

Avant-Gardes in Context

*Avant-Gardistic Analysis of an Avant-Garde
Phenomenon: Gastronomy*

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Opening Day

A short story

There is a certain, morbid brand of unease that can come over a person when they pick apart and analyze the direction – or lack thereof – that their life is taking. In the case of Declan Kapinas, this self-reflective and -destructive habit had been present a while. Coming out of high school his direction and plans had all seemed crystal clear. Dec was to be an artist. This was a career path that his father had less than approved of, and would not have financed had it not been for his mother's insistence, who loved him something fierce, and to whom, for as far as she was concerned, he – even despite the one incidence where he had run away from home at 15, instantly breaking her heart and sending her into a downwards spiral of anti-depressants and alcohol, to temporarily improve when he returned home two months later, during which time he had been sleeping in his best friend's attic (unknown to both parental households), only to steal near and around 2500 Euros from his mother's personal emergency stash and to repeat his home-hiatus for another 3 months before returning – was incapable of doing wrong. But so off he had gone to study the arts and its technical secrets at a highly esteemed school, about 3 and a half hours' drive from his parents' estate, and for four years he had labored to understand and learn as much as he could in order to manage to project the genius he knew was inside him onto a canvas or into a slab of marble.

It was after his graduation from said esteemed school that he was faced with his first few challenges, which would mark the beginning of his dabbling in less-than-positively charged self-reflection and alienation. Enter 14 months of a strenuous, self-testing period that would lead him to where he was today, and haunt his sleep with what-ifs and opportunities he had never been able to choose from or would now never be able to reap the benefits of. This whole time he stayed inconceivably strong and determined, convinced that every new piece, every new sale, every new exhibition was going to be his big break. But, of course, this big break never came. During this period he also managed to develop quite a controlled but persistent drinking habit – a dash of whiskey in his morning coffee, a hip flask on him everywhere he went – which rendered him at all times, not entirely hammered, but far from sober.

After this 14 month period he had had the realization in a vividly realistic dream that it was possible that his genius may never be recognized, and he had gone on a two-week bender during which time he ruined many of his relationships, including the already unsteady one he had with his father,

leaving his mother virtually the only person who still respected, loved, and encouraged him unconditionally.

This brought him to the present, 10:43 pm, where he had just gotten on the tram home from work – the very first and same job he had stumbled into in the kitchen at a small restaurant on the other side of town towards the end of his bender. In his drunken state of being he had stormed into the kitchen looking for a toilet to hurl into and had mistaken a large pan of boiling pasta for just that. Of course, he had then also by a mile missed what he had wrongly presumed to be a toilet in the first place, resulting in, suffice to say, quite a mess. The cook however, who was short a few hands in the kitchen, impressed by the ease and determination that Dec had – as plastered as he was – in cleaning the kitchen, and delighted by the enthusiasm with which Dec had devoured the plate of food – god remembers what it was – that the cook had placed in front of him, trying to sober him up (mistaking his hunger for delight, not knowing that he had been drinking only beer, whiskey and cough syrup for the past few days), offered him a job. This job was to be his distraction from his newly crushed dream of artistry, and would become the most constant thing in his life for the following 19 months.

But what he had first welcomed as a necessary distraction soon became dull and meaningless, kept relevant only by the rhythm it supplied him, without which he would undoubtedly have gone insane. Now, on the tram home, rain pouring down, enough blue in the sky to sew a cat a pair of pants, he couldn't help but view his own current situation from a strange, objective, distance. He was well aware of the fact that many people in his situation would likely be depressed, frustrated or disappointed, but he couldn't bring himself to be any. Instead, a comfortable numbness had washed over him, just as the rain washed over the tram's window, decorating the lights out on the street with a constantly changing blur through the glass. In a way the past 19 months had all also been a blur, and he could hardly recall any of the decisions he had made in this time. His accepting a job in a kitchen, alone, already hadn't been much of a decision, but rather, a lack of willingness to opt for another alternative, seeing as said alternatives weren't exactly ripe for the picking at the time. But even when he had gotten his drinking habit under a considerable amount of control again, and other options had opened themselves up to him, he had felt too unlike himself to be comfortable making the decision to leave the job where he may not exactly be happy, but was guaranteed a safe and constant environment.

