, honing their skills through proposal and collaboration. On such occasions, I seize the opportunity to challenge my chefs, pushing them to explore and expand their culinary boundaries (Shane Osborn, interview).

This flexibility within the hierarchy reflects what Amy Edmonson calls “psychological safety”—a culture in which chefs feel comfortable making mistakes, voicing dissenting opinions, and contributing original ideas. As Olivier Limousin explained to us:

I don't like to put too much pressure on the young chefs. The senior chefs, when they have worked with me for a couple of years, get more involved in the creative process because I like to get people thinking and encourage them to voice their ideas; I don't want to create robots (interview).

In many of the kitchens we visited, leaders consciously nurtured this atmosphere, fostering spaces where creativity and comfort could coexist with discipline. Take NOMA, for example, where chefs gather in a playful common area before service, surrounded by books, music, and design elements, creating a relaxed environment that fuels their collective innovation. While this collaborative mode of organizing is somewhat temporary and secondary to the structured hierarchy,

it plays a vital role in maintaining harmony. It acts as a release valve, ensuring the kitchen can pivot smoothly during moments of uncertainty or intense pressure. This organizational plasticity—the ability to flex and adapt without breaking—allows the kitchen to maintain its consistency even when the unexpected strikes, ensuring the hierarchical system remains strong yet agile enough to handle the chaos of service.

Inhabited tradition

Several chefs likened tradition to a kind of “*connective tissue*”—an invisible thread that links the past to the future, guiding their decisions and behavior. Tradition is the compass that keeps them grounded, yet there is a shared understanding that it must be approached with care. As one chef expressed, it is vital to “*intelligently revisit the tradition*” to avoid being trapped by “*the way things have always been*.” A successful kitchen cannot be so entrenched in tradition that it becomes rigid, unable to evolve. Instead, tradition must serve as a dynamic foundation for growth, allowing chefs to remain true to the past while being open to change. For example, a chef might stay true to traditional French cooking techniques (acting within their boundaries, as one of our informants put it) but use unexpected ingredients like fermented Korean kimchi or Japanese miso in their dishes (thinking outside the boundaries). This balance results in a shared conception of tradition as a resource that is not just statically revered as a painting on the wall but as something that is actively and regularly attended to, also recalling the physicality that involves, especially in a kitchen setting. It’s like a river that flows through time shaped by its banks yet constantly moving forward. Tradition and innovation must flow together, seamlessly intertwined. As Chef Nadia Santini explained:

"Our research lets us enrich the journey of valuing our heritage, blending tradition and memory with a touch of innovation, excellence, and surprise. In this quest to fuse tradition with innovation, it's crucial to understand ingredients and cooking techniques and to reinterpret cuisine to cater to contemporary tastes, pioneering sensory combinations, and enhanced digestibility." (interview)

Most chefs navigate this delicate tension by carefully identifying the core elements of their culinary tradition—those fundamental aspects that define the identity of the restaurant. These elements are

treated as sacred, the pillars upon which everything else is built. However, they remain willing to challenge or reinvent the parts of tradition that are not central to this identity. In doing so, chefs introduce novelty without threatening the integrity of their culinary roots. It's a thoughtful, measured process, like an artist experimenting with new colors while staying true to their signature style. Massimo Bottura, one of the most celebrated chefs in the world, exemplifies this point well. Renowned for his fresh take on classic dishes, Bottura intertwines the old with the new, ensuring the preservation of heritage through a contemporary lens (Kramer, 2013). His dedication to cultural preservation reaches far beyond his kitchen. Notably, he has been instrumental in revitalizing agricultural education by integrating culinary courses into local school programs, aiming to inspire a new generation of farmers. He actively collaborates with local dairy farmers to help preserve and rejuvenate the Bianca Modenese cattle breed and partners with poultry farmers to sustain the Romagnola chicken breed. Through these initiatives, Bottura not only enhances traditional Italian cuisine but also enriches the agricultural heritage that underpins it, ensuring that ancient flavors continue to inspire modern plates while creatively reimagining them for contemporary palates. Thus, tradition becomes both a starting point and a dynamic guide:

"Tradition is your starting point; it is knowing who you are and where you come from. To me, traditions are like the points on a compass giving me a sense of direction, and from these points, I can take off on great culinary adventures, off the beaten path, and yet never feel lost." (Massimo Bottura, interview)

Tradition, in this sense, is not static but dynamic, evolving as new layers are added to the rich tapestry of culinary heritage. Continuity provides stability, while variation breathes life into the future, ensuring that the past is not only preserved but also reimagined for generations to come. Thus, the concept of “duality”—the coexistence of continuity and change—becomes a defining characteristic of tradition as a resource that actors come to inhabit and enact.

