

TITLE

Account of a conversation with Ferran Adrià about creative processes

ABSTRACT

Conversation with Ferran Adrià about creative processes
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Account of a conversation with Ferran Adrià about creative processes

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The following is the account of a conversation between the chef Ferran Adrià, students in the Official Master's in Art and Design programme at EINA, students on the Interdisciplinary Master's in Design: Culture and Territories at the Jean Jaurès University of Toulouse, members of Bullipedia, as well as other spontaneous participants. The conversation took place at the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona on the afternoon of Thursday, 20 February 2014, and lasted for nearly two hours. This account attempts to retain the statements made by Ferran Adrià. We sought to relate the words of Ferran Adrià as accurately as possible and, for this reason, we have maintained the first person singular in this account. However, we have grouped his responses by topic. Therefore, the account does not follow the chronological sequence of the actual conversation. We also do not claim that this is an exhaustive account of the conversation and, in general, the discourse has been slightly revised because, although the conversation was colloquial in nature, we did not want it to be too much so .

On the creative process

Cooking is a creative activity made up of three processes: the conception of an idea, the creation of something that tastes good, and the creation of a menu. In cooking, the creative process used to create a new dish is not the same as the one used to create a full menu. In the first case, there is no underlying theme, while in the second case there is. Creating a menu is like creating a symphony. Some people may be good at one of these processes, or some people may be very good at all three. What is certain is that to construct a dish you need sensory creativity. Until you have mastered matters of taste, texture, temperature, it is very difficult to be creative in the kitchen. In cooking,

sensory criteria make all the difference. You need a certain skill. Being a good eater is not the same as being a good chef. Some people have amazing sensory capabilities. I haven't met many people in my life who know how a dish is going to taste before they've even tried it. In fact, there have been only two: Pierre Hermé and Joël Robuchon. Cooking is easy. What's difficult is creating. In three years, any of you could cook as well as I do. Because cooking has nothing to do with creating. I don't know whether there is any other discipline where the senses have such a primary importance. It's really fascinating because our sensory capabilities progressively developed during the evolution of the human brain. Take salt, for example. How old is it? 15,000 years? How did the concept of salty develop? What makes cooking so different is the ephemeral nature of the creative work.

The most typical creative method is observation. Watch and think. This requires plenty of method. But the idea in and of itself, that's like, *click!* If you go to a candy store to look for an idea, that's one thing, but if you go to a candy store and you discover an idea, that's something else entirely. These *clicks* are different depending on whether or not you force them. The moment of creativity is a *click*. You may have seen something a thousand times before, and nothing, but then suddenly one day, *click!* The truth is that it's not the same to look for ideas as it is to create a dish. Every day we rediscover things we didn't know before. Of course, sure, sometimes things happen by accident. At elBulli we put a lot of study into accidental creativity. There is a magical moment that day when somebody accidentally, for example, pours in sparkling water instead of still water. There were plenty of moments like that. Things that weren't in the script. But there was still a script. Because our experiences have taught us that without one, that if there is no method, we aren't productive.

What happens when you've spent two or three days just relaxing? You need something to do, or you'll just become decadent. At elBullitaller we had methods that we had learned from artists, and these worked for us. Artists are the most productive people. If you don't disconnect it's very hard to create, and that's why you need change, to seek out those upheavals that encourage creation. In 2009 we were running out of steam. We were very tired and so we had to invent the idea of opening during the autumn instead of in spring-summer, because we knew that in the autumn there would be different products and that would be a spectacular force for creativity. That was our release valve. The new technologies were as well. They were the power of the moment. A dose of self-motivation and self-inspiration. Remember that for a period of 25 years we changed everything every year. That's why we needed four months to rest and disconnect. I used to come up with ways to get people to put more pressure on me, and this used to make me more creative. We saw that we were able to create three different menus every year. So once we had one of these menus finished, we would invite a critic who we knew had enough expertise to shoot us down. I wanted that extra pressure. One of the things that can be learned from the creative methods at elBulli is the schedule, which at first we made with pencil and paper and later on the computer. Initially we made changes unconsciously but later we did it consciously,

