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The role of culinary competitions as a driver
of innovation in gastronomy

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of culinary competitions as potential drivers of innovation in gastronomy, while also exploring the role that the chef assumes in this process. Although the literature has extensively examined innovation diffusion, creativity, and the role of the chef in this domain, limited attention has been paid to culinary competitions as contexts capable of generating and diffusing innovation. This study therefore aims to contribute to filling this literature gap. Adopting a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews, a thematic analysis is carried out on the responses of four Italian chefs who participated in the Bocuse d'Or and one international expert providing a comparative perspective. The analysis reveals that constraints, competitive pressure, and cultural background within a knowledge-rich environment can generate incremental innovation, destined to spread beyond the competition itself. Rather than an isolated event, the competition should be understood as an engine of innovation requiring a supporting system made of teams, academies, and institutions, capable of capturing and diffusing what emerges. Context matters, as each country's traditions and surrounding ecosystem shape how innovation circulates differently. At the center of this process stands the chef, a key agent of innovation whose effectiveness depends not on individual talent alone, but on the collective system that surrounds and sustains that talent.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, innovation has been recognized as a crucial driver of growth and competitiveness across industries, including the food sector. Although traditionally associated with technological and industrial contexts, it plays an increasingly relevant role within creative industries as well.

The food sector represents a particularly interesting domain precisely because of its dual nature. On the one hand, it encompasses the food industry in its narrower sense, grounded in disciplines such as food science and food engineering. Here, knowledge is predominantly codified, making innovation relatively straightforward to observe and analyze. On the other hand, it includes gastronomy, and haute cuisine in particular, frequently described in the literature as a creative industry. In this context, by contrast, knowledge tends to be more tacit, making innovation considerably harder to observe, measure, and transfer. For this reason, haute cuisine stands out as a privileged context of gastronomy in which creativity and innovation are visibly intertwined, functioning as a research and development laboratory for the food sector as a whole. Within this domain, the chef assumes an increasingly central role, no longer hidden behind the stove or bound to the mere technical execution of recipes, but progressively emerging as an expert in the field, a cultural mediator and a key agent capable of driving change well beyond the kitchen.

Yet, while the academic literature has extensively explored the dynamics related to the diffusion of innovation within this domain, little attention has been paid to the role that events, and culinary competitions in particular, can play as an engine capable of accelerating the emergence and diffusion of innovation, ultimately benefitting the food sector as a whole. Although competitions have proven to be effective mechanisms for generating innovation across fields such as technology, public procurement, and management (considered as contests), their role within gastronomy remains largely underexplored, despite haute cuisine representing a relevant niche for innovation in the entire food sector. For this reason, this thesis aims to investigate the role of culinary competitions, addressing two main research questions: Can culinary competitions act as a driver of innovation in gastronomy? What role does the chef assume in the innovation process?

To address these research questions, the Bocuse d'Or was selected as a competition to test, being considered one of the world's most prestigious culinary competitions. This study therefore aims to contribute to filling the gap identified in the literature, offering an empirical perspective on the role of culinary competitions as drivers of innovation and providing a foundation for future research in this underexplored field. From a methodological standpoint, a qualitative approach has been adopted, combining a literature review on innovation, creativity, and competitions with primary data collected through semi-structured interviews. Four Italian chefs who participated in the Bocuse d'Or were interviewed, complemented by the contribution of Arne Sørvig, CEO of Stiftelsen Norsk Gastronomi, whose international perspective provided a comparative viewpoint. Methodological limitations are also identified, providing directions for future research.

The thesis is structured into three chapters. The first one provides a theoretical review of the concept of innovation in the food sector, progressively narrowing the focus to gastronomy, haute cuisine, and finally the role of the chef through three key trends in contemporary gastronomy: the professionalization of creativity, the standardization of the exceptional, and the central role of the chef, the latter representing the end point of the conceptual funnel. The second chapter explores the concept of events as arenas of innovation, with a particular focus on competitions, analyzing the role of constraints on creativity and providing an overview of the main culinary competitions in Italy. Finally, the third chapter presents the methodology and empirical analysis, organized around six main themes emerging from the five contributions. Conclusions present the main findings, a set of practical recommendations, and directions for future research grounded in the study's limitations.

Chapter 1 – Innovation: from the food sector to the chef

Introduction

In order to analyze whether culinary competitions can act as drivers of innovation, this chapter builds the theoretical foundations on which the empirical analysis will be based. A progressive approach is proposed, starting from innovation within the broad food sector and gradually narrowing the focus to the central role of the chef in gastronomy.

The chapter opens by outlining the different types, nature, and degree of innovation in the food sector. Beyond identifying these different categories, it is also crucial to consider that innovation can operate at a deeper level than individual products or processes. By reshaping the very logic through which an organization creates and captures value, innovation translates into what academic literature defines as Business Model Innovation (BMI), a concept further explored in the following sections.

The focus therefore progressively narrows from the broader food sector to gastronomy and subsequently to haute cuisine, a niche segment that, despite representing a limited fraction of the sector, constitutes a real laboratory from which innovation originates and spreads to the rest of the industry. This funnel progression culminates with the role of the chef as a central figure in gastronomy.

In parallel to this progressive narrowing, the chapter outlines three key trends in contemporary gastronomy necessary to contextualize and better understand the subsequent empirical analysis. These trends encompass the professionalization of creativity, the standardization of the exceptional, and the central role of the chef, the latter also representing the final point of the progressive narrowing of focus that characterizes this chapter.

1.1 Defining innovation in the food sector

Over the past few decades, innovation has become a central concept in academic literature and particularly within economic and organizational studies, where it is recognized as a primary driver of competitiveness and growth, both at the level of individual organizations and across entire industries. Traditionally, the concept of innovation was almost exclusively associated with research and development activities, with a predominant focus on the technological dimension. Over time, however, this view has

proven too restrictive to capture the actual complexity of the phenomenon. Indeed, recent literature has progressively broadened the boundaries of the concept, recognizing innovation as a far more articulated and multidimensional phenomenon that extends well beyond its purely technological component.

In this regard, to better understand what innovation entails, Kahn (2018) proposes approaching the concept dynamically, presenting it simultaneously as an outcome, a process, and a mindset. First, it can be regarded as an **outcome** when addressing, for instance, a product, process, or business model innovation, thereby focusing on a specific output. Second, it can be viewed as a **process** concerning the development and diffusion of ideas, revolving around how innovation is organized to yield concrete results. Finally, innovation can represent a **mindset** when it becomes internalized by the members of an organization and embedded within its culture.

This perspective helps highlight how innovation requires a broader lens, capable of capturing also its more intangible and tacit manifestations. This complexity is particularly evident in the food sector, where value creation heavily depends on creativity, symbolic meaning, and tacit knowledge, and where innovation neither develops uniformly nor follows linear and predictable paths. Unlike other industries, where technological progress represents the primary driver of innovation, the food sector is characterized by a set of forces that simultaneously shape and constrain this process, including consumer resistance to novelty, the weight of tradition, and the tacit nature of knowledge and creativity. Therefore, understanding innovation in this context requires going beyond standard frameworks, examining how these forces interact with one another and how innovation is generated and diffused through them.

Food innovation can be defined as the development and commercialization of new food products, services and techniques (Mohanty et al., 2024). This definition, however, only captures part of the phenomenon. What fails to emerge is the real complexity that characterizes innovation in this sector, which tends to be harder, slower, and more culturally constrained than in many other contexts. Despite these obstacles, it continues to emerge and spread within the industry. Understanding the mechanisms and contexts through which food innovation emerges is therefore far from trivial and represents a necessary step before exploring the role of culinary competitions as potential drivers of innovation.

1.1.1 Different types of food innovation adopting the OECD framework

As a first step toward a better understanding of innovation in the food sector, this thesis adopts the classification proposed by the OECD (2005) which identifies four main types of innovation: product, process, marketing, and organizational. It is worth noting that the more recent edition of the Oslo Manual (OECD/Eurostat, 2018) has revised this classification, aggregating process, marketing and organizational innovation into a broader category of business process innovation. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the original fourfold classification is retained, as it allows for a more granular distinction of the different typologies of innovation, which appear particularly relevant and conceptually distinct when analyzed within the food sector. Although originally developed to provide a common framework for analyzing innovation across industries, this classification proves especially useful in the food context, as it moves beyond a purely technological conception of innovation by encompassing also the intangible and creative dimensions that characterize the sector. Consequently, alongside the theoretical definitions of these four types of innovation, practical examples from the food industry are examined to illustrate how each dimension manifests in practice.