Emerging Framework

Our framework, depicted in Figure 2, offers a preliminary understanding of how elite chefs internalize and implement tradition to sustain and enhance excellence over time to create a new robust tradition.

This model reveals the interplay between individual experiences and collective practices in shaping how kitchens respond to challenges. It emphasizes flexibility, showing that success doesn't hinge solely on rigid systems or centralized control, but on striking a balance between the reliable execution of time-tested procedures and the agility to adapt to unforeseen opportunities.

The first dimension of this framework centers on a strong sense of duty that chefs feel toward maintaining tradition. This concept of "tradition-based maintenance" goes beyond mere adherence to old practices; it reflects a deeper moral commitment to preserving the legacy of the past. Tradition functions like a compass, guiding chefs as they navigate present challenges and plan for the future. These timeless norms act as a frame of reference (Whetten, 2006), helping chefs evaluate their decisions with an eye toward maintaining continuity. When confronted with multiple choices, they are more likely to choose paths that honor tradition, ensuring that their craft remains rooted in long-established practices.

Yet, tradition is not a static force. The second dimension of the framework reveals that tradition can also serve as a foundation for innovation. Chefs view their culinary work as an extension of their identity, a theme that surfaced repeatedly in our interviews. Vision, passion, and curiosity aren't just characteristics—they are the engines driving chefs' creative processes. But before they can truly innovate, chefs must first internalize and master the culinary traditions passed down to them. One chef described this concept as "*dormant artistry*," suggesting that creativity only awakens after the chef has absorbed the classical foundations. Another remarked that "*the self must be embedded into the routine*" before true artistry can emerge.

Once this mastery of tradition is achieved, chefs feel a strong urge to reinterpret and creatively reshape it. Tradition becomes a launchpad for innovation, a catalyst for new dishes and techniques that blend the old with the new. The ability to experiment, grounded in reverence for the past, enables chefs to create exciting culinary experiences that remain deeply connected to their roots. This balance between traditional quality and contemporary creativity is essential to maintaining high culinary standards, such as those required for earning and retaining three Michelin stars. The kitchen becomes

a creative laboratory, where ideas are continually tested, refined, and evolved. Chefs like Massimo Bottura and Moreno Cedroni exemplify this process, operating dedicated labs to experiment with select ingredients. These innovations not only enrich their menus but often influence the wider culinary world.

We observed numerous examples of chefs pushing the boundaries of tradition while still honoring it. Some reinvented classic recipes with surprising new ingredients, while others applied modern techniques to traditional dishes. What stood out was that chefs' deep familiarity with a variety of culinary traditions was key to guiding their exploration and experimentation. This process not only satisfied their creative drive but also helped them respond to the ever-changing demands of the market, illustrating how tradition can both anchor and inspire new ideas.

Our research into haute cuisine kitchens also revealed an interesting dynamic between hierarchy and tradition. On the surface, hierarchy provides the structure needed for smooth operation, ensuring precision and efficiency in a fast-paced environment. However, this rigid system is also designed to be flexible. Like a well-tuned instrument, it allows for adaptability when necessary. In line with Cabantous et al. (2023), we found that even within strict hierarchical frameworks—where standard operating procedures often dictate much of the day-to-day work—collaborative leadership frequently emerges. This leadership style enables teams to go beyond formal rules, giving them the flexibility to respond to sudden changes or new challenges. This team spirit fosters a balance between “*change within continuity*,” ensuring that while tradition remains intact, the kitchen adapts to new demands without losing its core identity.

Figure 2 here

Similarly, when making changes to menus, restaurants manage to introduce innovations that respect their long-standing traditions. These adjustments are made with a deep understanding of the restaurant's culinary essence, allowing for innovation without compromising its heritage. This "bounded flexibility" is key—it balances the desire for fresh, exciting flavors with the familiarity

and comfort of tradition. In doing so, chefs create a tradition that is both dynamic and enduring, one that stays rooted in the past while constantly reinventing itself to remain relevant in the present (Cancellieri et al., 2022).