It occurred to him that this was the first time since he had started chopping onions that he had even considered all this, the first time he had thought back to the exact moment where his life as he had had it planned had

derailed. The whole time working in the kitchen he had spent all day, every day, thinking about the numbness engulfing him, but had never really been able to put his finger on what it was exactly until now.

As the clouds gave way to a short patch of sunlight, and a brief period of dry skies, the tram made a sudden turn, swinging him out of his enchantment, off his seat, and onto the ground. As he scrambled to his feet and inspected the tram's surroundings he found that he had missed his stop by a few, and would have to walk back several blocks in what had quickly returned to a be a close-to-stormy climate.

Brick after brick after boring brick passed underneath. All smoothed down under the feet of countless individuals over the past years, so much so, even, that the grooves that once separated them were now only recognizable by the bordering lines of slightly deviating shades, shaped like little, irregular rectangles. It's amusing to think that every single brick on that street originated from a mold: a mold that was to ensure the exact uniformity of every single piece, so that every separate slab of clay, once baked to a brown crisp, would be able to fulfill its one and only purpose, on a bed of firm sand, under the feet of thousands of passers-by. Yet every one was unique. Each had come out of the stove with a slightly different tint, slightly more or less air bubbles here or there, and each had its own history on the road it now helped lay. The weather over the ages had hit each one in a unique way, shaping it differently from all the others, giving them all a personal identity. But who would even spend a minute to think of it? The road had been laid, used, and was beginning to erode, so would surely soon be renovated, only for the cycle to start again, the memory of every brick, lost to the ages.

Robert Gobberly harbored an eerie sort of empathy for the bricks under his feet. Every evening he walked upon them, in the same direction, for the same distance, before making a right and looping back to his front door – a walk of roughly 45 minutes in total. Every evening he would see every single brick, and appreciate the general setting through which he was walking, but he would not fully recognize a single rectangle, even though they all looked vaguely familiar to him. This was his evening ritual to clear his head, to get away from the daily rhythm he had developed and that was, slowly but surely, starting to appall him. This was his time of the day where he could get away from all the technological advances that he was slowly becoming too old to keep up with, his time of the day to dwell on the fact that everyone he encountered daily had the same faces, the same expressions, the same goals,

and this was his time of the day to, once again, reflect on the boredom that the following day would bring.

This obsession with boredom was something that had developed years ago. Upon the realization that everything that everyone he knew did on an average day was a distraction from a state of boredom, he had decided he never wanted to truly know this natural state of being. He had gone on a rampage for several years, trying every new distraction he could possibly think of or come into contact with: from mountaineering, to base-jumping, he had even worked at a carnival for 3 short and meaningless weeks. At the end of this streak, however, he realized that he was only using up all his distracting options at a quicker pace than he had been doing before, meaning he would only reach his highly-feared state of boredom quicker, and recognized the paradoxical essence of his pursuit. For a while he had even experimented with certain psychoactive drugs – a thought which would have nauseated him a few years earlier, due to his step-parents’ habit of force-feeding him 100 gr of liquorish (which he despised), followed by a thorough tooth-brushing session that utilized hand soap rather than tooth-paste, every time he had brought up a subject even barely related to the matter – particularly psychedelics, which he had read had lower risks in terms of physical addiction, but from which he still experienced occasional flash-backs, primarily at particularly inappropriate moments.

Although one might say he had accomplished a lot in those years, his constant travelling to the next new thing that would keep him fantastically distracted had eliminated any long-term relationships that he had had when he started, leaving him unbearably lonely. This, and likely the years experimenting with recreational substances, had turned the bags under his eyes wrinkly and tense, vaguely reminiscent of dried leather, but his pale blue eyes still sparkled with light, betraying few of the thoughts kept behind them.

The small patch of dry atmosphere that he had shortly found himself in evaporated as he turned a corner, and he was given the opportunity to observe a young man jumping out of a tram and cursing loudly as he stepped into the same down-pour that was now drenching Rob, soaking straight through his clothes. This was a man, he could tell, who led the risk of embarking on a similar journey as he had done all those years ago. The same restlessness, the same unease, the same emptiness and frustration were all there, he just hadn’t yet decided what to do with them.