Product innovation refers to the introduction of improved goods or services, including improvements to their components, materials and specifications, thus encompassing service innovation as well (OECD/Eurostat, 2005). When considered in the context of the food sector, product innovation may include, for example, the introduction of products made with alternative ingredients, new offerings on the menu, or the introduction of new product or service categories, such as catering services of a restaurant (Lee et al., 2019). This type is considered the most visible form of innovation to consumers, making market acceptance a particularly critical factor. However, this visibility comes with a structural challenge, as consumers in the food sector tend to display conservative behavior and a strong aversion to unfamiliar products. This phenomenon has been described as "consumer inertia" (Capitanio et al., 2010) or "food neophobia" (Barrena & Sánchez, 2013), creating a persistent pressure toward incremental rather than radical change. In this regard, Messeni Petruzzelli and Savino (2015) argue that product innovation in gastronomy can emerge from the recombination of familiar ingredients and traditions with novel elements, suggesting that tradition and novelty are not opposites but can be strategically combined.

Process innovation refers to new or substantially improved methods adopted in production or delivery, also encompassing modifications in the equipment, software, or techniques used (OECD/Eurostat, 2005). This type of innovation concerns changes that typically take place "behind the scenes", aimed at improving efficiency and productivity (Lee et al., 2019). In the food sector, relevant examples include the adoption of new technologies (e.g., *sous-vide* cooking and spherification), the introduction of new equipment, and the integration of information technologies (IT) into restaurant operations (Lee et al., 2019). Unlike product innovation, process innovation in the food sector tends to be more strongly associated with firm size and financial capacity, as its implementation often requires substantial capital investment. This creates an uneven competitive landscape in which larger firms are better positioned to adopt and implement process innovations, while smaller operators are often forced to find alternative pathways to innovate (Capitanio et al., 2010).

Marketing innovation involves changes in pricing, product design, promotional strategies, and packaging. It also aims to satisfy customers' needs, improve the current positioning of offerings, and reach new markets with the final goal of sales growth (OECD/Eurostat, 2005). In the food sector, examples of such innovation include the implementation of delivery services, discount and promotional strategies, the adoption of online booking systems, dedicated mobile applications, and partnerships with external organizations. Despite being widely implemented in the food sector, this type of innovation is paradoxically among the least strategically managed, as marketing decisions tend to be treated as reactive and informal (Lee et al., 2019). In this sector, however, where visibility and reputation play a central role in shaping consumer perception and demand, marketing innovation should not be overlooked.

Finally, **organizational innovation**, also referred to as "management innovation", concerns the introduction of new approaches to organizational structure, work organization, and the management of external relations. Its main objectives include the reduction of both transactional and administrative costs and the improvement of satisfaction in the workplace, with the ultimate goal of enhancing organizational performance (OECD/Eurostat, 2005). A relevant example in the food domain, and in particular in the restaurant sector, is the principle of hiring staff for their attitude and subsequently training them to improve their skills, reflecting a shift in how human capital

is conceived. Managers or business owners should thus look for staff with hard-to-find qualities and then provide training to develop the specific skills required for their roles (Tews et al., 2011). Despite its potential to significantly enhance organizational performance, management innovation remains particularly challenging to implement due to its intangible and idiosyncratic nature, which at the same time makes it more difficult for competitors to observe and replicate (Lee et al., 2019).

Although they have been discussed separately, it is important to note that the various types of innovation rarely operate in isolation. In real-world contexts, they are often deeply interconnected, mutually reinforcing one another and contributing differently to competitive advantage. Product and marketing innovation can enhance profits by boosting consumption of the firm's offerings, process innovation can achieve the same result by reducing costs, while organizational innovation can foster structures that support the implementation of the other forms of innovation (Lee et al., 2019).

This first distinction among different types of innovation provides the conceptual vocabulary needed to identify and classify the forms of innovation that emerge within culinary competitions, which will be further discussed in the following chapters.

Table 1: Types of food innovation following the OECD classification

Type of innovation	Definition	Examples in the food sector	Key tension
Product	Introduction of improved goods or services, including components, materials, specifications improvements	New products made with alternative ingredients, new menu offerings, introduction of new product or service categories (e.g. the implementation of the catering service)	Pressure toward incremental change due to “consumer inertia”
Process	New or substantially improved production or delivery methods, including equipment, software or techniques modifications	New technologies and techniques (e.g. <i>sous-vide</i> cooking and spherification), equipment, IT integration	Significant capital investment is required, favoring larger players

Marketing	Changes in pricing, product design, promotional strategies and packaging	Delivery services, discount and promotional strategies, online booking systems adoption, dedicated mobile applications and partnerships with external organizations	Widely implemented but poorly managed strategically
Organizational/management	New approaches to organizational structure, work organization, and external relations management	Hiring staff with hard-to-find qualities and training them to improve skills: a shift in human capital conception	High impact on performance but difficult to implement and replicate

Source: own elaboration

1.1.2 The degree of novelty: radical vs incremental innovation

To further build the theoretical foundations necessary for the empirical analysis, it is important to go beyond the categorization of innovation types. Two additional dimensions are worth considering: the degree of novelty that innovation can assume, ranging from radical to incremental, and its nature, distinguishing between soft and technological innovation.

A first distinction concerns the level of novelty that innovation can assume, distinguishing between radical and incremental innovation. **Radical innovation** concerns the implementation of changes to products, services, or processes that are substantially different from existing practices (Bessant & Tidd, 2007). Considering the food sector, it involves profound transformations reshaping culinary practices and consumption experiences, such as the emergence of molecular gastronomy, the development of cultivated meat, and the use of augmented reality or digital projections that redefine the dining experience.

On the other hand, **incremental innovation** consists of the introduction of small improvements to already existing products, services, and processes (Bessant & Tidd, 2007). Examples of incremental innovation in the food sector include the continuous refinement of existing recipes (such as menu offerings or the addition of low-carb or gluten-free versions), improvements in *mise en place* through the use of new molds, the

introduction of new ingredient combinations, and improvements in food preparation and preservation processes.

A common misconception about innovation is that value is created only when something is completely new and disruptive. In reality, while radical innovation is often challenging due to its inherent risks and substantial resource requirements, incremental innovation is equally important and should not be underestimated. As Kahn (2018) notes, small wins can contribute to big wins, as continuous improvements and refinements may collectively lead to substantial performance gains and long-term competitive advantage, even though they do not appear revolutionary in isolation. This does not imply that radical innovation is absent from the food sector. Rather, it tends to emerge within specific contexts where experimentation is prioritized, tolerated, and indeed expected. Haute cuisine serves as a prime example to better understand this tension. As demonstrated by chef Ferran Adrià with the rise of molecular gastronomy, radical innovation in this domain is possible. However, the specific context matters considerably. Even within these elite spaces, structural constraints can limit the room for free experimentation, shaping the type and degree of innovation that can ultimately emerge. Culinary competitions, the main focus of this thesis, represent a particularly relevant case in this regard. They constitute a context where creativity and innovation are explicitly encouraged, yet simultaneously bounded by strict rules, raising the question of whether and how innovation can truly flourish under such conditions, a dilemma this thesis sets out to explore.

1.1.3 The nature of innovation: soft vs technological innovation

For a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, another dimension beyond the degree of novelty concerns the nature that innovation can assume, distinguishing between soft and technological innovation. **Soft innovation** concerns "*innovation in goods and services that primarily impacts upon aesthetic or intellectual appeal rather than functional performance*" (Stoneman, 2010, p.22). In the food sector, this translates into food craftsmanship and creativity (Mohanty et al., 2024), encompassing a more symbolic dimension rooted in tacit knowledge that is difficult to articulate and formalize, and typically acquired through experience and practice.

As opposed to soft innovation, **technological innovation** needs to be considered. Stoneman refers to this as technological product and process (TPP) innovation, a concept that closely aligns with the OECD (2005) classification of product and process innovation.

In the food sector, it concerns more scientific and technical knowledge, encompassing domains such as food microbiology and food engineering, and typically manifests in the more visible and structured aspects of kitchen operations, including the design of equipment or layout (Mohanty et al., 2024). This form of innovation is typically based on codified knowledge that can be formally articulated and replicated, making it more easily imitable and facilitating its diffusion.

This distinction introduces a fundamental tension: technological innovation is easier to diffuse but also to imitate, while soft innovation is harder to replicate but also to identify. This tension proves especially relevant in gastronomy, where tacit knowledge circulates informally among chefs and intellectual property protection of recipes and techniques remains limited. These aspects, representing an interesting structural characteristic of this domain, will be examined in greater depth in the following sections when presenting some of the key trends in contemporary gastronomy.

Table 2: Degree and nature of food innovation

Dimensions		Description	Examples in the food sector	Key tensions
Degree	Radical	Implementation of changes to products, services or processes that are substantially different from existing practices	Molecular gastronomy, cultivated meat, use of augmented reality or digital projections on dining experience	Inherently risky and resource-intensive
	Incremental	Introduction of small improvements on products, services and processes already existing	Refinement of existing recipes (e.g. low-carb or gluten-free versions), improvements in food <i>mise en place</i> , preparation and preservation and new ingredient combinations	Dominant yet often underestimated

Nature	Technological	Innovation related to technological products and processes (TPP) (codified knowledge)	Food microbiology, food engineering and kitchen operations, including equipment design, layout	Easier to diffuse and also to imitate
	Soft	Innovation impacting upon aesthetic or intellectual appeal rather than functional performance (tacit knowledge)	Food craftsmanship and creativity	Harder to imitate but also to identify

Source: own elaboration

1.1.4 Business Model Innovation

So far, the different dimensions of innovation have been examined by looking at changes occurring at the level of individual offerings, practices, or structures. However, when considering how innovation emerges and diffuses in the complex context of culinary competitions, the focus of this thesis, a broader perspective is needed. Innovation should also be considered at a deeper level, examining how it can reshape the way in which value is created. This is precisely what the concept of Business Model Innovation (BMI) addresses.

