Abstract:

Crossing Borders: Culinary Categories as Constraints in French Gastronomy

A pressing question in cultural and economic sociology is whether actors who span multiple categories gain or lose social standing. We focus on how actors straddle opposing categories by blending techniques, and ask whether those who blend techniques from rival categories receive better or worse evaluations by external critics. Our research setting is French gastronomy during the period starting from 1970 and ending in 1997 when classical and nouvelle cuisines were rival cuisines competing for the allegiance of chefs. We study the effects of chefs blending cooking techniques from both rival categories on the number of stars received by chef-restaurant dyads from the Guide Michelin. Our results show that when chefs blend cooking techniques from rival cuisines, they receive a lower number of stars. The harmful effects of blending, however, are not cushioned by the perceived skill of the chef. Moreover, the penalty paid for blending depends on whether chefs incorporate techniques from an ascendant cuisine or a declining cuisine. Implications for research and action on blending and segregating processes, and boundary work are outlined.