DISCUSSION: LEVERAGING TRADITION TO BUILD A NEW ROBUST TRADITION

“Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.” — Pablo Picasso

Picasso (1881–1973) began by mastering traditional art techniques but soon grew restless with the rules. Teaming up with Georges Braque, he broke away from convention, creating Cubism by reducing objects to geometric shapes and showing multiple perspectives at once, revolutionizing modern art with a new visual language. With Cubism (c. 1907–1914), a new “tradition” was born—one that remains a significant reference point in the art world today. Similarly, just as Picasso invented a new tradition in art, Michelin-starred chefs seek to innovate to create new traditions in haute cuisine. Haute cuisine offers a uniquely rich context for studying the emergence of new traditions because it is rooted in both discipline and creativity, much like the art world. The strict standards of excellence and the reverence for established techniques provide a firm foundation, while the intense pressure to innovate and stand out drives constant reinvention. In this high-stakes environment, where consistency is as important as novelty, chefs seek to push the boundaries of tradition while maintaining the quality and precision that define their craft. As such, the haute cuisine setting is ideal for exploring how tradition serves not just as a constraint but as a catalyst for new creative expressions. Not surprisingly, numerous studies have examined this creative tension. For instance, Rao et al. (2003) document how chefs balance the need to maintain culinary credibility while pushing creative boundaries, while Svejenova et al. (2007) argue that tradition acts as a springboard for bold reinterpretations. Erdogan et al. (2020) and Sasaki & Ravasi (2024) emphasize that tradition ensures consistency while also inspiring experimentation and adaptation. De Massis et al. (2016) position tradition as a flexible toolkit that fosters innovation, especially in family businesses, whereas

Cancellieri et al. (2022) highlight its role in maintaining a performance edge. Bouty and Gomez (2013) explore how hierarchical structures preserve tradition while fostering controlled creativity. Meanwhile, Adrià et al. (2003) assert that the ongoing interplay between tradition and innovation defines haute cuisine, ensuring both continuity and progress.

Across these studies, a common theme emerges: chefs, as leaders, must first understand the rules in order to break them. While tradition is deeply respected and serves as the foundation of culinary excellence, it is also a launching pad for creativity. Great chefs reinterpret and reimagine traditional techniques and ingredients in original ways. The concept of "*Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist*" is central to this process. Michelin-starred chefs immerse themselves in the classical traditions of their craft, mastering the techniques and philosophies that have defined haute cuisine for centuries. Once these foundations are internalized, they gain the creative freedom to break away from tradition, experimenting with new flavors, techniques, and presentations to establish a new tradition.

Our study corroborates these findings and expands on them by revealing the organizational micro-foundations that enable chefs to overcome the inherent personal limitations of human nature, allowing them to realize the balance between stability and adaptation. Overall, our research shows that chefs overcome their physical constraints and make their new tradition robust through a combination of cognitive imprinting, skill selection, hierarchy, and organizational routines that bring their unique vision to life. Cognitive imprinting refers to the deep-seated beliefs and values that chefs pass down to their teams, shaping the way they think about food, service, and excellence. These values become ingrained in the culture of the restaurant, influencing every aspect of its operation. Skill selection is another crucial element in this process. Our research shows the often-ruthless processes through which people self-select via a tough rotation program across culinary stations: only team members who possess the stamina to build the technical skills will become part of the team. This self-selection process ensures that the team operates with a shared understanding of how to do things, not just what to do. Hierarchy ensures consistency and discipline in building robust traditions,

allowing chefs to pass down their vision and techniques. Organizational routines also play a key role in embedding the chef's tradition into the fabric of the restaurant. These routines, which range from daily prep work to the execution of complex dishes during service, create a structured environment where excellence becomes second nature. This combination of cognitive imprinting, skill selection, hierarchy and organizational routines creates a paradoxical dynamic within the restaurant. While these elements might seem to impose rigidity, which we call maintenance in our model represented in Figure 2, they actually serve as the bedrock for triggering tradition-based innovation (please refer to Figure 2) in response to fluctuations in customer demands and/or inconsistencies in the supply of ingredients. Innovation and adaptation are critical for ensuring that the new tradition does not perish in its infancy.

For restaurants operating at the frontier of culinary excellence, where only perfection is acceptable, this ability to innovate and adapt in real-time is critical. Variability in customer demands—such as special requests or dietary restrictions—must be met with the same level of precision and creativity as the standard menu offerings. On the supply side, fluctuations in the availability of ingredients require chefs and their teams to be flexible and resourceful, adjusting their menus without compromising quality. In Michelin-starred kitchens, this need for real-time adaptation is non-negotiable. Excellence is not merely an aspiration; it is a daily requirement, regardless of the contingencies. By leveraging these organizational foundations, chefs and their teams pivot seamlessly, responding to changes without missing a beat. The ability to maintain perfection under such conditions is what sets these restaurants apart and ensures their continued success in a highly competitive industry.