First of all, the concept of Business Model (BM) should be introduced. According to Clauss (2017), it represents the unique configuration through which a firm organizes and aligns three mutually reinforcing dimensions: value proposition, value creation and value capture. Value proposition concerns the portfolio of solutions a firm proposes and how it intends to deliver them to customers. The second dimension, value creation, deals with the value created by the firm along its value chain considering available capabilities and resources. Finally, value capture denotes how value proposition is transformed into revenues.

This leads to the concept of BMI that refers to deliberate changes in different components of an organization's business model with the main goal of sustaining firms growth, accessing new markets, and responding effectively to disruptive environments

(Chesbrough, 2010). Foss and Saebi (2017) agree with this perspective defining BMI as changes to the key components of a business model that are designed and non-trivial, emphasizing that such changes may also occur at the architectural level, involving the reconfiguration of interactions among these components. BMI is therefore a systemic form of innovation that can have a significant impact on a firm's performance and its competitive positioning. In this context, the application of BMI in the food sector represents a relatively recent yet growing area of research.

To better understand how BMI manifests in practice, it is useful to consider the study conducted by Breier et al. (2021), which offers an illustrative example of how firms in the food sector adopted it to respond to disruption. The study examines how restaurants and bars leveraged BMI not only to recover from the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to adapt to a highly uncertain environment and strengthen their competitive positioning. Some of the changes implemented included creating food boxes, which were advertised and sold directly to customers via social media. In this case, product and marketing innovation coexisted as firms redesigned their offerings while simultaneously adopting new communication and distribution channels. These changes also affected revenue streams, influencing both the value creation and value capture dimensions of their BM. Another example was the development of a flexible bar in a mobile trailer for cocktail catering at private events. This represented a reconfiguration of both the value proposition and the delivery mechanism, extending the firm's reach beyond its traditional physical location. A further strategic move consisted of maintaining and strengthening relationships with customers, who became active supporters of the business, acting as revenue generators, brand ambassadors, and informal marketing channels. Moreover, sustained customer engagement provided decision-makers with emotional reassurance and strategic feedback during a period of high uncertainty (Breier et al., 2021). This relational dimension suggests a shift toward a more community-oriented and participatory business logic, where value is co-created with customers rather than simply delivered to them.

The concept of BMI discussed so far has been primarily organizational in nature, describing how an organization redesigns the logic through which it creates and captures value. Beyond this organizational perspective, a more specific interpretation of BMI emerges when considering the context of gastronomy and the primary focus of this thesis

on culinary competitions. Although the literature typically associates BMI with a macro-organizational level, Svejenova et al. (2010) proposed a micro-level application within the gastronomic domain, suggesting that the concept of Business Model can also be applied at the level of the individual chef. In their view, it is precisely this figure, with a unique creative identity, reputation, and symbolic capital, who represents the core asset around which value creation and capture are organized. This perspective closely aligns with the third trend about the central role of the chef in gastronomy that will be explored in the following sections.

1.2 From the food sector to gastronomy: narrowing the focus

The previous sections introduced the conceptual tools needed to identify and understand the different dimensions of innovation within the food sector as a whole. However, this sector is internally heterogeneous, and innovation does not manifest uniformly across all its domains but rather takes distinct forms and follows various mechanisms. On the one hand, contexts such as large-scale food production are primarily driven by standardization, efficiency, and technological optimization. On the other hand, domains such as gastronomy are characterized by experimentation, creative exploration, and the construction of symbolic meanings around food. This narrowing of focus is not merely a matter of analytical scope, but a necessary step toward understanding the context in which culinary competitions operate and the role they play in the diffusion of innovation. Gastronomy, however, does not represent the final point of the analysis. The focus will progressively narrow to haute cuisine, a niche where innovation emerges most prominently and from which it diffuses across the rest of the sector, before turning to the central role of the chef.

1.2.1 Gastronomy

Before analyzing how innovation emerges and diffuses within gastronomy, it is important to understand how the literature defines this domain and its relevance within the Italian landscape. Etymologically, the term "gastronomy" derives from the Greek words *gastro* and *nomos*. *Gastro* refers to the stomach and, by extension, the entire digestive system starting from the mouth, while *nomos* means regulation or norm (Santich, 2004). In a broad sense, gastronomy therefore concerns the norms related to eating and drinking and, by extension, advice and guidance regarding the quality, quantity, combinations, and reasons behind what we eat. After the term disappeared for several centuries from the

European lexicon, it reappeared in the title of the French poem *La Gastronomie* before being introduced as an independent field of study by Grimod de la Reynière, considered the father of food journalism, at the beginning of the 19th century. However, it was Brillat-Savarin who inspired a vast body of literary and journalistic work on gastronomy and represented a milestone in defining this domain as encompassing both art and science, with the primary objective of promoting human well-being through the best possible nutrition (Brillat-Savarin, 1994, as cited in Santich, 2004). This dual nature of art and science identified by Brillat-Savarin aligns with the contemporary conceptualization proposed by Galarraga and Martinez De Albeniz (2025), in which gastronomy is considered a strategic domain presenting both the features of an economic-industrial sector and a cultural one, where innovation and creativity are deeply intertwined through their symbolic and technical dimensions.

Beyond being a complex domain characterized by both a creative and cultural dimension and a more technical one, gastronomy is also economically significant in the Italian landscape, making it a context in which the capacity to innovate assumes strategic importance. To better appreciate this economic significance, it is useful to focus on the restaurant and food service sector, which represents the most direct and measurable expression of gastronomy in economic terms. According to Federazione Italiana Pubblici Esercizi (FIPE, 2026), in 2025 the value added of the restaurant sector amounted to 59.3 billion euros at current prices, representing a growth of 0.5% compared to 2024 and 3.1% compared to the pre-pandemic period considering prices in real terms. Out-of-home food consumption reached 100 (99.9) billion euros, representing 33% of total food consumption. Although consumption in 2025 is still 5.4% lower than pre-pandemic levels in 2019 in constant prices, the sector nonetheless recorded 3.7% growth compared to the previous year. Active firms in food service amounted to 324,436, displaying, however, a certain structural fragility due to a high rate of business turnover. In 2025, indeed, 10,062 new businesses began operating, while 25,239 ceased activities. This fragility is also confirmed by a low business survival rate. Notably, considering data from businesses registered in the sector in 2019, after five years, the survival rate is 44%-54%. In terms of employment, the sector employed 1.3 million standard labor units in 2025, recording a slight increase of 1.7% compared to 2024, while dependent employment alone registered a reduction of 10.3%, suggesting a shift toward more flexible and non-dependent employment forms.

The picture that emerges is therefore that of an economically significant yet structurally complex sector, characterized by high competitiveness, a high failure rate, and increasing pressure on human capital. In this context, the ability to innovate is a necessary condition for survival, making it crucial to understand the mechanisms through which innovation emerges and spreads in gastronomy.

1.2.2 Haute cuisine

When considering innovation in gastronomy, it is essential to recognize that the segment where it emerges most intensely is haute cuisine. Given the focus of this thesis, it is therefore important to gradually narrow the scope of analysis, moving from the food sector in general, to gastronomy as already discussed, and finally to this segment.

Haute cuisine can be considered a particular niche within gastronomy where innovation takes shape most visibly, as a sort of R&D laboratory. While representing a limited portion of the entire sector in quantitative terms, this niche exerts a crucial influence on the food industry as a whole. Similarly to haute couture in the fashion industry, it acts as a trendsetter, defining quality standards and directions that gradually diffuse to the rest of the industry (Surlemont & Johnson, 2005).

What makes this segment so relevant from an innovation perspective lies in its dual nature. On the one hand, it is often defined as an artistic industry, where consumers do not simply seek nourishment but expect a sort of "magic of discovery" (Surlemont & Johnson, 2005). On the other hand, haute cuisine has also been described as a crafts industry built around a rigid professional structure, where chefs acquire expertise through rigorous training involving the development of both sensory and technical skills (Gomez et al., 2003, as cited in Abbate et al., 2019).

It is precisely this tension between creative freedom and organizational structure that makes haute cuisine a privileged context for studying how creativity and innovation are generated and legitimized. In this thesis, culinary competitions within this segment are analyzed as a unique observatory: a context in which this dual nature becomes especially visible, as competitors are simultaneously expected to demonstrate technical mastery, creative originality, and the ability to navigate the boundaries between tradition and innovation under structured and codified conditions.