The steam engulfing the air did little to help the already tropical climate that Dec had greeted when stepping into the kitchen that afternoon. Moreover, a

large chunk of it was now condensing on the ceiling and dripping back down at a fascinating rate, making it difficult for Dec to identify what of what was drenching his cutting board came from above him or from his own forehead. It was driving him mad. Today he had already sliced 28 onions into paper-thin half-rings, stirred in this pan 28 times in a counter-clockwise direction, stirred in another 6 times in a counterclockwise- and 17 times in a clockwise direction, cleaned his personal knife 34 times for every time he had a different ingredient to dissect, reloaded the dish-steamer 28 times, dried off everything from said steamer the according amount of times, and performed about a hundred and some more similarly, mind-bashingly boring humdrum tasks. That was the way it was here now. The same menu was served for months on end, meaning the same exact recipes were made and the same exact tasks performed for months on end, making every day so numbingly similar, it could send any man into a blazing bender. But Dec had experience with such decisions, and it was precisely what had landed him this excruciatingly mundane job that he found himself currently performing in the first place, so he opted against giving in to the urge.

A year ago, in a slightly more inebriated state than usual, he and one of the other boys in the kitchen had proposed to their boss – a large, pink man with a pot belly and a full, greying walrus mustache by the name of Edward Miscundus – a change of menu. Miscundus, in turn, had given them a week to come up with and present to him this new menu, a time constraint which they had agreed to, but forgotten about almost instantly. The morning their new menu was due, the other boy had run in laughing, having just remembered their agreement, and Dec and the boy went about preparing the strangest, and most irregularly paired course they could think of. Then, while presenting this course, and realizing Miscundus really knew nothing about food, indicated by hiss slurping and smacking his lips, and complementing them on their efforts, they couldn't hold their laughing in an instant longer and burst into high-pitched cackles and howls, after which Miscundus, in realizing that what had looked to be an exciting new turn for his business had turned out to be a petty prank, had cursed and scolded them, proclaiming that neither of them would ever be allowed the grand opportunity of adding a single dish to the menu ever again.

The irony of the fact that his own boredom with his work had offered the incentive for him to mess with his employer, resulting in the prolonged and ever-lasting boredom that would dominate his life as long as he stayed where he was, was wasted on Dec, but at that very moment the boy who had helped him with his quote unquote exciting new menu came rushing into the kitchen with news. There was a man having a fit in the restaurant, choking on

his food, flipping over tables and chairs, trying to get away from something invisible to all the other customers around him – the most exciting and unexpected thing that had happened in the restaurant since Dec had started working there, And everyone rushed out to see.

Several days later Dec made a wrong turn on a stroll through town and found himself in a back alley by a Chinese – or at least some other oriental – comfort-food stand. The other day he had been in the back of the kitchen, and by the time he had gotten out, the hallucinating man had already exited. Realizing that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and that it was already closing in on 4:00 pm, he searched his pockets for some spare change and ordered something randomly off the list of foreign, strangely spelled words that he couldn't pronounce, let alone understand, to go. What he received wasn't bad – some rice, various different styles of stir-fried noodles and meats – pretty much what he had expected. There was, however, one side-dish that he hadn't realized was there until a few hours after having finished the rest and left it on the table in the dusty living room of his small apartment, by now leaning towards cold, that he couldn't get out of his mind for weeks to follow. Maybe it was the temperature, or maybe the hours of sitting outside of a fridge or the lack of some other form of anti-expiring measure that had caused its texture to diverge from its original state, but the combination of everything that may or may not have happened to it culminated in the most curious taste he had ever experienced.

At first he wasn't at all sure whether he liked it – actually, for an instant he thought it had already gone bad and that he would have to run to his bathroom to wretch it back up any minute – but he soon realized it was simply a completely unique taste. No preconceptions or childhood memories attached, no expectations or urges to fulfill, just a simple sensation that he could objectively evaluate. There seemed to be a clash between what he tasted, how he experienced it, and everything he thought he had known about tastes up until that time, and here his deeper understanding of how particular tastes, textures, temperatures, and even smells, could work together to create something unique began to grow. This was an experience that would change his life forever.