Once the organizational foundations are in place, our research uncovers the mechanisms that activate tradition-based innovation capabilities. In the kitchen, when faced with dynamic changes on the supply or demand side, a short command resonates: "do it as Robuchon would do it," or "do it as [the chef] would." This is quickly followed by a perfectly harmonized chorus of "oui chef," "sí chef," or "yes ma'am." The shared understanding of both what to do and how to do it runs so deep that with

just one key phrase, any variability is addressed, ensuring unwavering adherence to the established tradition. Our study complements the extant literature on the duality of change and innovation (e.g., Farjoun, 2010; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Turner and Rindova, 2012; Eisenhardt et al., 2010) by systematically documenting the micro-foundations and activators of the capabilities that enable a balance between stability, innovation, and adaptation.

Future research avenues can build on several aspects highlighted in this paper. First, exploring the role of hierarchy and leadership in enabling flexibility within robust traditions could reveal deeper insights into how top-down authority systems coexist with collaborative innovation, particularly under pressure. Further investigation into how chefs manage and transmit their culinary identity across expanding global empires while maintaining local authenticity would be invaluable. Additionally, the concept of "robust tradition" itself, with its balance of heritage and adaptability, could be applied to other sectors where tradition and innovation are similarly at odds—such as luxury goods or high-end manufacturing—offering comparative insights (De Massis et al., 2016; Sasaki et al., 2020). The study of business models for scaling tradition is another area ripe for research opportunities (e.g., Lanzolla and Markides, 2022). Once chefs build their reputations and establish their culinary identities, they must find ways to protect and perpetuate the principles that define their work. Our fieldwork uncovered three different types of business models used by Michelin-starred chefs to achieve this goal, each grounded in a dedication to maintaining their culinary traditions. At one end of the spectrum, chefs like Lassard and Nadia Santini focus on perfecting a single restaurant while meticulously managing upstream activities, such as cultivating their own gardens to ensure the freshest ingredients. At the other end, we see global empires like those of Joel Robuchon and Alain Ducasse, who oversee a substantial number of restaurants around the world. Ducasse's success lies in maintaining exceptional quality standards and overcoming the challenges of distance and lack of physical oversight—a feat evidenced by the impressive number of Michelin stars he has garnered outside of France. In this model, fears of compromised quality during expansion, which often hold back chefs operating a single location, are mitigated by selecting and rigorously training a trusted

team who can then be empowered to uphold the brand's standards at distant sites. A third model revolves around leveraging know-how and brand reputation to transfer expertise and create value across contiguous domains while maintaining the Michelin stars that signify excellence. For instance, Massimo Bottura signs menus for various fine dining establishments within luxury hotels and provides a chef trained in his own "laboratory" to execute the dishes. This approach is shared by other chefs who keep their flagship restaurants as operational bases while transferring intangible skills and knowledge to external ventures. In each business model—be it a single, finely-tuned restaurant or a global culinary empire—chefs like Lassard, Nadia Santini, Joel Robuchon, and Alain Ducasse demonstrate a compelling commitment to preserving their culinary philosophy. This dedication not only sustains their legacy but also ensures the authenticity and continuity of their culinary traditions across various operations.

Such models provide a robust framework for other chefs aiming to balance commercial success with fidelity to their artistic and culinary visions. Looking ahead, it's worth delving deeper into how these models facilitate the transition of personal culinary artistry into enduring legacies. Research could focus on how top chefs adapt their business strategies to maintain their culinary ethos across diverse and evolving markets while ensuring their influence persists through generations. This inquiry could explore which models best support the institutionalization of culinary traditions, ensuring that a chef's signature style and philosophy endure well beyond their direct involvement. Such studies would enhance our understanding of the intersection between culinary art and business acumen, offering valuable insights into the sustainability of haute cuisine traditions in the competitive global marketplace. Finally, longitudinal studies that track how chefs' culinary philosophies evolve over decades while still anchored in the traditions that define their success could provide a more dynamic understanding of how creative leaders balance continuity and change over time. These studies can also delve into the micro-foundations of organizational routines that allow for this delicate balance, thus enriching organizational theory with much needed specific and actionable insights.