1.2.3 Three key trends in contemporary gastronomy

To understand the mechanisms through which innovation can emerge in this particular niche of gastronomy and how it can subsequently diffuse toward the broader food sector, this section examines three key contemporary gastronomic trends: the professionalization of creativity, the standardization of the exceptional, and the central role of the chef. The aim of introducing these trends is not merely descriptive, but rather aims to provide a richer and more contextualized understanding of the gastronomic landscape in which the empirical analysis of this thesis is situated. Culinary competitions, in fact, cannot be understood in isolation as they are embedded in a broader ecosystem shaped by creative dynamics, processes, and key figures that determine how they function. Examining these trends therefore makes it possible to grasp the conditions and mechanisms that shape the emergence and legitimation of innovation within culinary competitions themselves.

1.2.3.1 Professionalization of creativity

The first gastronomic trend concerns the professionalization of creativity. In management literature, creativity and innovation are closely intertwined and often studied together. In fact, as Sarooghi et al. (2015, p.715) point out “*creativity is the seed of all innovation*”. Creativity, therefore, cannot be reduced to mere imagination or the ability to think out-of-the-box, but is increasingly recognized as a critical skill able to generate value.

Within the domain of haute cuisine, previously defined as the “innovative niche” of gastronomy, the professionalization of creativity plays a fundamental role. It is precisely through this mechanism that innovation can be systematically generated, replicated, and diffused, transforming it from an individual creative act to a codified process. Bouty and Gomez (2013), in fact, describe haute cuisine as a domain where creativity coexists with innovation that needs to be standardized.

This dynamic becomes particularly relevant in the context of culinary competitions. Within these highly competitive environments, where constraints and pressure are high, creativity becomes a crucial yet demanding element to handle. On the one hand, it often represents an important criterion of evaluation. On the other hand, any innovation that emerges from its application cannot happen accidentally, but must rather become structured, replicable and transferable.

The following sections aim to explore these dynamics in greater depth, moving across three interconnected stages. The discussion opens with the case of Ferran Adrià, presented as a pioneering example of how creativity can be progressively transformed from an occasional and informal activity into a structured and codified process. Building on this, Leone's framework is presented to provide a systematic theoretical lens through which the different configurations of the creative process within haute cuisine can be examined. Finally, the relationship between creativity, innovation, and tradition is explored, showing that the professionalization of creativity does not occur in isolation from the cultural background. Tradition, in this sense, can be considered as the foundation from which innovation emerges.

Ferran Adrià case

A pioneering example of the importance of turning creativity into a codified and structured process is offered by the case of Ferran Adrià, co-owner and chef of elBulli, a three-Michelin-starred restaurant in Spain that closed in 2011. Unanimously regarded as one of the most innovative chefs in the world, Adrià was the first to professionalize creativity in the culinary domain (Svejenova et al., 2010).

At the beginning of his career, while working as an employee at elBulli, Adrià had the opportunity to accumulate fundamental knowledge and develop extensive experience in improvisation. After becoming owner-manager of the restaurant, he decided to redefine its value proposition, investing significantly in food quality and creating a dedicated space for experimentation. At this stage, however, creativity was still considered an auxiliary and *ad hoc* activity (Svejenova et al., 2010).

Subsequently, Adrià established a separate development unit where the team could dedicate time specifically to generating new ideas. With the achievement of his third Michelin star in 1997 and the recognition as the best restaurant in the world in 2002, creativity became a permanent and structured activity, supported by a dedicated team operating outside the restaurant and a creative workshop that eventually became year-round. Adrià also began to focus on research and culinary training, initiating collaborations with schools, universities, and foundations, successfully bridging the worlds of cuisine and science and developing cutting-edge techniques still associated with his name today, such as spherification and the use of liquid nitrogen. His case clearly

demonstrates how creativity can be transformed from a secondary activity into a core competence and a distinctive and lasting competitive advantage (Svejenova et al., 2010).

This case therefore provides a practical illustration of the professionalization of creativity, showing how this process can unfold progressively over time. Beyond this example, academic literature has shown a growing interest in this topic, developing important theoretical contributions to explain how creativity can be systematically organized, managed, and transformed into a strategic asset. The following section will present, in particular, the framework proposed by Leone (2020), which helps understand the different configurations that the creative process can take within the context of haute cuisine.

Framework di Leone's framework on creativity

After presenting the case of Ferran Adrià as an emblematic example of how creativity can be progressively professionalized and transformed into a structured process, it is possible to introduce the framework developed by Leone (2020), which allows for a more systematic analysis of how creative processes take shape in haute cuisine. The framework challenges the traditional view of creativity as a purely sequential process, in which ideas move linearly from generation to realization, arguing that in reality this process is much more nuanced and complex. Leone identifies five main creative patterns: improvisation, experimentation, trial-and-error through analytic procedures, trial-and-error, and imagination. Before examining each pattern in detail, however, it is necessary to introduce four aggregate dimensions, whose interaction and combination give rise to the different configurations.

These four dimensions are: process triggers, planning, the unfolding of creative phases, and trialing, each of which will be examined in turn.

The first dimension concerns **process triggers**, which represent the starting point of the entire creative process. New ideas can emerge from extemporaneous choices, such as last-minute changes to a recipe, a mistake during preparation, random combinations of ingredients, or ideas that emerge spontaneously while other creative processes are already underway. Some choices can, on the contrary, be more reasoned and deliberate when the chef intentionally dedicates time and energy to the creation of new dishes. Finally, the influence of other colleagues can also represent a potential trigger,

encouraging cross-contamination and the expansion of culinary knowledge (Leone, 2020).

The second dimension addresses **planning**. When following a structured creative process, some crucial elements need to be predefined such as time, spaces, and resources dedicated to creation. Beyond these three elements, planning also encompasses routinization. Chefs may choose to routinize the entire creative process or only specific phases, either before trials begin or once a new dish has been finalized. When considering planning, it is also worth noting that creative ideas do not always arise regularly, and chefs must therefore strike a balance between the continuous drive for innovation and the need to maintain a stable and coherent restaurant offering (Leone, 2020).

The third dimension relates to the **unfolding of creative phases** and captures two distinct aspects. The first regards the creative orientation of the chef, where some processes may be more spontaneous, with the chef doing *bricolage* with ingredients at hand, while others are more intentional, for example, with predetermined ingredients, techniques, or preparations. The second aspect instead concerns the way in which the different phases of the process relate to each other. For some chefs, the creative process manifests as a continuous flow in which the phases follow one another rapidly and at times overlap. For others, on the contrary, they are clearly distinct, with each phase concluding before the next one begins (Leone, 2020).

Finally, the fourth dimension concerns **trialing**, which in most creative processes represents the final phase. To fully understand this dimension, it is important to consider that the approach to trials varies significantly depending on both their nature and the way in which they are used. Regarding their nature, trials can be purely mental, where the entire creative process unfolds cognitively and the only physical trial coincides with the final execution of the dish. Alternatively, trials can be multiple and sequential, where the result of one trial builds upon the next, or conducted in parallel, testing different conditions simultaneously. With regard to their purpose, some trials serve to transform an abstract vision into a tangible result, others aim at reaching perfection in the final output, while others are simply part of a planned and structured creative process (Leone, 2020).

Having outlined the four underlying dimensions, it is possible to examine how their interaction and combination lead to five distinct creative patterns: improvisation, experimentation, trial-and-error through analytic procedures, trial-and-error, and imagination.

The first pattern is **improvisation**, characterized by the high speed of action that distinguishes this pattern from the others. This pattern is usually triggered either by extemporaneous choices or by the influence of colleagues. Planning is practically absent, and the process is based on breaking existing routines to generate new outcomes and mental schemas. Regarding the unfolding of creative phases, these overlap both in time and substance, resulting in a spontaneous process that resembles a form of bricolage with the ingredients at hand. Finally, trialing is practically absent or entirely mental, with usually only one physical trial carried out to make sense of the overall process. A concrete example of this pattern is the *amuse-bouche*, typical of haute cuisine restaurants, whose composition often depends on the chef's daily improvisation (Leone, 2020).

The second pattern identified by Leone is **experimentation**. Its defining characteristic is the analytical orientation directing the entire creative process, in which the chef intentionally designs multiple contrasting scenarios in order to compare results. This is also reflected in the typical triggers of this pattern, which are generally reasoned choices or the influence of colleagues. The level of planning is very high, and experimentation usually takes place outside the restaurant's regular working hours, in dedicated spaces and with specifically allocated resources. The unfolding of creative phases is highly structured, with each phase clearly distinct from the next, where the chef adopts a deliberate and pondered approach. Finally, trials are conducted in parallel sessions, similarly to laboratory experiments, and serve both to reach perfection in the final result and to establish a structure for the creative process (Leone, 2020).

