Tatattoouile on the Menu: Tats in the Kitchen, a Side of Ink, and Food as Communication'

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Keywords
food, communication, tatattoouile, menu, tats, kitchen, side, ink

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
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Introduction

Food is as much solace for the body as is for the soul. What we eat becomes embodied, thus a veiled part of self. But food is more; as Roland Barthes\(^1\) argues, food is a system of communication that conveys a broad range of meanings: from emotions, to beliefs, taste, status, class, gender and cultural identity. In recent years another nuanced layer of meanings has been ascribed to food, with the use of food iconography in the popular practice of body modification – tattooing. The focus of this study is to explore tattooing as a practice through which the permanent etching of food imagery on one’s body conveys a form of communication, a narrative of self thus highlighting the prominent role of food in culture.

There is a general acceptance that celebrity chefs and media representations of food have become an enduring and uncontested phenomenon of the twenty first century. In recent years, media portrayals of chefs have been ‘spiced up’ by the sensationalist display of their tattooed arms and torsos.

This project focuses on food iconography in tattooed bodies. Selecting two specific cohorts – chefs and foodies – who in varied ways are associated with the production and consumption of food, this study seeks to explore the symbolic meanings communicated by this new form of food imagery, which encoded with forms of power act as markers of cultural identity and social belonging.

Using a line of inquiry that draws on textual and pictorial material collected from digital media sources, this study undertakes a textual and semiotic analysis of ‘tats in the kitchen’. Thus, the questions guiding this study – why has food become an item of tattoo iconography? What are the encoded meanings communicated by food tattoos? And, why are chefs and foodies adhering so passionately to this form of body modification.

This study is guided by a theoretical framework that views tattooing as a cultural practice with a broad range of connotations that are culture, place and time-specific. That is, whereas in some traditional cultures tattooing is still regarded as a ritual and a rite of passage, gender and status-specific, its appropriation and increased utilisation over recent decades by western societies, has altered its meanings. Having shed its initial stigma, the practice no longer connotes deviance, rebellion and pathological social behaviour. Instead, tattooing, as a form
of body modification, has acquired complex overlays of polysemic meanings. Associated with lifestyle choices; techniques of body management; hedonics enhancement; and a signifier of identification and projects of self; tattooing ‘re-attaches’ and grounds the self, in a world full of uncertainties and risks. Thus, by asserting that this form of body modification has in fact become culturally accepted and regarded as an integrative social practice, this study suggests that the permanent inscriptions of visual representations of food items on tattooees’ bodies highlight the significant role of food as a marker of cultural identity, and a tool of cultural communication and social inclusion. By endorsing tattooing as a popular form of self-expression and creativity, chefs and foodies are further contributing to the endorsement of food as an item of popular culture, and an artefact of consumer culture pertaining to processes of cultural identity.

**Contextualising Tattooing as a Cultural Practice**

Tattooing is a form of body modification whose popularity has re-emerged in western cultures over the last thirty years. Body modification includes a broad range of practices which have the purpose of altering the appearance and form of the body. Whilst some of these practices – tattooing, piercing, branding, cutting and binding – have to some extent, usually been associated with some degree of stigmatisation or stereotyping, others are not. For example, dieting, bodybuilding, plastic surgery and even routinised practices of makeup, hairdressing or hair removal have been normalised and are even considered culturally desirable.

Tattooing is one of the earliest and most commonly used techniques of permanent body alteration. Geometric patterns inscribed in mummies witness the use of tattooing by the Egyptians; likewise, Atkinson notes evidence of the practice being commonly used in India, China and Japan, and claims Tahitians, Samoans, Hawaiians and Maoris practicing tattooing for over 4,000 years. There is also documented verification that in the American continent, Aztecs, Inca and Maya cultures used tattoos as a form of body decoration. In turn, in Europe, the popularity of the practice amongst the Greeks, Romans as well as in tribal groups in the British Islands is documented, debunking the preconception that tattooing is a practice unique to eastern cultures. The use of tattoos by the Greeks and Romans connoted social exclusion and were used to mark social outcasts or rival tribes. For example, Romans soldiers referred with scorn to the blue or black inked Celtic bodies as ‘Picts’, whereas Celtic warriors proudly ornamented their bodies with war-inspired tattoos. In these cultures the
practice was performed in ritualised ceremonies of group identity, and the tattoos were symbolic signifiers of social inclusion and in-group identification.