because our timings were actually intentional strategies to prevent a lapse into monotony. But sometimes your ability to be disruptive can reach its end. However, it's also true that if the creative team from elBulli got back together today, I don't know what would happen. I don't know because we don't want to know. We're 5 years beyond that now. I'm not going to have that problem because now my job is to create creators. My challenge now is to let others be the disruptors, to let others take on that challenge. Bullipedia is also an effort to allow anybody to have their creative process, for each person to see what might interest them. What can I learn from your process to apply to my process? Whether learning about resources, or a way of working, or whatever it might be. Actually, if I think about who the most creative chefs in the world are right now, they're not disruptive. I doubt that in our generation we will see another disruptive event in gastronomy like what happened during those years at elBulli. We were pushing the limits of performance. Today there are some incredible chefs and incredible artists, but what they're doing is not cooking. There's a new discipline beyond the kitchen, creating a performance in which the sensory capacities take on as much importance as the food. This is not cuisine. Of course, to remain at the top of this performance, the chef has to be spectacular. There won't be too many chefs who are going to play this role, or too many artists who are willing to dare.

But what we did at elBulli was so disruptive! In 1997 we served a mousse of smoke! What the hell can you do after a smoke mousse? What's incredible is that even after that we were still looking for small disruptive acts at elBulli. Each year we were able to create disruptive spaces that continued to add up. But the disruptive period for elBulli was really 1994 to 1997. We discovered a world of our own. Because it was for us. That is was disruptive later on, well, that's another story.

Each of us had our own reasons for being there. But as time goes by you realise that, at the end of the day, we were there because we thought something was happening, and we were passionate about it. In 1994 I was the owner of elBulli and I could hardly make ends meet! Full-time work for 18 hours every day, nobody can handle that. If you asked me why we put up with it, I don't know, that's the magic of elBulli. But it wasn't the dishes we created. The creative team worked like dogs so that others would understand what we were doing. We put our heart and soul into it, and that's the truth. At first there were only three of us on the creative team and the other seven did not create. But they got excited too when they saw the things we were doing, because they understood the magic. The place, it was clearly the place, that is everything. At elBulli you experienced happiness. And you don't need to create a mousse of smoke to be happy. I think happiness is a word that we have to start using again. I want to use it more.

On auditing creativity

One of the strategies we introduced at elBullitaller in order to drive the creativity was creative auditing. At first it wasn't really intentional, but in the end of became a strategy. When you're not a chef, you can't

audit the creative process for cuisine because you don't have the technical abilities. In cooking it's impossible to be an analyst if you don't know the technique for something. If you don't know the history of the whipped cream canister for creating foams and you can't contextualise it so you can't analyse that culinary process. Probably 99.5% of the chefs and critics in the world don't know what a foam is. What is created when something comes out of a whipped cream canister should be called a 'whip'. A 'foam' is what comes out of the canister with the intention of making a mousse without dairy or eggs. That is what at elBulli we called a foam. The idea was: How can we make a raspberry mousse without dairy or eggs so that the flavour will be pure? We started using CO2 for the first time in order to make the whipped mojito. It's essential to know all of this in order to audit. This is why at elBulli we audited ourselves. But I didn't like that. I would have loved for someone else to audit me, but there was no one else who could.

Auditing is not criticising, but quantifying. It involves stating facts; it doesn't matter whether or not I like that fact. Evolution is also involved; the analysis is evolutionary, not creative. Because there are plenty of things that I don't create, but I do take advantage of. Tomorrow I could use the technique of another chef and achieve something different and novel with it. If tomorrow I take a technique from another chef and copy it in my own kitchen, I could create something new that would put me on a whole new path. For example, liquid nitrogen. The first time it was seen in the world of gastronomy was in a sorbet Michel Bras did in 1996-97, and nobody realised the potential it had. In 2000 or 2001, Oriol Castro and Albert Adrià went to a chemistry fair and they saw it and we used it. To be fair, Heston Blumenthal was the first to use it, but he only made one thing with it, whereas we made 1,000. Within the evolutionary progression, they were the first. But it's actually all ridiculous, because cooking techniques, what are they? If I won't let you boil anything, what happens to your cooking then! It's just a technique. Thanks to liquid nitrogen in cooking you can create a hot-cold contrast, and thanks to liquid nitrogen I can take any cocktail and make it into a sorbet, something that was impossible before. In the end, if you really want push the issue, to create, create from zero, nobody does that. The technique of cutting – we didn't create that but we use it in almost everything. All of what I'm explaining here are objective facts, and that's what is involved when you do an audit of the creative process.