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Table 1. Informants

Restaurant	Chef	Interviews
Aain Ducasse at the Dorchester	Jocelyn Harland	1
Dal Pescatore	Nadia Santini	1
The Ledbury	Bret Graham	1
Madonnina del Pescatore	Moreno Cedroni	2
Torre del Saracino	Gennaro Esposito	1
Le Calandre	Massimo Alajmo	1
Restaurant Gordon Ramsey	Clare Smyth	1
La Francescana	Massimo Bottura	3
L'Atelier Joel Robuchon	Olivier Limousin	2
Piede a Terre	Shane Osborne	1
Ristorante la Madia	Pino Cuttaia	2
Uliassi	Mauro Uliassi	1
Vissani	Gianfranco Vissani	1
Total		18

Figure 1. Data structure

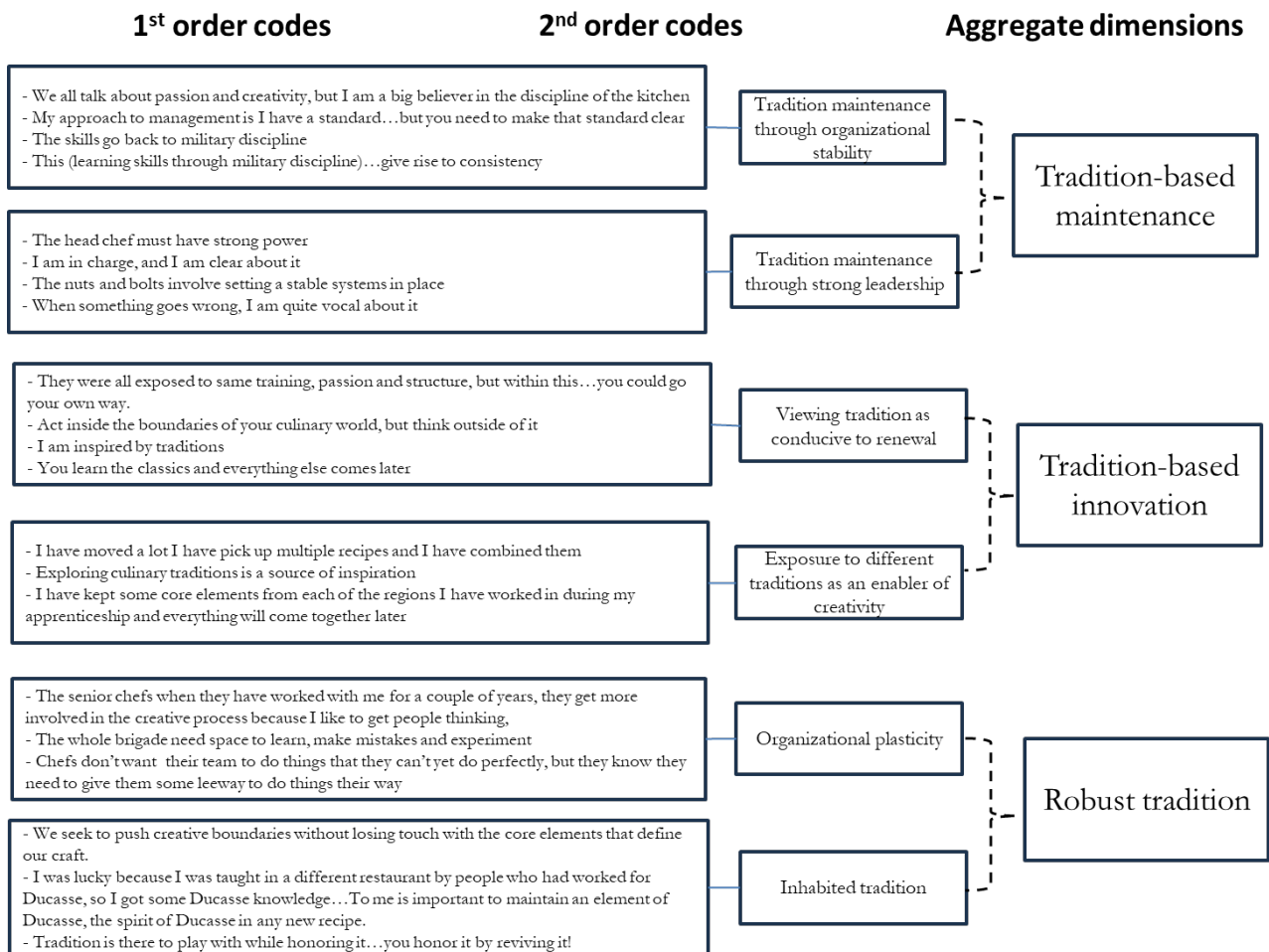


Figure 2. Continuity and Change through Tradition