Clinton Sanders and Angus Vail, describe the initial techniques of body inscription being customarily implemented with the use of serrated bones or shells dipped in pigment made from oily smoke or burning nuts kernels. These painful procedures were usually associated with rites of passage to adulthood or higher hierarchical social ranking thus denoting prestige, status and social identity, at the same time documenting the tattooee’s bravery and endurance. Nevertheless, as a polysemic cultural practice, tattoos’ meanings also differed across time and context. For example, amongst the Maoris and other tribal cultures, tattoos fostered ‘in-group cohesiveness and mutual identification’; at times ascribed with religious and magical powers, tattoos would ‘… indicate spiritual filiations’ or a protection against evil, as was the case with Fijian tattooed women seeking divine protection in their afterlife.

Tattoos have not only been attributed with a wide range of meaning across time and space; their cultural acceptance has also undergone major shifts. Within the same culture, tattoos’ acceptance has oscillated from periods of stigmatisation and censorship, to stages of approval and popularity. For example, in early Christianity tattoos were banned because they were seen as an alteration of the body made to God’s image. Yet, during the crusades the practice was prevalent because the cross etched on the crusaders’ body, ensured them with a burial according to Christian traditions.

After centuries of dormancy in Europe, and following Captain James Cook’s eighteenth-century voyages in the Pacific, the practice was re-introduced to the continent as ta-tu, the name used by the local Pacific tribes. Connoted with racist overtones, stigmatised as a non-normative practice and a marker of deviance, tattoos also offered the allure of exoticism and difference. Since then, the practice’s acceptance and popularity has undergone major shifts, in particular after the 1960s Tattoo Renaissance when it started losing its negative connotations. Increased social acceptance, and in particular improvement in operating techniques, inks and pigments have decisively contributed to the current boom in tattooing practices and their cultural recognition. Currently, tattooing’s socio-cultural acceptance and popularity are giving the practice’s practitioners and supporters encouraging signs of successfully having tattooing recognised as an art form.

Presently, there seems to be no limitations to what can be tattooed and who chooses to be tattooed. The practice’s broad range of connotations is indicative of its cultural
embeddedness, and its alternating patterns of social acceptance/refusal only reiterates the practice’s cultural bearing, vitality and integration, reflecting its capacity to adjust to historical contexts and cultural milieus.

Currently, tattoos have a firm hold in popular culture and are a theme of scholarly research. Literature review gives evidence of the polysemic qualities of the practice, its cultural embeddedness and its ability to mould to historical, and socio-cultural contexts. For example, expanding on Giddens’s ‘project of self’ of the modern man, Paul Sweetman\textsuperscript{26} suggests that tattoos are a tool that re-anchors the postmodern self in environments of profound change and instability, further empowering tattooees with the capacity to exercise social agency and re-gain control over one’s body in the overregulated postmodern society. In turn, B.S. Turner\textsuperscript{27} notes that in traditional societies tattoos were obligatory body marks with a fixed and culturally accepted meaning. Usually associated with rites of passage, body inscriptions acted as markers of ‘in-group’ identity, group-membership, cultural affiliation and promoted social cohesiveness. Conversely, in postmodern societies, tattoos are ‘optional, decorative, impermanent and narcissistic’\textsuperscript{28}; they refer to voluntary membership no longer connoting social bonding but rather an assertion of self. If in some social cohorts, tattoos still represent alienation and disenfranchisement from mainstream values, in middle-class ranks, they function as a signifier of consumerism\textsuperscript{29}, a form of ‘body capital’\textsuperscript{30} and an indicator of a culture that has commodified the body\textsuperscript{31}. Tattoos have become polysemic codes invested with meanings ascribed by tattooees rather than social-cultural norms.