The criteria for creativity are always objective. We didn't actually audit whether we were the first to do something, what we audited was whether we had done something before. We're talking about cooking at a level of 10. There are some chefs who are very creative, but at the same time they've never done anything new. At level 10 where we were doing our thing, there were only five or maybe seven or eight chefs. At elBulli my mind was at the cutting edge, and when we tried to make it *prêt-à-porter*, it just didn't work out for us. Later my brother, Albert Adrià, started a semi-traditional tapas bar, Tickets, in Barcelona, and he started creating culinary *prêt-à-porter*. Creating for Tickets has nothing to do with creating for elBulli. I could've done 100 dishes each day for Tickets. When it comes

to creativity, the level of creativity is very important. At elBulli, our level was not about creating *a* chair; it was about creating *the* chair. Take ravioli. I can think of a billion, a trillion kinds of ravioli, for example, chocolate with anchovies. That's something pretty unique, right? But for me, something like that has no creative value. It has sensory value. But it's not creative, it's emotional. Of course, it could turn out to be so perfect that it wouldn't matter whether it was creative or not. For example, Joël Robuchon was so perfect that he could turn something that was not creative into something that was, even creating some things that when you ate them, they were so exciting that it made up for the fact that they had no creative value.

On decoding

Creative auditing and decoding are not the same thing. Decoding allows us to organise. Where does the ravioli fall within the culinary system? Is the ravioli an intermediate phase of some other final product? Or, which came first in the evolutionary history of cuisine, the empanada or the ravioli? If we go back to the origin, we just have flour and water. If we make that flat and round, we'll have a Mexican tortilla. Then just fold that in half and fill it, then close it up. What is that? A calzone? An empanada? Is that what happened? We don't know what happened – first there was flour, which allowed us to make pasta, then clay pots were invented and we started boiling. Surely the only technique we had before the Neolithic was grilling on stones. Our theory is that if we could really know all of this, we could audit better. And also from knowing this you could create in another way. Of course there is another important weak point in this theory, which is that I didn't know any of this and I ended up with elBulli! Well, that's not true, because in 1994 we were already auditing ourselves. It's better for the young people to have all of these tools for cooking. They will make a crêpe and understand that this was also done in Mexico, or China. The crêpe is the same as a Mexican tortilla, except that it's not made with maize. We must be able to untangle all of this and know what each thing is.

One of the things we're going to do at Bullipedia is an evolutionary analysis of the history of cooking, and then see where it goes from there. When you study haute cuisine, it seems like it starts in Italy and then goes to France. You need to analyse very well what the difference between Italy and France is. If you look at the book *Le viandier* by Taillevent (14th century) although it's a little rustic, there are recipes with an egg on the grill, which today would be super modern. At Bullipedia we're trying to figure out what the first book in the history of haute cuisine was, and we still haven't found it.

Here's another very interesting question: Are there styles in cooking? Would snacks be minimalism? Conceptually it's just a snack, but it's produced in a way that I would understand as minimalism. Of course, in painting minimalism means one thing, and in music it's something else. But what about in cooking? This is work that has never been done. And what about the Baroque, what is that? A lobster gazpacho? Would

that be from the world of the Baroque? If I create a deconstruction of gazpacho, and you still recognise it, what have I created? A gazpacho variation?