The third pattern is **trial-and-error through analytic procedures**, which lies midway between the previous two patterns. In this case, a highly structured process is adopted, beginning with a preliminary phase of study and analysis, then continuing through a series of sequential trials aimed at refining the dish. In the initial stages, attention is focused on a specific idea serving as the trigger for the creative process. In this context, the influence of colleagues plays a significant role and is mainly linked to the knowledge and expertise accumulated over time. Furthermore, similarly to what occurs in the experimentation

pattern, reasoned choices also represent an important trigger of the creative process. This pattern also features pre-defined time, spaces, and resources, and the process is highly routinized, characterized by clearly structured and well-separated stages. In particular, two main routines can be identified. While a first routine supports the development phase and is repeated until the desired result is achieved, a second one is introduced at the end of the creative process with the aim of making the dish replicable in the future. In this pattern, chefs adopt a deliberate and pondered approach, in which the different stages of the process are clearly separated and follow a precise sequence. Trials are carried out consecutively, with the outcome of each attempt progressively eliminating alternatives and guiding subsequent trials. In this way, they serve both to move closer to the optimal result and to provide a clear structure to the creative process throughout its entire development (Leone, 2020).

The fourth pattern is **trial-and-error**. This approach takes several variations and is generally used not only to create new dishes but also to improve existing menu items. Unlike the previous patterns, triggers can emerge and change throughout the creative process, taking the form of any of the three trigger types previously identified. Time, spaces, and resources are not always predefined, allowing for greater flexibility in the process, while routinization manifests itself through the repetition of procedures that are progressively adapted based on the results of previous trials. It is possible to clearly distinguish the initial idea generation phase and a final execution phase, while intermediate trials follow one another closely and are conducted rapidly. Consequently, the overall orientation of the process is relatively spontaneous and less rigidly structured than the two previous patterns. Learning derives mainly from the chain of results generated by multiple trials, with each attempt contributing to progressively increasing precision, ultimately defining an operating standard and perfecting the final dish (Leone, 2020).

The final pattern concerns **imagination**, where the creative process unfolds almost entirely at a cognitive level, with the chef constructing a complete mental representation of the intended dish. The decision to work on a dish through imagination can be activated by any of the previously discussed triggers, all of which lead the chef to pre-design a complete mental image of a dish or product to be created. In this pattern, then, planning plays a pivotal role. While the chef is generally unable to define time and spaces in

advance, resources are already mentally defined. Once a clear mental plan has been established, a routine can be put in place to guide the process. Concerning the unfolding of creative phases, since the entire process occurs at a cognitive level, there is no real structure of phases, as these are constantly intertwined with the chef's accumulated knowledge and memory. Finally, trialing includes multiple cognitive trials, with only one physical trial ultimately performed to verify and give meaning to the entire imagination process (Leone, 2020).

Table 3: Leone's framework on creativity

Creative patterns	Process trigger	Planning	Unfolding of creative phases	Trialing
Improvisation	- Quick and extemporaneous choices - Influence of colleagues	- Almost absent - Routines are broken to generate new outcomes	- Overlapping of creative phases - Spontaneous process: bricolage	Mental trials with a single final physical trial to make sense of the overall process
Experimentation	- Reasoned choices - Influence of colleagues	- Very high - With dedicated time and spaces, and resources specifically allocated	- Highly structured and clearly distinct - Deliberate and pondered approach	Trials in parallel sessions to reach perfection and establish a structure
Trial-and-error through analytic procedures	- Reasoned choices - Influence of colleagues serving as accumulated knowledge	- Pre-defined time, spaces, and resources - Highly routinized with a double routine	- Phases are clearly separated and sequential - Deliberate and pondered approach	Multiple and sequential trials, each shaping the following one to reach perfection and establish a structure

Trial-and-error	- Extemporaneous choices - Reasoned choices - Influence of colleagues serving as accumulated knowledge	- Time, spaces, and resources not always predefined - Routinized with routine changing based on trial results	- Distinct idea generation and execution phases, with rapid intermediate trials - Spontaneous process	Multiple trials to increase precision, define an operating standard and perfect the final dish
Imagination	- Extemporaneous choices - Reasoned choices - Influence of colleagues	- Time and spaces not pre-defined - Resources mentally pre-defined - Routines are established after mental planning	- Unstructured phases constantly intertwined with knowledge and memory - Spontaneous process	Multiple cognitive trials, with a single final physical trial at the end to verify and give meaning to the mental process

Source: own elaboration based on Leone (2020)

The framework developed by Leone (2020) thus offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how creativity unfolds in haute cuisine. The creative process can no longer be conceived as a simple linear and sequential model. As Leone demonstrates, it can take multiple and non-mutually exclusive forms, each driven by different combinations of triggers, planning, routinization, and trialing. Creativity therefore emerges as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, in which the need for structure and its more spontaneous dimension coexist and interact. This complexity proves especially relevant in the context of culinary competitions, where finding the right balance between structure and spontaneity becomes crucial for chefs to stand out.

Relationship with tradition

One crucial consideration when studying this trend is that analyzing how creativity can be professionalized does not imply a complete rupture with the past. On the contrary, especially in gastronomy, tradition represents a fundamental dimension of the creative process.

The relationship among creativity, innovation, and tradition has attracted considerable attention in academic literature, which has extensively explored how these three

dimensions can interact and reinforce one another. In this context, tradition can serve several functions within innovative processes.

First, tradition can act as a **knowledge base** from which something new can be built. It has been described as a rich repository of cultural heritage, collective identities, and shared memories (Dacin & Dacin, 2008, as cited in Messeni Petruzzelli & Savino, 2015), serving as a foundation for building the future rather than belonging solely to the past. In the culinary context, therefore, it can be translated as a repertoire of techniques, ingredients, recipes, and cultural references from which something new can be created.

Second, tradition can serve as a **source of legitimacy** for innovative solutions. When a new product incorporates elements that are already familiar to consumers, it is more likely to be accepted by the market (Messeni Petruzzelli & Albino, 2012, as cited in Messeni Petruzzelli & Savino, 2015). This concept recalls the notions of “consumer inertia” and “food neophobia” already encountered in the analysis of product innovation. When consumers display these conservative behaviors, tradition helps mitigate uncertainty and encourages purchases.

Finally, tradition plays a crucial role in **protecting a society's identity** (Guiné et al., 2021), preserving a heritage passed down from generation to generation and contributing to the economic and cultural development of a community. Notable examples include the UNESCO recognition of the Mediterranean Diet in 2013 (Guiné et al., 2021) and of Italian Cuisine in 2025 (Italia.it, n.d.) as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This protective function is also reflected in European certifications such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG), which represent a form of legal protection for local and authentic products (Guiné et al., 2021).

Tradition, therefore, should not be overlooked in the pursuit of creativity and innovation but should rather become an integral part of these dimensions. This is clearly demonstrated by Messeni Petruzzelli and Savino (2015), who analyzed five Italian restaurants awarded three Michelin stars to understand how innovation can emerge from the recombination of traditional elements. By interviewing the chefs and examining their dishes, the authors were able to identify two distinct “recombinant” strategies. The first involves combining traditional ingredients with elements drawn from different cultures,

enabling a form of cross-cultural contamination. The second instead concerns the introduction of unconventional combinations between traditional elements themselves. Taken together, these two strategies suggest that tradition is not a constraint on creativity, but rather a foundation from which original ideas can emerge.

This concept of “recombinant” strategies, and more broadly the tension between tradition and innovation, is particularly relevant in the context of culinary competitions. In these settings, participants must constantly negotiate between loyalty to tradition and the need to surprise and distinguish themselves from other contestants. This tension is inevitably reflected in the evaluations of both judges and audience, for whom tradition serves as a shared reference point against which the innovation proposed by each chef is measured and legitimized.

1.2.3.2 Standardization of the exceptional

In addition to the professionalization of creativity, another significant trend within gastronomy concerns the so-called “standardization of the exceptional”. Haute cuisine is often perceived almost as an exclusive and nearly unattainable domain, but as illustrated in a preceding section, it can rightfully be considered as the innovation laboratory of gastronomy. The innovative ideas, new techniques, and new combinations emerging from haute cuisine must then gradually diffuse throughout the broader food sector, enabling innovation to extend beyond the boundaries of this niche domain.

This process of innovation diffusion is strongly related to the concept of the trickle-down effect, first studied in the fashion context. Here, haute couture, similarly to haute cuisine, acts as an innovation laboratory for the broader sector, with fashion trends originating at the top and gradually trickling down through the fashion industry, ultimately reaching mass production. Along this path, iconic garments and styles are simplified, standardized, and scaled for a wider market.

To develop this trend, the trickle-down process will first be presented in the context of fashion, before being applied to the food domain through some concrete examples. Finally, the concept of imitation will be addressed. Although imitation is traditionally considered a threat undermining competitive advantage, in this context it does not represent a barrier but rather plays a crucial role in the diffusion of innovation, making it more accessible to the industry.

This trend is also closely linked to culinary competitions, the central focus of this thesis. On the one hand, the presence of several constraints and a highly structured environment transforms these events into a mechanism through which ideas, techniques, and creative solutions are not only tested, but also validated and made replicable. On the other hand, innovation and new ideas emerging from these competitions can subsequently diffuse throughout the rest of the food sector.