It is in this context that the use of food and culinary iconography in tattooing assumes scholarly relevance. Acknowledging the valuable contribution of previous studies to our current understanding of tattooing as a form of body modification, there is nonetheless a gap in the literature that this study addresses. By teasing out the meanings of food imagery in tattooing this paper will contribute to further illustrate the communicative role of food and its cultural significance in the twenty-first century

**Methodology**

Digital media made this study possible. From the start that this study intended to use only secondary media resources. Acknowledging inherent shortcomings to this methodology, the advantages seemed to outweigh its limitations, as the plethora of available resources gave access to a much larger database than a qualitative study ever would. Moreover, this
methodological design would bypass the bureaucratic protocol required by qualitative methods of research – from ethic committee approvals, to recruitment of respondents, interviewing processes, and transcriptions – thus decreasing the duration of the investigative process. These benefits could not be overlooked in particular when time and financial constraints had to be taken into account. Nonetheless, the drawbacks of this methodology also need acknowledgment. It is particularly relevant to note the lack of the researcher’s control over the choice of respondents and the gathering of first-hand primary data which qualitative methods of research may provide. However, given that this constitutes a preliminary stage of research, the outcomes of the present study will provide valid results, which can later be used as a platform for future investigation.

It is important to reiterate that the project’s aim is not an exploration of tattoo as a form of body modification. Rather, its specificity stems from the topic being researched: the analysis of food as a form of tattoo iconography. Its distinctiveness is twofold – the object and the subject of the study: the former exclusively exploring the use of food iconography in the practice of tattooing; the latter focusing solely on individuals that are either directly associated with cooking – chefs – or individuals “very, very, very interested in food”32 – foodies. Drawing on these principles, this study aims to establish the significant communicative role of food in a socio-cultural context where both food and the body have become highly commodified.

Guided by the research questions, a Google search was deployed using a selected range of keywords – ‘chef’, ‘tattoo’, ‘foodie’ and ‘food’. The abundance of material attained surpassed the initial expectations providing a broad platform for research. It also made obvious the need to limit the amount of data analysed, by classifying it into two main groups: group A constituted by renowned Australian celebrity chefs and group B comprising unidentified foodies. The preference given to the former cohort was based on the local popularity of celebrity chefs and food shows on Australian TV, which have created loyal audiences and a large pool of media resources. Accordingly, data will be clustered in two different sets – Chefs’ Testimonials, and Food Tats as Communication; the former centred on the chef, the latter focusing on the tattoos of anonymous foodies.
Chefs’ Testimonials and Kitchen Ink in Australia

Steve Dow’s Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) online article Kitchen Ink publishes the interviews of some of the more popular chefs in Sydney and Melbourne. A photo gallery entitled Rockstars of the Kitchen accompanies the text. From arms, to hands, legs, torso and neck, chefs proudly display their body artwork to the camera. The iconography is varied ranging from names of relevant people in the chefs’ lives, to text; pinups; star signs; and mythological designs, with some chefs also displaying food items, usually related to some of their signature culinary work. For example, pastry chef Adriano Zumbo, who reached celebrity status after his participation on TV show Master Chef, reveals a series of colourful tattoos on his arms and torso – a scorpion (his star sign), Willy Wonka the classic character from Roald Dahls’ children’s novel Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, and a pinup wearing a frilly apron and holding one of Zumbo’s trademark multi-coloured macaroons. In turn, Sardinian chef Giovanni Pilu of the Restaurant Pilu in Freshwater – Sydney – displays on his left calf the names of his three siblings. The Melbournian-based chef Brydie Smith (Slowpoke Expresso in Fitzroy) poses her right forearm with the wording ‘Keep calm and carry on’, and on the outer side of her hands the words ‘resolute’ and ‘strength’. In turn, chef Mike Patrick from San Telmo in Melbourne, exhibits heavily tattooed forearms, a rose on his neck, and the lettering ‘pots pans’ – one letter on the first-knuckle of each of his eight fingers. Barcelona-born chef Olivia Serrano working at Bloodwood, in the trendy Sydney suburb of Newtown, displays a tattooed jellyfish on her left arm, which she explains is a keepsake of the moment she was stung by one jellyfish on Clovelly beach, Sydney. Also featuring in Dow’s Kitchen Ink, are chefs Elvis Abrahanowicz and Ben Milgate from Restaurant Porteno in Sydney, who share their business partnership and their love for tattooing. Along with heavily tattooed arms and forearms, Elvis declares to have designed some of his tattoos, such as the word ‘Esperanza’ on his chest, and a bandoneon on his abdomen. In turn, Ben confesses having had his first tattoo – a Inca design – when he was in Peru; at the age of thirty-two, Milgate admits to having fifty per cent of his body covered in tattoos.

