scope
Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 29:
Hospitality & Tourism
July 2025

Article
https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1029009

"IS THIS TUNA?" AND "WHAT THE FUCK IS A CHEF KNIFE?": UNLEARNING CULINARY ARTS

Nohema García-Castañeda and Kai-Sean Lee

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

Article https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1029009

"IS THIS TUNA?" AND "WHAT THE FUCK IS A CHEF KNIFE?": UNLEARNING CULINARY ARTS

Nohema García-Castañeda and Kai-Sean Lee

Is this tuna?
A vignette by Nohema García-Castañeda

I remember one of my first lessons as a culinary student. It was in Puebla, Mexico, in 2008, a time when molecular gastronomy swept through culinary programs. Students weren't just interested in knife skills and mother sauces anymore, they were obsessed with liquid nitrogen, sous vide compressions, and turning everything possible into edible foams and spheres. But for many of us, the most mind-bending transformations weren't the ones involving agar-agar and sodium alginate. They were the ones that challenged what we thought we knew about food.

Most of us had never been outside the country. What little knowledge we had of global cuisines and ingredients came from paid TV; late-night reruns of *Iron Chef*, and Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations* were our culinary points of reference. We watched in awe, but it was all abstract—mere images on screen.

"Gather your mise en place and grab your tuna—we'll be working with it today," our instructor announced.

My partner, a fellow first-year student, walked over to the ingredient table. Only to return a moment later empty-handed.

"I couldn't find the tuna," he muttered.

"Okay," I said, assuming he'd just overlooked it.

Minutes passed and frustration crept into his voice. Finally, he turned to the chef, and somewhat hesitantly admitted, "Chef, I can't find the tuna."

The chef cocked an eyebrow, walked over to the fridge, and came back holding a sleek, ruby-red fillet on a quarter-size sheet pan.

"This tuna?" he said, pressing the sheet pan into my partner's hands.

My partner stared at it perplexedly, turned to me and held it up like an alien artifact.

"Is this tuna? I've only ever seen tuna in a can."

No, tuna does not originate from a can. But the food systems that we are exposed to and grew up with would make us believe otherwise. A person's relationship with food is shaped by the environment they are raised in. As Lee (2022) notes, we are all carriers of different "culinary worlds"; and by "world," Lee is referring to a metaphorical domain socially constructed upon our accumulated experiences with food—a culmination of one's gustemic knowing (p. 7). A person's culinary world is unique, personal, and incomparable to another's.

As two U.S. culinary educators of immigrant backgrounds—one from Mexico, the other from Malaysia—we have witnessed firsthand our students' varying culinary worlds. We once had a student searching for "dry white wine" on the spice rack, mistakenly expecting it to be in powdered form. We have witnessed another meticulously peeling the skin off a green zucchini, only to say that "this cucumber doesn't look right." We have even seen students hold up both a green and red bell pepper in confusion, asking us, "Chef, which one is considered black pepper?" While it would be easy to dismiss these students as uninformed or naive, their confusion is well-founded. The industrialization of food, the dominance of processed and pre-packaged ingredients, and the erasure of food literacy in education have left many disconnected from the raw materials of cooking. In a society where food is increasingly commodified, where fish comes in rectangular frozen blocks, vegetables are pre-diced, and "home cooking" often means assembling pre-made components, the fundamental nature of ingredients is obscured.

Culinary education today, circa 2025, is hence not just about teaching techniques. It is about rebuilding lost relationships with food. It is about reintroducing students to the raw, the unprocessed: the origins of what they consume. Without such a foundation, how can we expect our students to understand the true depth of a cuisine, let alone master it? The lack of culinary acumen and food literacy is a major concern. We are witnessing a growing disconnect between us as humans and our natural, cultural environments. It is no surprise, then, that students today are more likely to recognize a Starbucks Peppermint Mocha over fresh peppermint tea, a McDonald's McFlurry over a freshly churned vanilla ice cream, and instant ramen over hand-pulled noodles.

Each student's culinary worldview is shaped continuously and, at times, distorted by the prevailing food environment and shifting consumer trends. Consider, for example, the decline of home cooking and how it has disrupted vital connections to the natural world and weakened ties to family and community (Pollan, 2014). In the U.S., the growing reliance on food consumed away from home has fostered dependency on a mass-produced, industrial food system—one that is often impersonal, unsustainable, and concerning to public health (Baldwin et al., 2023). Even for those who still cook at home, the landscape is troubling: grocery stores and supermarkets are overwhelmingly stocked with processed and ultra-processed foods, accounting for 60 percent of the average American's caloric intake (Ravandi et al., 2025). Let us not forget that access to food, and the hierarchies embedded within food systems, are also systemic issues. Not everyone has equitable access to "good" meals. This disparity of access is often rooted in the intersections of race, class, geographical location, social status, and income (Herrington & Mix, 2021). As educators, we must acknowledge these forces, for they allow us to better equip students—not just with skills, but with the critical awareness needed to navigate and challenge today's food systems.