The trickle-down effect in the fashion industry

Haute cuisine has previously been defined as the innovative niche of gastronomy from which innovation emerges and subsequently spreads throughout the entire sector. To gain a deeper understanding of this mechanism, it is useful to introduce the concept of the trickle-down effect, originally studied in the fashion industry but equally applicable to haute cuisine. This parallel is not coincidental because, as Surlemont & Johnson (2005) point out, haute couture plays the same role within the fashion sector as haute cuisine does within the food industry.

The trickle-down effect is a theory elaborated by Georg Simmel (1957, as cited in Atik & Firat, 2013) within the sociology of fashion, arising from the observation that new fashion trends were transferred from the social elite, represented by haute couture, to the lower social classes. The latter naturally sought to emulate the styles of the former, but as a trend gradually trickled down the social hierarchy, it became progressively "vulgarized", losing its ability to signal the status distinction originally pursued by the elite.

This mechanism represented the basis of fashion cycles, whereby, once a trend was absorbed by the lower classes, high fashion was compelled to continually reinvent itself to preserve its distinction. Over time, however, some authors, including Blumer (1969, as cited in Atik & Firat, 2013), reinterpreted this mechanism no longer as a mere expression of social hierarchy, but rather as a means through which new tastes could emerge in a constantly evolving world. From this perspective, fashion cycles serve not as a marker of class distinction but rather as a way to rejuvenate the market, stimulate growth, and respond to the collective desire to be "in fashion".

An emblematic example illustrating this phenomenon is Coco Chanel's iconic tweed jacket, conceived by the designer as an elite garment. As Pike (2021) explains on the British Vogue website, its sporty cut, inspired by the attire of her former boyfriend, the Duke of

Westminster, and the use of Scottish tweed, a fabric traditionally used for menswear, made it revolutionary and unmistakable at the time. Over time, *prêt-à-porter* and fast fashion replicated its aesthetic, replacing fine fabrics and precious buttons with cheaper materials, thereby making it accessible to the mass market, a process that perfectly embodies the logic of the trickle-down effect.

The trickle-down effect in the food industry: some examples

To better illustrate the phenomenon of the trickle-down effect in gastronomy, it is useful to draw on some concrete examples.

The first one concerns **spherification**, a modern technique in the field of molecular gastronomy that allows a liquid to be encapsulated in semi-solid spheres enclosed by an extremely thin membrane. Triggered by a controlled reaction between calcium chloride and sodium alginate, this jellification process is able to produce the famous "burst-in-the-mouth" effect. While the core scientific principle was patented in 1942 by a Unilever scientist in Great Britain, Spanish chef Ferran Adrià was regarded as his pioneer of its culinary application developed in his restaurant elBulli in 2003, transforming it into a hallmark of haute cuisine (Gaikwad et al., 2019). From there, this complex technique followed a trickle-down path, gradually spreading from haute cuisine to more casual dining restaurants and, eventually, to the mass market. Modern examples include the use of *perlage*, often used in restaurants, or the "popping boba" found in bubble tea, which simplifies the principle of spherification with fructose syrup and food coloring, turning a historically sophisticated technique more accessible and simplified in its execution.

A second example concerns the concept of "**deconstruction**", also developed by Ferran Adrià with his iconic "deconstructing soup". According to the chef, this technique allows traditional recipes to be reinvented by modifying the internal structure of a dish through alternative temperatures, shapes, and textures. This process allows chefs to enhance the spirit of a dish, reinterpreting recipes starting from tradition and pushing beyond the boundaries tradition itself (Parasecoli, 2001). This approach, initially confined to haute cuisine due to its technical complexity, has subsequently evolved into a successful format replicated across the entire industry. Consider, for instance, the widespread trend of deconstructed desserts, dishes assembled directly in front of the customer, or salad bowls featuring separated ingredients that consumers can combine at their own discretion.

A third example of the trickle-down effect in gastronomy concerns *sous-vide* cooking. As Haas (2006) explained, it originated in the 1970s when French chef Georges Pralus found a solution to the significant weight reduction that *foie gras* underwent during cooking. He conceived the idea of wrapping the *foie gras* in multiple sheets of plastic to remove the air and immersing it in temperature-controlled water, thus drastically reducing this weight loss. Beyond solving the shrinkage problem, this technique also allowed the food to preserve and intensify its juices and flavors. While initially met with skepticism due to the use of plastic in cooking, the method began to spread across Michelin-starred kitchens after Georges Pralus opened a dedicated cooking school and began teaching the technique. *Sous-vide* was later scientifically refined, since cooking times and temperatures were found to be extremely specific to each ingredient and could critically alter the texture of the final product (Haas, 2006). Today, this cooking technique has become accessible to home cooks thanks to commercial appliances like the vacuum sealer and the immersion circulator (also called *roner*) that maintains water at a precise temperature. Much like spherification and deconstruction, this method eventually trickled down well beyond the boundaries of haute cuisine, demonstrating how innovations born in elite culinary contexts can gradually spread to the mass market and become integrated into everyday gastronomic practice.

The phenomenon of imitation

After analyzing the trickle-down effect in the gastronomic sector, one aspect that cannot be overlooked concerns the phenomenon of imitation, which can be considered an important mechanism for the diffusion of innovation within the food industry.

This phenomenon is particularly interesting when examined within the gastronomic context, as the sector presents a distinctive structural characteristic that distinguishes it from most others. As most innovation in gastronomy and haute cuisine concerns creativity, the sector cannot rely on traditional intellectual property (IP) protection tools, such as patents, copyrights, and trade secrets, to protect innovation. It would indeed be impossible to patent a recipe or a particular *mise en place* of a dish. For this reason, the sector can be defined as an “IP's negative space” (Raustiala & Sprigman, 2006, p. 1764).

According to traditional economic theory, imitation is typically regarded as a threat to competitive advantage, reducing the exclusivity of new ideas, discouraging innovation, and ultimately harming the originator. In the food sector, however, despite this structural

characteristic of weak appropriability, innovation continues to exist and spread. This apparent paradox has been described by Raustiala and Sprigman (2006) as the “piracy paradox”, a concept originally applied to the fashion industry but equally applicable to the food sector. It describes a condition in which weak intellectual property protection sustains innovation rather than limiting it. Indeed, within the gastronomic domain, imitation does not necessarily harm the original innovator; on the contrary, it can promote further innovation while simultaneously benefiting the originator (Raustiala & Sprigman, 2006). This view is consistent with that of Teece (1986) who argues that when appropriability is weak, imitation becomes easier, and sustainable competitive advantage depends less on legal protection and more on complementary assets and the capacity to innovate continuously. It is precisely this mechanism that explains the paradox in the gastronomic sector. Being unable to leverage exclusive ownership of their ideas, chefs and organizations are driven to keep innovating constantly, and this sustained pressure translates, at the industry level, into a broader diffusion of innovation itself.

However, the absence or weakness of formal legal IP protection does not imply a complete absence of rules. In this regard, Fauchart and von Hippel (2008) explored the existence of an informal yet collectively recognized **norm-based IP system** within a sample of French haute cuisine chefs. Rather than relying on legal instruments, the haute cuisine community was found to rely on three main implicit social norms regulating their professional behavior. The first norm states that chefs must not replicate the innovative recipe of another chef identically. The second norm dictates that if a chef decides to reveal some secret information about a recipe to a colleague, the latter must not disclose the information without the original creator's consent. Finally, the third norm concerns the recognition that innovators should receive from other chefs when they decide to share their innovations. Despite being informal, this system of norms is collectively recognized within the haute cuisine community. Since chefs consider recipes to be an extremely valuable asset forming the basis of both a strong reputation and customer loyalty, these norms are vital for regulating the circulation of ideas, prohibiting direct copying without attribution, and requiring acknowledgment of the original creator. In this way, the system preserves the reputational incentives that motivate chefs to innovate while ensuring proper recognition is attributed to the original creator.

This dynamic aligns with the perspective of Raustiala and Sprigman (2006) regarding the benefits that an original innovator can derive from imitation. Nevertheless, it must be noted that these informal norms primarily govern relationships among peer chefs, whereas imitation also takes place far beyond this closed community.

It is therefore useful for individual chefs to protect themselves at a personal level. Building on this, Presenza et al. (2017) identified five barriers that chefs can leverage to protect their creativity from imitation. These involve two distinct stages of the creative process: the idea generation stage and the transformation stage. The first encompasses three barriers: “the chef's individual creativity”, “attentiveness to clients' needs”, and a “systematic approach to creativity”. By contrast, the second stage, where ideas are concretely developed into recipes, relies on two barriers: “knowledge-based feasibility” and “accumulated professional skills”. While the authors hypothesize that all five dimensions contribute to protecting innovation, their empirical findings point to a more nuanced picture. The most effective barriers prove to be the “systematic approach to creativity” and “accumulated professional skills”, suggesting that what really matters for protection against imitation is the depth of the creative process and the expertise behind it.