The mainstream media accounts of tattooed chefs are echoed in Steve Dow’s visual and textual narratives. Portrayed as young school dropouts, chefs are described as rebellious young individuals with artistic tendencies, creative dispositions, non-conformist attitudes and musical preferences that favour heavy metal and punk styles. For example, chef Zumbo was a dropout at fifteen; Zac Pauling (of The Anchor in Bondi-Sydney) looked up to the controversial celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain (who loves tattoos and rock music) for
inspiration and professional guidance. In turn, Claire van Vuuren acknowledges that tattoos in female chefs connotes toughness and resilience, attributes required in women working in a male dominated industry. Nonetheless, acknowledging her ‘female side’, Claire admits to using tattoos as a replacement for the jewellery that chefs are not allowed to wear whilst at work. Rebellion; toughness; ‘not the normal nine-to-five class’; creativity and individuality are themes that discursively frame media narratives of ‘kitchen ink’ and conceptually underpin the tattooed celebrity chef phenomenon. These accounts circulate abundantly in the media and the heavily tattooed ‘rockstar Aussie chef– Matt Stone’, is another case in point.

Since being awarded the Best New Talent at the National Gourmet Traveller Awards in 2010, Matt Stone had a rapid ascendency into stardom. After leading the kitchen at Greenhouse Restaurant in Perth (Margaret River – Western Australia), Stone took the helm as Executive Chef at Brothl (Melbourne), the first zero-waste food outlet in Australia. Brothl closed down in March 2015 after a long battle with Melbourne City Council over an industrial composter behind the restaurant. In an interview with Syariafah Syazana in Time Out, Stone claims to be an environmentalist at heart, defender of ‘small community farming and work with small producers’. Portrayed as a young high-school dropout who loves surfing and skating, Stone started as a kitchen-hand at fifteen, and at the age of twenty was recognised as a talented and alternative chef, who creates ‘recipes that rock’, loves ‘punk rock music’, likes a ‘bit of anarchy’, and operates a restaurant that is a ‘really fun place’. Media spokesperson for Western Australia, where Stone was born, Stone presently promotes his hometown Margaret River’s fresh produce and wines. Similarly, Stone spearheads the environmentalist movement endorsing sustainable practices of food production and the consumption of alternative foods in the hospitality industry. In a 2014 interview with Ron Backus, Stone claims ‘…trying native Australian meats like wallaby and kangaroo …. and consuming insects like crickets, green ants …. is really an ethical way of consuming protein, vitamins and nutrients.’

Media narratives of tattooed celebrity chefs frame their body artwork as representations of social agency, flagship of rebellion, innovation, and artistic endeavour. In this context, tattoos become a signifier of individuality, a cultural marker that asserts difference and generates what has been described in literature as an identification project of self. For example, the aforementioned Aussie chef Matt Stone, becomes the embodiment of cultural values and a site of cultural representation where polysemic meanings are produced. On the one hand, his tattooed body constitutes a canvas where previously stigmatised meanings attached to tattooed individuals (rebellion, non-normative) become normalised; yet, on the other hand, Stone’s
celebrity chef status equally flagships socio-cultural progressive dispositions. Stone’s public persona is constructed in a way that stands for avant-gardism and cultural change, an association which has been described in the literature\textsuperscript{40}. Concomitantly, and from the individual’s viewpoint, techniques of body modification connote social agency, a tactic to re-assert control over one’s body and a stance against the over-regulation and surveillance to which individuals are submitted in post-industrial societies\textsuperscript{41}. As claimed in previous studies, for tattoos to become part of mainstream culture two conditions had to be observed – the stigma attached to tattoos had to be removed and the practice of tattooing had to be veneered with glamour and cultural acceptability\textsuperscript{42}. As this study demonstrates, Chefs’ stardom statuses have been powerful tools in facilitating this process.