Beyond concerns of food equity, the *Is This Tuna?* vignette also reveals a deeper issue within our culinary programs: the enduring colonial presence embedded in our gastronomy curricula. In a recent viral rant in the tourism field, Benjamin et al. (2024) call for a much-needed review of our academy and the colonial values we hold. The authors urge us to decolonize our curricula by critically examining how they may perpetuate the marginalization or devaluation of minority cultures. The next vignette illustrates how dominant cultural assumptions persist.

What the fuck is a chef knife?

A vignette by Kai-Sean Lee

> I come from a family that valued good cooking and eating. My mom single-handedly raised a family of four out of near poverty. During the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and economic recession in Malaysia, a period marked by mass layoffs and corporate upheaval, mom started a small catering business to support us. With very few options and an urgent need for income, she began catering lunches for a small corporate office. She started modestly, cooking just ten home-packed meals each day, collecting payments in cash, and slipping one ringgit (about 20 cents USD at the time) into my hand as a reward for behaving well during our afternoon drives together. Ten meals soon turned into twenty, and eventually, she expanded into owning her own restaurants.
>
> My mom was an extraordinary cook. One of my earliest childhood memories, from when I was four, is of her rhythmically drumming a cleaver onto a wooden cutting board. She used that cleaver for everything she prepared. The sound was distinct and resonant: *Tock … Tock … Tock …*, a steady clock-like beat produced from nothing but the twist of her wrist.
>
> I had never used a knife other than a cleaver until I enrolled in a culinary program in Malaysia—a French culinary curriculum ironically taught by only Malaysian Chinese chefs. On the first day of school, we collected our culinary bags and tools. I was eager to finally have a cleaver of my own—only to be disappointed. The blade I received was sleek, curved, and unfamiliar. It was a "chef knife," my culinary instructor told me. I remember looking at it and thinking: *What the fuck is a chef knife?*

Culinary education is often steeped in implicit assumptions about what constitutes legitimate culinary knowledge. The standardized curriculum in many culinary schools privileges Eurocentric gastronomy and culinary techniques (for instance, French knife cuts or mother sauces) as the foundation of professional cooking. This foundation is not neutral; it reflects a colonial legacy that marginalizes other culinary traditions and ways of knowing (Janer, 2007, 2022).

For Kai-Sean, who grew up in South East Asia, a cleaver was not just a tool but a tangible cultural heritage. Thus, the chef's knife in culinary school was not simply a new instrument, it was an explicit signal to which culinary traditions were valued, and which were seen as secondary, even invisible. Introducing this knife represented a form of "intellectual imperialism," wherein the dominant culture's knowledge continues to overshadow and marginalize another's long after the end of colonial rule (Alatas, 2000). The curriculum never questioned why the chef knife was considered the "preferred" tool, nor did it leave space to explore alternative culinary tools and techniques that reflected the lived experiences of students from varied backgrounds.

Standing in a classroom filled with shiny chefs' knives and feeling the weight of an unfamiliar blade illustrates how coloniality persists in shaping what we teach, how we teach it, and whose knowledge is centered. Students from non-Western backgrounds are often asked to adapt, conform, and suppress parts of their culinary identities to fit a predetermined mold. Their own culinary worlds are rendered invisible, sidelined in favor of a curriculum designed around Western gastronomy's perceived universality (Janer, 2007, 2022; Lee, 2020; Lee & Bucher, 2023; Lee & Carmer, 2024; Woodhouse, 2016, 2018; Woodhouse & Rodgers, 2024).

As educators, we must ask ourselves: Whose body of knowledge and techniques are we privileging over others? What culinary knowledge is excluded when we enforce a singular, colonially informed standard of excellence? Why aren't we introducing the techniques of the non-West? Why isn't Chinese noodle-making part of the lesson plan for understanding gluten development, whereas pasta-making is? Why aren't the fermentation techniques behind Korean kimchi as rigorously incorporated into our curriculum as those used to make European cheeses

and wines? Why aren't Indigenous methods of open-fire cooking recognized as foundational skills when grilling and sautéing dominate the curriculum? Why is a French omelet the "preferred" way to learn about protein coagulation when *tamagoyaki* and *omurice* are equally valuable and challenging techniques to master? Why do we emphasize Western stocks and consommés while overlooking the depth and complexity of Southeast Asian broths like pho and laksa? Why isn't the Japanese philosophy of *mottainai* (Japanese: もったいない for "no waste") integrated into lessons on sustainability and food waste, while European nose-to-tail butchery is emphasized? Why isn't mastering chopsticks part of a curriculum, but Western dining etiquette is?