The first effective barrier concerns the creation of a systematic and structured creative process, through which the chef experiments with atypical ingredient combinations, blending traditional and innovative techniques. The second regards the accumulated experience and skills that chefs embed in their dishes, effectively “signing” each one with their own technical knowledge. Together, these forms of tacit knowledge become crystallized in the final result, making them extremely difficult to decode or replicate without the direct involvement of their creator.

It is precisely this depth of process that makes these two barriers the most effective in protecting creativity. This also connects to the importance of treating creativity not as an isolated event but as an ongoing process, already highlighted in the first trend, an idea that also resonates with the “recombinant strategies” discussed by Messeni Petruzzelli and Savino (2015), when considering tradition. The remaining three barriers, though relevant, offer comparatively weaker protection of a chef's creativity, as their outcomes are more easily observable or explicable from the outside, leaving them more vulnerable to imitation.

In short, imitation is structurally embedded in the gastronomic sector and, considering also the trickle-down logic, it acts as an important vehicle for the widespread diffusion of innovation. Nonetheless, the literature has identified some mechanisms that can help regulate this phenomenon. It is precisely this ongoing tension between diffusion and intellectual protection that keeps the sector dynamic and in continuous evolution.

The phenomenon of imitation in the gastronomic sector, characterized by particularly weak intellectual property protection, is also relevant to the study of culinary competitions. These events constitute a space in which innovation is exposed, judged, and publicly legitimized. In this context the mechanism of imitation can play a fundamental role in accelerating the diffusion of innovation throughout the sector, making these events particularly relevant not only as moments of comparison among chefs, but also engines of collective innovation.

1.2.3.3 The central role of the chef in gastronomy

The two trends examined so far have offered complementary perspectives on how innovation operates within haute cuisine. The first trend explored how creativity in haute cuisine has been progressively professionalized and structured into a replicable process, showing, at the same time, how tradition does not act as a barrier but rather as a foundational resource from which innovation can emerge. The second trend, on the other hand, analyzed how haute cuisine functions as a privileged context for experimentation and innovation, generating exceptional outputs that subsequently diffuse across the broader gastronomic sector in a trend that has been defined as the “standardization of the exceptional”. In this regard, the trickle-down effect has been addressed, alongside the phenomenon of imitation, which proves to be a structural feature of the sector.

However, within the dynamics previously examined, one element that cannot be overlooked is the role played by the chef. Studying the innovation emerging from haute cuisine and the mechanisms surrounding it is fundamental, but at the heart of these processes the figure of the chef emerges with his or her identity, creativity, and capacity to contribute decisively to the evolution of the sector.

The central role of the chef therefore represents the third and final trend of this chapter. Its introduction is not accidental, as it completes the analysis of the trends of haute cuisine, and closes, at the same time, the conceptual funnel developed throughout the chapter.

In light of these considerations, this last trend will be articulated in three parts. First, the evolution of the chef's figure will be traced, exploring how the role of the chef has profoundly transformed from its origins, when the chef was confined behind the stove. Subsequently, the current role of the chef will be examined in greater depth, moving from a more contained perspective that sees the chef as a guardian of culinary heritage to a broader one, exploring the role of the chef as an agent of change and cultural mediator. Finally, to conclude the overview of the chef's current role, attention will turn to the chef's media presence, considering both how chefs use media to diffuse ideas and influence the broader gastronomic culture, and how media in turn shape the chef's identity and reputation.

The evolution of the role the chef

The role of the chef has not always been what we know today, having progressively transformed over time until assuming the central role it holds today. Before the 1970s, only a few chefs, like Escoffier or Paule Bocuse, enjoyed international fame and reputation. The chef was generally seen as an employee hidden behind the stove and called upon to cook for others without any particular visibility. Starting from that decade, however, the image of the chef began to change, and three distinct periods can be identified in this evolution (McBride & Flore, 2019).

The first period, between the 1970s and 1990s, saw the chef assume the role of **entrepreneur**, coinciding with the emergence of nouvelle cuisine in France. During this period, thanks above all to figures such as Paul Bocuse and Pierre Troisgros, the chef ceased to be a simple employee bound to execute the restaurateur's directives and became a chef-owner, presenting themselves directly to the clientele instead of remaining hidden behind the scenes (McBride & Flore, 2019).

The **second period**, between the 1990s and the early 2000s, was marked by the advent of food media and saw the chef transform into an entertainer. With the launch of the Food Network in the United States in 1993 (Collins, 2009, as cited in McBride & Flore, 2019), chefs began cooking in front of a camera to explain how to prepare dishes to an audience without technical expertise. This brought cuisine into everyone's homes, and the figure of the chef acquired an entirely new visibility.

After the 2000s, the chef finally began to be recognized as an **expert**. The previous phases had granted chefs growing public trust and widespread media recognition, turning them into diffusers of knowledge increasingly called upon to voice their opinion on sensitive social, environmental, and political issues. In recent years, for example, many chefs have participated in significant initiatives related to the reuse of food waste, the development of local communities through food, and support for populations affected by natural disasters. Furthermore, chefs have developed a growing connection with the academic world, participating in interdisciplinary laboratories that bring them closer to researchers (McBride & Flore, 2019).

The chef's current role in gastronomy: three dimensions

Indeed, drawing on academic literature on the subject, it is possible to capture the complexity of their role through three distinct dimensions. The first, more closely tied to the chef's identity within the culinary environment, frames the chef as a guardian of heritage and a gastronomic gatekeeper. The second, then, adopts a more systemic and socially oriented perspective, exploring their role as an agent of change and cultural mediator. Finally, the third dimension concerns the mediatic role of the chef, studying how chefs actively use media to produce content and gastronomic knowledge, as well as how they shape their public image, reputation, and authority within the gastronomic ecosystem and beyond.

The first and narrower dimension sees the chef as a “**guardian of knowledge, of heritage, and of tradition**” (McBride & Flore, 2019, p.1), capable of preserving these elements and passing on stories and knowledge deeply rooted in the gastronomic culture of a territory. In this context, McBride and Flore (2019) argue that the chef actually holds an advantage over the anthropologist, as the chef does not merely study and document the traditions and practices of the past, but is capable of reviving them and projecting them into the future. From this perspective, the chef does not simply preserve gastronomic heritage but also reinterprets it. It is precisely this ability to mediate between past and future, between cultural heritage and the market, that has led some authors to define the chef as a “**gastronomic gatekeeper**” (Vu et al., 2024). Unlike the role of the guardian, which can be considered more passive and oriented towards preservation, that of the gatekeeper requires the chef to act as an active filter, able to select and reinterpret the past in order to transform it into innovation.

Moving to the role of the chef at a broader systemic and social level, the chef is also seen as an **agent of change** or change-maker (McBride & Flore, 2019; Pereira et al., 2019), assuming the role of intermediary between various social, economic, and institutional actors within the food system. Two cases help illustrate this dimension.

The first regards chef Gaston Acurio, who, in the context of the Mistura conference in Peru, was recognized as a mediator between farmers from rural communities and politicians. The chef was able to fulfill this role thanks to the trust built over time by engaging directly with local rural communities through his schools and other local initiatives. This position allowed him to act as a "mediating agent", facilitating dialogue between these two groups, whose relationships are often marked by tension and mutual distrust, and channeling local needs to the attention of institutions (McBride & Flore, 2019).

A second significant example comes from the culinary movement in Zimatlán, Mexico, where local chefs, in addition to being consumers of local products, took an active role in influencing the quality standards of ingredients sold in local markets, pushing producers to prioritize quality over quantity. Unlike the previous example, mediation here does not occur between actors with vastly different levels of power, but rather within the local food supply chain itself. Through their growing attention to the quality and origin of ingredients, these chefs became important intermediaries in the marketing process of local products, generating a system of mutual learning between producers and chefs that contributed to the diffusion of more sustainable agricultural practices and the redefinition of local supply chains. In this case, the chef therefore assumes the role of an agent of change capable of influencing not only culinary practices but also the economic, productive, and ecological dynamics of the local food system (Pereira et al., 2019).

A final dimension concerns the **mediatic role** of the chef, who leverages media for a dual purpose. On the one hand, chefs disseminate gastronomic content and knowledge; and on the other, they build and consolidate their public image, increasing visibility, reputation, and authority within the gastronomic ecosystem.

First, digital platforms and social media allow chefs to communicate their work, share creative processes, and disseminate their gastronomic discourse. Through these channels, they can openly spread ideas, techniques, and culinary creations, while also interacting with other chefs. This phenomenon, defined by Borkenhagen (2017) as "open-source

cooking", contrasts with the traditional tendency to jealously guard recipes and professional knowledge. Furthermore, this practice provides a direct benefit to the chefs themselves, as publicly sharing their creations allows them to associate their name with the ideas being shared, ensuring a form of attribution and authorship in a domain characterized, as highlighted in the previous trend, by low levels of appropriability. Consequently, knowledge and innovation can circulate more rapidly and reach a much broader audience than through traditional channels.

In parallel, media exposure helps strengthen chefs' reputation and professional legitimacy, increasing their ability to influence the sector. From this perspective, chefs can also be considered as role models (Irimiás & Volo, 2023) who, by virtue of their privileged position, are able to promote values, guide preferences, and encourage more sustainable and ethically responsible behaviors.