It was getting harder and harder to tell between flashbacks and reality. Just a few days ago, a little before his daily walk, Rob had come home to an empty fridge – which he could not remember being empty when he left for work that

morning, but that was beside the point – and decided to try the small restaurant across the street from where he lived, which, had he been younger at the time, he would have tried the second it had opened four years ago, excited by the thrill of the possible discovery of a new take on cuisine. When it had, however, opened its doors to the public, Rob had seen it as another establishment that would most likely serve food like all the rest, attracting only those too lazy to cook for themselves, too poor to afford anything else, or those hoping to seem sophisticated or romantic to their friends or spouse, respectively. Now, however, feeling a little queasy and lightheaded he stumbled across the street and swung the establishment’s door wide open.

What awaited inside washed over him in a haze.

“Hello, sir! How many?”

“One, please.”

“Right this way sir, I hope you don’t mind the breeze through the window.”

“That’s quite alright.”

“Would you like to hear today’s specials?”

And before he knew it – or what it was, for that matter – they had placed a plate in front of him. He looked at it through weary, troubled eyes: the same chestnut color flooded his plate as did the tapestries on the walls, and a glass of red wine, the color resembling that of the curtains, was poured for him. The contents on his table and his surroundings blurred together. It seemed they really had a color theme going in this place, the likes of which so obvious and dull, it sickened him. He felt powerless, the memory of making a choice from the menu evidently repressed, and, defeated, he took a bite.

He hadn’t seen what it had been, but it tasted like he was chewing on some cut of meat – likely steak – but poorly seasoned. As expected, the chef here had no inspiration, no personality – it was probable that he had simply looked up a recipe or video on the web, and changed exactly nothing about it. The vegetables and sauce surrounding it were similarly disappointing: like every other vegetable – and sauce – he had ever tasted. There was no more variation in the world, it seemed. Everything was always the same: dull, depressing, and unbearably identical. The food tasted the same everywhere you went. The people looked the same everywhere you went. The conversations you had were the same everywhere you went. And most troubling of all, everywhere you went your experience was, pretty much, the exact same, regardless of what it was you actually did.

Suddenly Rob grew soberly attentive. He looked around with wide eyes and even wider pupils. It seemed all the other customers were all staring at him, and most disturbing of all, they all wore the same face. Men and

women alike had the same features – the same eyes, the same wrinkles, even the same moles. He quickly averted his gaze, only for it to be caught by the waiter, who, incomprehensibly, had now misplaced the face that had greeted him at the door, and bared the same mask as everyone else surrounding him.

“Is everything pleasing you, sir?” he asked with a creepy smile that ran off the side of his face.

Rob choked on his mouthful, and, without thinking, jumped up out of his chair and fell backwards, kicking over his table and half-eaten dinner. As he jumped up and looked around, splashes of an off-white liquid fell to the floor and solidified instantly, leaving small heaps of what seemed almost like dry concrete. He looked up to see the ceiling melting into large blobs and falling to the ground, one gulp at a time, at a terrifying rate. The wooden frame of the building itself was already partially exposed and he fell over backwards again, promptly rolled over to his right in order to avoid another splash of white, and jumped back up to his feet. On his way out he must have kicked over at least three tables, fallen over at least another two more times, and ruined many a meal. Staff from the kitchen were quickly streaming in to witness the debacle, but he managed to flee the premises before they all made it out, reducing his embarrassment by just that little bit.

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Opening day. ETA: 23 minutes. All preparations beyond underway. Not a single thing could or would go wrong today. About half a year ago, after Dec had encountered the alien taste from an oriental food-stand, he had experienced a rebirth. New tastes had come to life at his home as he researched and experimented with as many odd ingredients, spices, and odors as he could get his hands on. Unbeknown to Miscundus, Dec had sneaked various sorts of amuse-bouche and other miniscule side-dishes to the guests at their tables, on the house, and had formed almost a cult-following – rumors spread among town about the young sous-chef at Miscundus’ establishment that sneaked the customers strange delicacies the likes of which their taste buds had never salivated over before. Who knew that the perfect amount of chili, mixed with an already intense umami would result in such an exotic, alien taste? Who knew that the lemongrass-esque flavors of the Brazilian Saúva ant, found all over the Amazon Rainforest, together with the crunch it provided when lightly roasted would produce such a tender sensation? People were hooked, and before long Dec was introduced to the man who would become his benefactor – Luscius Tendrol. Luscius had earned his fortune in shipping computer chips around the world, primarily from China, and Dec

had thought it no coincidence that the first person to show interest in backing him personally would be using the income they had earned in an area, from which the first dish that had opened his eyes to the world of real, fine cuisine was descendant, to do so. And now the day was upon them. Dec removed the sheet delicately wrapped around the sign outside his new workshop. “*Kapina’s*”.