We (both the first and second author) once worked with a chef who advised our students to master French cuisine before exploring any others, insisting that "French techniques are the fundamentals, transferable across all cuisines." Yet, the student receiving this advice was of Chinese heritage—a culinary tradition that not only differs profoundly in philosophy and technique from those of European cuisines but also predates them by centuries. The origins of Chinese culinary traditions go back at least 4,000–5,000 years, with records of sophisticated cooking techniques and regional variations appearing in ancient texts like the *Rites of Zhou* (c. 1100 BCE) and *Shiji* (c. 100 BCE). The Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) already had a structured approach to cuisine, including dietary classifications and culinary philosophy (for instance, theories of flavor balance and yin yang principles), and cooking methods that were well-developed long before many European culinary traditions took shape. What we now recognize as "French cuisine" began developing from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries. France's cuisine evolved later, shaped particularly by Renaissance and Enlightenment currents, and rose to global prominence between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet even during its ascension, French kitchens eagerly absorbed Eastern influences, often without crediting their origins. From the porcelain and tea rituals of the East Asian elites to imported citrus, spices, and cooking vessels that quietly reshaped European technique, they each remind us that culinary authority is never straightforward and that privileging French "fundamentals" often means overlooking the traditions on which they stand over. The bottom line is, if we are comparing which culinary system has documented, continuous foundations stretching furthest back, Chinese cuisine still precedes French gastronomy by millennia.

Why does this chronology matter? Because it reveals how "fundamental" status is less about merit and more about whose culinary knowledge became canonized through imperial power and Eurocentric taste-making. Teaching European methods as the baseline therefore risks reinscribing historical hierarchies and marginalizing equally rigorous traditions. A contemporary curriculum should treat European techniques as one influential dialect among many, and invite students to engage with multiple culinary heritages, including those that predate and have quietly nourished European gastronomy itself.

Unlearning culinary arts: Towards a culinary pedagogy of *sondering* and *world-traveling*

In *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, John Koenig (2021) introduces the term "sonder," which he describes as:

> The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries, and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk. (cover page)

Sonder is the humbling recognition of the vastness of human experience, the understanding that we can never truly see life through another's eyes, only our own. What if we embraced culinary education through sonder? What if we shift our lenses away from mere delivery and depositing of information, and towards embracing each student's culinary world with curiosity? What if we leaned into the multiple, untold culinary stories in our classrooms, and leveraged them towards our curricular goals?

As educators we often mistake a standardized curriculum and lesson plans for a universal, one-size-fits-all framework; this is a false impression, especially in gastronomy and culinary education when students arrive at our classrooms with different levels of access to food (especially in the flawed and inequitable food systems we live in today). We need to lean into our "sonders" (Koenig, 2021), understand that our students' "inner culinary worlds" are unique and non-universal (Lee, 2022), and figure out ways to travel into their respective worlds. Doing so will not only enrich the student's experience and growth but also ours as instructors.

To embrace the idea of sonder and world-traveling, we must first unlearn the culinary education as we know it, and work towards rebuilding the fabric of new culinary curricula that enables us to see the world through the diverse lenses of food. We need to work towards helping learners lean into their own intersecting understandings of taste and culture, allowing each learner to tap into their individuality before gazing outwards (Lee, 2022, 2023; Lee & Carmer, 2024). In addition, we must foster a safe and brave space for culinary dialogues to occur; one that does not discount one culture's culinary knowledge but understands each culture's role in the grand scheme of our global gastronomy. Fostering such a space moves the domain a step closer towards Benjamin et al.'s (2025) call for a decolonized academy. Culinary arts and gastronomy do not belong to a singular cuisine, culture, or framework (Bucher & Lee, 2023; Lee & Bucher, 2023; Woodhouse & Rodgers, 2024). Thus, a critical eye needs to be cast on our current culinary curricula.

A simple step towards this goal is to incorporate currently marginalized flavors, ingredients, and culinary techniques into our lesson plans. For example, we can introduce *Shaanxi Biangbiang* noodle-making in classes that emphasize gluten-development and starch gelatinization (which in the U.S. often focus solely on Italian pasta-making). Why not incorporate *masa de maíz* into the lesson as well, especially when gluten-intolerance is becoming a widespread epidemic? Why not show how *lengua* (beef tongue) is cleaned, prepared, and eaten, and not just overindulge in "preferred" meat cuts? Why not introduce students to how *salsa de molcajete* is crafted, and how charring poblano peppers over an open flame brings out depths of flavors that would otherwise remain buried? Why not incorporate wok-frying and the science of *wok hei* (the breath of the wok) in searing and sauté classes, since wok-frying is recognized as the most efficient cooking method in many Eastern cultures? If we take the time to unlearn our current ways of teaching culinary arts, we may just be amazed by the depth of our sonders. Culinary education then becomes an opportunity for learning and sharing: a "world-traveling" endeavor with our students (Lee, 2022).