On eater

Just like there is an individual creative process, there is an individual eating process. There have been times when I've gotten excited about a chef, without ever going to eat that chef's food. At elBulli, you either loved it or you didn't. Proportionally, there was about the same number of people who loved it as who hated it. Surely this aversion was because we were making people reflect upon something that they didn't want to reflect upon. If you ate a pistachio truffle that was solid on the outside and liquid on the inside, that was something new that you had never felt before. Maybe you could understand it, or maybe not. Even at the same table there may have been some people who got it and other people who didn't. We used to introduce a new recipe each day, and sometimes what happened was that there would be a table where everything came together and the menu they ate was a 10, because that day there were 10 brilliant dishes of the 12 that we were serving, but at the same time, at another table it wasn't like that. Perhaps you need to go to a cutting-edge restaurant one day after another and analyse different tables. When you went and you had never been before, it was more than just something special; it was really a shock because it was so different. It wasn't the creative expectation that you may have had. This is why it was so difficult to find creative auditors. There was nobody at creativity level 10; they were at level 8 maybe. They knew a lot, sure, but we were flying at a higher level. Sometimes we even slowed down a bit and those experts still didn't understand anything. None of this has anything to do with whether or not they liked the menu. If somebody said there was too much fruit in the menu, that didn't interest me at all. That wasn't what it was about. When you go to see a horror film, it doesn't make you feel good, but you still like it. As a chef, metaphorically, you can incorporate fear at some point in the menu. Fear or provocation. The most important aspect of elBulli was provocation, irony, something illogical. The point of the food was not to make you like it. Instead, the idea was created that you're going to like it precisely because you're not going to like it. I don't think it's compulsory that during a long experience like a full menu you're going to like everything, it might even get tiresome. And at elBulli it was. Because when you got to dish 26, you reached the point where your mind was just overloaded. Some people would go out onto the patio to rest and then come back in. It was impossible to remember everything you had eaten. So in 2010-2011, when we decided to become a foundation, that last season, we were only thinking about the people. That was the only time we wanted people to be happy, to give it all a big finish, because for us we felt like it had already ended.

What should the dining room be like then? I don't know what a space for enjoying cutting-edge cuisine should be like. Maybe that's because it should be a space that is constantly changing. At the new elBulli we had 7,000 metres of space to keep changing: one day you might be eating on the beach, the next day somewhere indoors, etc. How do I see it today? I guess I see it more as purely performance. I think that the food is so intense, that

to put in more things might be overwhelming, although this doesn't mean that mentally you couldn't do it. I've always said that it's good to live on the edge. The restaurant Tickets in Barcelona, my brother Albert Adrià has it set up like a theatre. Of course, that's not easy to do. There are as many different designs for dining spaces as there are kitchens. And in the creative kitchen, the most important thing is whatever is important for the chef. For example, if you serve main courses you'll need one type of table, while if you do snacks, you'd need something different.

It's great if you can incorporate the dining experience into the food. We have to speak of this ugly word 'experience' to someone who eats every day. Because we all eat every day. We all have our day-to-day relationship with food. And this doesn't happen with other disciplines. You're not required to go and listen to music, for example. For myself in particular, this communion of the architect with the chef in order to jointly create the dining space has always bothered me. At the level of experience, Frank Gehry's design at the museum in Bilbao doesn't interest me at all, but on the other hand, the food is exceptional.

On design

When we speak about design, what design are we referring to? Are we talking about graphic design? Industrial design? Because these are completely different. The design process is sometimes the same, other times it isn't. Creation is one thing, and artistic production is another. Creation is something that then has to be sent to a factory, and once there, another process follows. This variability must be established for all of the processes. To give an example, using a standard, industrial tableware is not the same as using tableware that's 'made to order', as Luesma & Vega did for us at Pueblo Español in Barcelona.

For me, the most interesting thing that has happened in this country in recent years in relation to industrial design is the tableware concept that was generated by the collaboration between elBulli and Ester Luesma and Xavier Vega. It was very exciting to go their production centre as a chef and work with and create with those people the support you need for your concept. Because the logical thing would be to create a plate for each project. That would be a 10; and from such a demanding position you can only go downwards. With these producers, the concept of personalised tableware for each chef was created. And that is unique. Industrial design should try to transfer the sensory world of cuisine into its objects. Cuisine has a sensory ability, and that makes all the difference. Chairs don't eat, right? We have more possibilities than anybody; we're privileged because we have the capacities of all of our senses. When there is communion between the receptacle and the food, that's really something incredible. That's when industrial design for the restaurant industry takes on a whole new dimension, because the design and the food are linked. Perhaps Japan is the country where this has been done the best.