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Is cookery an art or a science?¹

(A culinária é uma arte ou uma ciência?)

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Abstract: In the last decades, western European cuisine has undergone very spectacular changes. Among them, a “molecular cuisine” has developed a strong interest for the chemical mechanisms of the cooking process. This is not the first time in the history that cookery has tried to appear as a science: the tension between art and science, innovation and reproduction goes back as far as the Antiquity. This paper studies, from the Vth century BC onward, the cultural framework in which cookery was thought, explaining its classification as an art or a science. The first point is Greek Antiquity, with the question: “Can cookery be written, as other kinds of knowledge?” The Late Middle Ages is the second stage of our history. Scholars of this time raised the following matter: “Is cookery a part of a mechanical art or a mechanical art per se? Next point will be the Renaissance: “Did the rediscovery of Apicius’ book help to define cuisine as an art in the context of the emergence of the fine arts?” Around 1730-1740, a first French “nouvelle cuisine” claimed the status of science, defining itself as a “kind of chemistry”. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, two opposite traditions appear: one that stresses the link between cuisine and such fine arts as architecture (Carême), another one that insists on the “scientific” part of cookery. Nowadays, everyone can notice the explosion of the area of cookery. The strict separation of art and science is recent, with the crystallization of the fine arts around the notion of creation and the figure of the author and then with the building of “modern” science. Reconciling art and science is a challenge for the present time. Maybe cookery can help to this reconciliation.

Keywords: cookery, art, science, Antonin Carême, molecular cuisine.

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