Another step towards a decolonized curriculum is to curate our learning materials (such as recipes, readings, and textbooks) from more diverse sources. We should move away from textbooks that glorify certain cuisines and foodways over others. In doing so, we can acknowledge the contributions of global food cultures and eliminate the tendency to label them with blanket titles such as "foreign foods," "international cuisine," and "Asian cookery." More importantly, as educators, we need to reflect on how our own culinary backgrounds and training influence our teaching practices, ensuring that we do not exacerbate divisions or reinforce hierarchies between culinary traditions. In other words, we need to understand our own culinary worlds and the blind sides that come with them.

Our role as educators is not to impose a singular narrative of culinary excellence but to cultivate an environment where diverse traditions are not only acknowledged but centered and valued. By leaning into our culinary sonders, perhaps one day a student will not be shamed for mistaking tuna for merely canned food, and a Chinese cleaver will be included in a standard culinary school knife kit.

Nohema García-Castañeda (ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3883-5306) explores food and beverages as a cultural, educational, and societal influence. Her research focuses on understanding how food shapes people's life, educational, and work experiences, while also enhancing hospitality education and practices in food and beverage operations.

Kai-Sean Lee's (ORCID ID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1899-7219) research interests rest in the crossroads of philosophical aesthetics and gastronomy. In simpler terms, he studies the nature of good food and good eating, and what "good" means to different people. On a lighter note, Kai-Sean also identifies as a w(h)ine enthusiast, meaning he loves to drink wine and whine about life.

REFERENCES

Alatas, S. H. (2000). Intellectual imperialism: Definition, traits, and problems. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *28*(1), 23–45.

Baldwin, K., Williams, B., Turner, D., Tsiboe, F., Raszap Skorbiansky, S., Sichko, C., Jones, J. W., & Toossi, S. (2024). *U.S. agricultural policy review, 2023* (Report No. EIB-285). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. https://doi.orgBa/10.32747/2024.8754393.ers

Benjamin, S., Lee, K. S., & Boluk, K. (2024). Shit has to change, right? A call for "good trouble" in tourism. *Journal of Travel Research*, *64*(4), 1016–1024.

Bucher, S., & Lee, K. S. (2023). Dear chef, do you really want a PhD? *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, *33*, Article 100773.

Herrington, A., & Mix, T. L. (2021). Invisible and insecure in rural America: Cultivating dignity in local food security initiatives. *Sustainability*, *13*(6), Article 3109.

Janer, Z. (2007). Edible nature: New world food and coloniality. *Cultural Studies*, *21*(2–3), 385–405.

Janer, Z. (2022). *The coloniality of modern taste: A critique of gastronomic thought*. Routledge.

Koenig, J. (2021). *The dictionary of obscure sorrows*. Simon and Schuster.

Lee, K. S. (2020). Contemporary Malaysian pâtisserie—Tales of creativity confined by western traditions. In P. Mura, K. H. Tan & C. W. Choy (Eds.), *Contemporary Asian artistic expressions and tourism* (pp. 249–269). Springer.

Lee, K. S. (2021). Pâte à choux, a love story: Expressions of a culinarian. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, *24*, Article 100348.

Lee, K. S. (2022). Culinary aesthetics: World-traveling with culinary arts. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *97*, Article 103487.

Lee, K. S. (2023). Cooking up food memories: A taste of intangible cultural heritage. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *54*, 1–9.

Lee, K. S., & Bucher, S. (2023). Desnobberizing good eating and drinking: (Re)defining gastronomy and culinary arts. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, *33*, Article 100798.

Lee, K. S., & Carmer, A. (2024). Calling all wine snobs, shut up and drink the wine! *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, *36*, Article 100926.

Pollan, M. (2014). *Cooked: A natural history of transformation*. Penguin.

Ravandi, B., Ispirova, G., Sebek, M., Mehler, P., Barabási, A. L., & Menichetti, G. (2025). GroceryDB: Prevalence of processed food in grocery stores. *medRxiv*, 2022-04.

Woodhouse, A. (2016). *Critical self-reflection: A means to instigate a culinary education revolution*. Dublin Gastronomy Symposium 2016: Food and Revolution, Dublin, Republic of Ireland. https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1072&context=dgs

Woodhouse, A. (2018). Coming to autoethnography: A culinary story. *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics (Flexible Learning)*, *3*, 8–24.

Woodhouse, A., & Rodgers, L. (2024). Culinary arts education: Unpacking and disrupting its master-apprentice pedagogy. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, *35*, Article 100898.