He thought back to the first people to have discovered what he had so suddenly fallen in love with – oppressed by the church with warnings of gluttony, only to later, again be left behind or kept in the dark, when the church lost a considerable amount of their power, by those with the means to finance a constant supply of quality cuisine. It seemed that in the past decade everyone’s perception of dining had become monotonous and dull – ordering and serving the same dishes that were to be found on every street corner, in every region: the higher the price, the higher the quality. But no actual difference whatsoever. That experience that seemed now to have happened so long ago had changed his world forever. His experimenting had brought him in touch with other young, ambitious chefs around the world, and he felt like he was part of a small, underground revolution – like what being an abstract expressionist on the brink of fame must have felt like. He and his fellow progressive food-professionals were creating whole new worlds for people, in a way never witnessed before. He now realized he had been right about his career choice, coming out of high school, he had merely misinterpreted it.

He walked over to the door to open it to a short, but satisfying line of eager customers. As he was about to gesture the first party in, a man with wild, blue eyes and leathery bags beneath them stumbled in front of them, and gave him a heart-wrenching look of desperate plea. Taken aback at first, he inspected the man closely, and then led him to a small table in the corner of his salon, and the rest of his guests followed.

Appendix I

One course at Kapina's

Sour Cream Pearls

Ingredients

For the sour cream pearls

100 g of Greek yogurt, 100g sour cream, 90 g heavy cream, 30 g sugar, chive

For the alginate bath

1500 g of water

7.5 g sodium alginate

First, prepare the alginate bath. Mix the sodium alginate into the water, making sure it is completely dissolved (this may take longer than expected), and let it rest in the fridge for 24 hours.

For the sour cream pearls, simply mix all ingredients together, except the chive. Either carefully, with a spoon, drop the mixture into the alginate bath, making sure every circle stays together, or freeze the mixture in a mold with circular cases first (with a diameter of about 0.75cm) for perfect pearls. Leave the mixture in the alginate bath for 2 minutes if liquid, and 4 or 5 minutes if solid, for the skin to form. Carefully remove the pearls, and rinse them under water.

Serve each pearl separately on a spoon with two short sprigs (about 2 cm long) of chive on them.

This dish is meant to surprise. The pearl seems solid, but upon bite it explodes into a liquid. Most ingredients such as sour cream and yoghurt are served separately in containers, this recipe breaks these conventions by offering them as a grape.

“The desert already?”

Ingredients for 6 people

For the Porto gelatine

1 bottle of Porto, 3 oranges, ½ a lemon, 18 g gelatine sheets

For the gelato alla mozzarella di bufala campana

210 g mozzarella di bufala campana, 480 g milk, 120 g fresh cream, 103 g honey

For the prosciutto mousse

200 g prosciutto crudo di Parma, 400g ricotta cheese, 15g butter, 2 tablespoon of fresh cream, balsamic vinegar

Place the gelatine sheets in cold water. Drain, squeeze and melt them over low heat in 1 decilitre of water. Mix the Porto, the orange juice and the lemon juice. Incorporate the dissolved gelatine, stir and pour into individual moulds. Cool them in the refrigerator. Meanwhile, cut the mozzarella into small pieces and immerge it into the cream. Dissolve the honey in the milk and boil it. Turn off the heat and let the milk cool until it reaches 70 degrees (Celsius), stirring it with a whisk. Add the mozzarella and the cream and let it rest for 20 min. Blend all the ingredients together with the mixer and pour them into an ice cream mould. Chop the prosciutto very finely with a knife. Transfer it into a mixer together with the ricotta cheese, butter and cream. Blend it until creamy. Add a few drops of balsamic vinegar and whisk again. Let it rest in the fridge for a few hours. Accompany it with unleavened bread which, being unsalted, will balance the flavour of the mousse.