Arguably, and in time, the relentless circulation of these media narratives have multiple effects: they normalise body artwork, rubberstamp tattoos with social and cultural approval, and encode the chefs’ food with the fetish symbolism that the celebrity chef’s body already carries. Thus, this study claim that the chef’s tattooed body works as a ‘silent’ but highly visible semiotic encoded icon that creates a symbolic backdrop in which the three signifiers – chef, food and tattoo – come together connoting stylised and fetish values highly appreciated in commodified culture.

Thus, the overarching pattern emerging from the analysis of Steve Dow’s *Kitchen Ink*, is that chefs use their skin as a communicative human canvas where they inscribe narratives that go into the making of projects of selfhood. Glamorised by media narratives, body artwork becomes body capital\textsuperscript{43} and by association the chefs’ food and the ethical principles (eg. environmentalist) they endorse become invested with cultural capital. Only time will tell if Stone’s endorsement of kangaroo meat and insects as alternative sources of dietary protein will ‘stick’. Nonetheless, due to food’s high communicative power and the chef’s attained cultural legitimacy these trends might successfully attain public endorsement, particularly in a media saturated consumerist environment in which food and chefs have acquired high cultural currency (legitimacy) and a large group of followers. Amongst these followers, foodies rank high. In the next section the emphasis is on foodies and their tattoos, which noticeably are all images of food and/or food-related items.
In this second cluster, the emphasis is on foodies and their tattoos. Whereas the tattoos are entirely food-related, the tattooees remain anonymous individuals who willingly display their bodywork and are described as ‘…people who love food’ that is, foodies. By centring the analysis on the inscription food-tattoo, the foodie’s body becomes a site representing food as a fetish item of popular culture.

Ann Barr and Paul Levy define foodie as a person who is very very interested in food. Foodies are the ones talking about food in any gathering – salivating over restaurants, recipes, radicchio. They don’t think they are trivial – Foodies consider food to be an art, on a level with painting or drama. It’s actually your favourite art form⁴⁴.

Foodie is a term highly contested. Josée Johnston and Shyon Bauman⁴⁵ claim that the concept carries features that are dichotomous: foodie as democratisation and accessibility to food knowledge; and foodie connoting taste, distinction, ‘…snobbery and the faddish trend-setting of elites’⁴⁶. Expanding on Barr and Levy’s previous work, Johnston and Bauman describe foodies as individuals with specific traits: the yearn to learn about ingredients and cooking techniques; the desire to make food a central identification marker; a craving for unusual foods; and foodies evaluate food on the basis of its aesthetic attributes. Not surprisingly, foodies are eager to etch a food-related tattoo on their skin. In this context we need to evaluate the use of tattoos in foodies as a marker of cultural identity that marks difference, taste, style and the aesthetics values by which food is seen not in function of its nutritional value but rather as an icon of consumer culture – food as fetish.

Food items have a wide range of iconographic representation in tattooing. The most common items are vegetables and fruits. Some of these tattoos constitute colourful meticulously crafted artwork. From aubergines, to strawberries, pineapples, carrots, peas, bananas, corn and asparagus, they are usually inscribed with vivid colours and sophisticated detail, representing highly refined still-lives imprinted on the human canvas. The minuitia with which these tattoos are inscribed is in alignment with current trends by which tattoo enthusiasts are persuasively lobbying for tattooing to become recognised as an art form, and tattooists as artists. These artistic representations on the foodies’ skins are a powerful signifier of what food means to foodies – an item to be valued for its aesthetics values, a
fetish to be painted and tailored to customer’s specifications of colour, size and beauty. As a result food iconography in tattooing is invested with personal values thus becoming a signifier embedded with meanings that are arbitrary and personal. For example, food tattoos representing vegetables or fruit may as much signify aesthetic beauty as they can make statements about the tattooee’s eating habits – ‘I am a vegetarian/vegan’ – or belief systems – ‘I eat ethically’.