The main idea of “The desert already?” is to break conventions by serving an entrée that resembles a desert. The ham mousse, the buffalo mozzarella gelato and the Porto gelatine are together able to create a view of a desert in the mind, which will, then, disappear after tasting it.

Incomplete Ravioli

Ingredients for 6 people

For the swordfish tartare

400 g swordfish; 4 oranges; 2 bunches of mint; parsley; extravergin olive (EVO) oil; 1 lemon; salt; pepper

For the green egg pasta

100 g white flour; 80 g spinach leaves; 1 egg; ½ tablespoon EVO oil, salt

For the egg pasta

100 g white flour; 1 egg; ½ tablespoon EVO oil, salt

Wash and clean the spinach, cook it in salted water, drain and squeeze it, then chop it finely and sieve it.

Above a wooden work surface, place the flour, with at its centre, the egg, the spinach, olive oil and salt. Mix gradually until the dough is smooth and leave it resting for at least two hours, covered with a cloth.

Using the same procedure prepare the dough without the spinach. With the help of a dough

sheeter lay a 1 millimetre thick layer of pasta.

Cut the dough into squares of about ten centimetres wide.

Dice the swordfish and let it marinate for about 10-15 minutes in a citronette made with oil, orange juice, orange zest and lemon juice. Peel the other oranges sharp and cut into cubes (not too small) to combine and mix with the swordfish.

Chop the mint leaves in a mixer or a blender with a few leaves of parsley and plenty of oil, salt and pepper to taste, until obtaining a not too thick sauce.

Cook the pasta in salted boiling water.

Put a tablespoon of the mint sauce on the bottom of each dish. Arrange the green egg pasta, then the tartar with the help of a pastry ring and cover with the egg pasta and the remaining sauce.

Incomplete raviolo is mainly a reversal of roles: the thin veil of pasta hides "important" and (supposedly) "noble" ingredients that should have been, according to the gastronomic hierarchy, the "main actors" of the dish. The raviolo itself is first deconstructed when cooked and then served in way that actually reassembles regular ravioli.

Deconstructed Strawberries and Rhubarb Pie

Ingredients for 6 people

For the strawberries cream

500 g fresh strawberries; 300 ml milk; 2 yolks; 50 g sugar; 30 g corn starch

For the rhubarb coulis

500 g rhubarb, 150 g sugar; 200 ml water; 1 tablespoon corn-starch

For the chocolate meringues

4 egg whites; 300 g sugar; 40 g cocoa powder; 1 lemon

Combine the egg yolks with the sugar for a few minutes to make the mixture lighter.

Heat milk and add it to the previously chopped strawberries.

Blend the strawberries and the warmed milk with an immersion blender. Add the corn-starch to the egg and sugar, stirring vigorously.

Combine the milk and strawberry mixture to the egg, sugar and corn-starch mixture, little by little. Put on low heat and stir until complete densification.

Clean the rhubarb, cut it into pieces and cook it in a saucepan with 1 dl water and the sugar for 20 minutes. Puree the rhubarb in a blender with the cooking liquid and put it back into the

saucepan. Dilute the corn-starch in the remaining water, add it to the sauce and cook for another 5-6 minutes.

Whisk 4 egg whites with a dash of lemon juice, 150 grams of sugar and 20 grams of cocoa, when they are well steady, after about 10 minutes, add another 150 grams of sugar and 20 grams of cocoa, mix gently from the bottom to the top.

Arrange the meringues on a baking paper with a pastry bag. Put in the oven at 110 degrees for 1 hour, leaving the oven slightly open.

Spread the sauces over a tablecloth in an artistic manner (primarily in the shape of large teardrops). Scatter the meringue over this, and break them into smaller pieces with one blow from a (preferable heavy) metal spoon.

The idea of the Deconstructed Strawberries and Rhubarb Pie is to deconstruct the original recipe while using the same ingredients to prepare it. Moreover the fact that it is served over the whole tablecloth for all to share, rather than a separate desert on a separate plate per person, creates a sense of alienation among the customer.