Pizza slices, ice-cream and small cakes, in particular cupcakes, are also popular items. Animals are equally represented, with the pig being the most frequently depicted image, sometimes as a charming pet; as food – bacon slices; or as text – ‘I love bacon’. In an interview Chef Dustin Gardner refers to the popularity of the pig in tattooing, by asserting ‘every chef is obsessed with pigs’, and acknowledges that his own favourite tattoo is that of a pig ‘… labelled with all the primal cuts’. Either way, the massive representation of pigs in tattooing raises questions that future studies should address, particularly due to the creature’s cultural stigmatisation as a ‘dirty animal’, and a food banned by some cultures and religions.

Foodies also display tattoos representing kitchen utensils. Most representations of culinary material culture are ‘ordinary’ items of everyday use, demonstrating that simple objects can still be represented as an object of art inscribed on the human canvas. The knife is the single most common representation in tattoo iconography. Knives are an essential part of the chef’s toolbox and a fundamental tool in food preparation: they cut, carve, slice, chop, pierce, dissect, hack and tear food apart. Knives assist chefs to perform delicate tasks and give intricate shapes to food, as illustrated by the expert carving skills in Japanese decorative garnishing practice of Mukimono. Knives’ different applications are captured in tattooing, with explicit images of knives cutting through skin and piercing through hearts, reminding us, as Roland Barthes did, of the embedded violence associated with the practice of preparing food and transforming raw material into edible nutrients suitable for human consumption. Other kitchen utensils are also widely used as iconography – whisks, spoons and forks, and even bulkier utensils such as free-stand and hand-held cake mixers.

Food-related iconography is a witness of tattooing’s popularity as a form of body modification in the twenty-first century. They represent the use of food as a symbol of personal taste, style and the aesthetic values that go into the making of cultural identities. Food as tattoo iconography signifies that food is more than an edible entity with a functional
purpose – nutrition and survival; rather food tattoos communicate the fetishisation of food in consumer culture.

**Conclusion**

This paper examines food iconography in the practice of tattooing, to explore the meaning of food as communication. Despite a vast body of research into the practice of tattooing, the emerging trend in food iconography is under-researched, a gap that this study aims to close. Thus, the research questions guiding this study: *why is food used in tattoo iconography? and why are chefs and foodies adhering so passionately to this form of body modification?*

Some patterns emerged from this study. The two researched cohorts – chefs and foodies – share common interests for food and tattoos. Chefs’ engagement with food stems from their professional association with the production of food; in turn, foodies are individuals ‘very very interested in food’[^48], who communicate their relationship with food through skin representations of food iconography, which then become markers of individual cultural identity and a fetish of consumer culture.

Chefs and foodies are also committed tattooees. Whereas chefs usually select tattoos that represent their signature dishes, they also choose items pooled from mainstream tattoo iconography. In turn, foodies choose to exclusively select food-related imagery. This constitutes a new trend in tattooing that reveals designs with high level of detail in form and colour, suggesting that foodies use iconography as much as a manifestation of their personal food preferences, as of their recognition of food as an art form integral to projects of self.

Thus, food iconography is indicative of the high currency that food culture and celebrity chefs currently have in popular consumer culture. Chefs and foodies use tattoos to re-claim their body as a signifier of social agency, a testimonial of self-identification and a canvas that reiterates the communicative role of food as a commodified signifier of cultural identities.

**Notes**

7 Featherstone, 2000 p1.
8 Ibid
9 Sanders and Vail, 2008 p9.
11 Ibid p30.
12 Sanders and Vail, 2008 p9-10.
15 Ibid.
17 Sanders and Vail, 2008 p10-11.
19 Ibid p30.
20 Sanders and Vail, 2008 p11.
21 Ibid p13-14.
25 Ibid.
28 Turner 2000 p42.
29 Turner in Featherstone, 2002 p47.
30 Featherstone, 2000 p3.
34 Reid Hingston in Dow 2012.
37 Syazana (nd).
46 Ibid p54.