Academic literature has also dedicated growing attention to the figure of the **celebrity chef**, one of the most evident manifestations of the broader mediatization process that has affected the profession. Although this figure has contributed to increasing the profession's visibility and prestige among the general public, part of the professional community tends to distinguish their professional identity from that of celebrity chefs, perceiving a risk that the spectacularization of cooking might trivialize the authenticity of the culinary craft. Some chefs, in fact, place greater value on technical knowledge and hands-on experience, highlighting how fame is not necessarily the primary criterion for legitimacy within the sector (Cooper, 2012, as cited in Giousmpasoglou et al., 2020). The phenomenon of celebrity chefs therefore represents only one of the possible consequences of the increasing mediatization of the profession.

This tension between the media dimension and professional identity also emerges in the context of culinary competitions. When discussing this type of event, the collective imagination often tends to recall television formats such as MasterChef, in which entertainment plays a central role. However, there are numerous types of culinary competitions, each with different aims and logics. From this perspective, competitions like the Bocuse d'Or, the subject of the empirical analysis, take on a different meaning, representing a highly structured professional context in which technique, creativity, innovation, and gastronomic excellence are the primary evaluation criteria.

The progressive funnel that has guided the analysis from the food sector to the figure of the chef, alongside the three gastronomic trends, has provided the theoretical foundations necessary to approach the empirical analysis of this thesis. Before proceeding in this direction, however, it is necessary to deepen the understanding of the specific context of culinary competitions. The following chapter will therefore examine the role that events play within a sector, before narrowing the focus to competitions and, more specifically, to culinary competitions, with the aim of understanding their logic, dynamics, and relevance within the gastronomic sector.

Chapter 2 - Competition events as “arenas of innovation”

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed innovation within the food sector, gradually narrowing the focus to gastronomy, haute cuisine, and ultimately to the central role of the chef. However, innovation does not emerge exclusively within the boundaries of a restaurant or within the research and development department of an industrial food business. On the contrary, it can also be triggered by external sources capable of incentivizing creativity, competition, and experimentation.

Among these external contexts, events play a crucial role. These include, for instance, gastronomic festivals, trade fairs, industry conferences, chefs collaborations, and professional workshops. Within this broad category, this chapter focuses specifically on culinary competitions, which represent the main focus of this thesis and a distinctive type of event characterized by rules, constraints, rivalry and performance-based evaluation.

While competitions, referred to in the broader literature as “contests”, have been widely studied across different domains such as management, economics and technology, their role within gastronomy has received only limited attention, representing a gap in literature. This is particularly surprising given the highly innovative nature of haute cuisine, where such events may act as important drivers for the generation and diffusion of innovation.

Building on this premise, this chapter first examines events as mechanisms able to support innovation. It further narrows the focus to competitions, drawing on literature from various sectors and exploring how they can stimulate innovation despite constraints such as limited time and resources. In this context, two theoretical frameworks are applied to competitions, considering the Bocuse d'Or, selected for the empirical analysis, and the *La Miglior Frittella del Carnevale di Venezia* competition, whose most recent edition took place in Venice last February. Finally, an overview of the main culinary competitions in Italy is provided, categorizing the most relevant ones in order to understand their primary objectives.

2.1 Events supporting innovation

When considering how innovation usually emerges, the R&D division of a company likely comes to mind. In such structured environments, considerable effort, time, and financial resources are required to develop new products and services. Nevertheless, such a concept does not reflect the whole picture. As some scholars note, innovation processes are increasingly drawing on external sources, creating new opportunities for development (Chesbrough, 2003). This portion of innovation, commonly referred to as “**open innovation**”, has been widely discussed in the literature and contrasts with “closed innovation”, which occurs within the boundaries of an organization. Among the different contexts in which open innovation can take place, events occupy a particularly relevant position.

Management studies have examined **events** as mechanisms for generating and disseminating innovation, observing how some of them are also able to facilitate open innovation. This suggests a close connection between events and innovation, positioning the former as a potential vehicle for the diffusion of the latter (Schüßler et al., 2015). Some researchers have conceptualized such events as “field-configuring events” (FCEs), highlighting their capacity to shape and transform entire fields or sectors. These events are characterized by the ability to host interactions in places that are spatially and temporally, defined by “predictable unpredictability” (Lampel, 2011, as cited in Schüßler et al., 2015). This concept suggests that, although interactions and the emergence of new ideas are certain and can be anticipated, their specific outcomes remain uncertain.

The importance of these events lies in their capacity to facilitate interactions that would otherwise be unlikely to occur. By bringing together diverse actors, they enable the creation of new relationships and the circulation of knowledge, contributing to the generation and diffusion of innovation. As Lampel and Meyer (2008, as cited in Schüßler et al., 2015) highlight, such events have a dual nature: they are not only a product of the field or sector in which they take place, but also an input capable of shaping it.

Building on the concept of open innovation, understood as an approach in which innovation processes can rely also on external sources, field-configuring events can be seen as spaces where these processes naturally unfold. They can therefore be considered as arenas where external knowledge, relationships, and ideas converge to generate innovation.

2.2 Focus on competitions

Within the broad category of events described above, competitions represent a particularly interesting subset. Unlike other types of events, such as trade fairs, festivals, professional meetings or conferences, they are structured around rivalry, evaluation, and rewards, creating strong incentives for participants to develop novel and high-performing solutions. It is worth noting that in the academic literature, competitions are often referred to as “contests”. For consistency with the literature reviewed, both terms will be used interchangeably throughout these sections. In relation to open innovation, Terwiesch and Xu (2008) suggest that contests represent a notable exception. Efforts related to open innovation are typically motivated by altruism, a strong sense of community, or by self-interest, as contributors may also be users of the innovation. A clear example is the development of open-source software, where individuals voluntarily contribute to the improvement of shared tools without any expectation of direct compensation. A notable exception, however, is represented by innovation contests, since they require the existence of a winner and an award is expected.

Despite the rich body of research on contests across different fields such as management, economics, and technology, the study of competitions within gastronomy remains limited. This represents a significant gap, particularly given the potential relevance of competitions in stimulating creativity and innovation in culinary contexts. For this reason, the chapter examines how contests have been conceptualized and analyzed in other sectors in order to derive insights relevant to the field of gastronomy.

First of all, it is important to note that contests have existed for a long time and hold historical importance as mechanisms able to foster innovation. A notable example dates back to the 15th century, when the office in charge of the construction of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence organized a contest to design its dome. At the time it would have been the tallest and widest in the world, representing an architectural “dilemma” lasting for over 50 years. On this occasion, the proposal of Filippo Brunelleschi was ultimately selected as the winning design (King, 2000 as cited in Boudreau et al., 2011).

Two other historical examples of innovation contests concern the canning of food and margarine. Food canning originated thanks to Napoleon Bonaparte, who organized a contest to find a way to better preserve food for military campaigns. Margarine, instead,

owes its origin to Napoleon III, who in 1869 organized a contest to find a process to produce a substitute for butter that would be cheaper and longer-lasting (Khan, 2005 as cited in Adamczyk et al., 2012).

Contests appear across different sectors and have been receiving increasing academic interest. One of the domains in which they have become most established is the technology sector, with hackathons representing a clear example. These can be described as computer programming events, which are problem-focused and are used to stimulate creativity, skills, and intelligence of participants. In these settings, prototypes are typically developed and tested, and can further evolve into full-scale products and services. During this type of events, participants usually gather in an intensive sessions lasting one to two days, working to develop innovative solutions to a given challenge (Franco et al., 2022).

Furthermore, innovation contests are increasingly considered an important policy instrument to bring innovation into the field of public procurement. In this way, governments can ensure that high-quality public services are provided to citizens while promoting collaboration with the private sector. In doing so, it also stimulates innovation in the latter, as it creates a demand for innovative solutions (Makkonen et al., 2018).

Finally, innovation contests have been widely studied in the management literature, here they are considered as competitions in which innovators use their skills, experience, and creativity to provide a solution to a specific challenge posed by an organizing entity (Walcher, 2007; Bullinger and Möslein, 2010a as cited in Adamczyk et al., 2012). To better explain the importance of these contests, a well-known example is InnoCentive, a platform acting as an intermediary between seekers (typically R&D organizations or firms looking for solutions to scientific and technical problems) and solvers (usually scientists). The company organizes and manages hundreds of innovation contests per year on behalf of its clients, and once the collected solutions are delivered, seekers can acquire the intellectual property rights from the solver who proposed them, if they find the solution useful (Terwiesch & Xu, 2008).

A significant part of the literature also focuses on identifying the optimal number of participants in a contest, the design of an appropriate reward structure, and the factors affecting participants' incentives to invest effort and contribute to the contest. A larger number of participants, for example, may reduce the individual incentive to exert effort,

but at the same time increases the likelihood of finding an extreme-value solution (Terwiesch & Xu, 2008).

Another crucial aspect extensively discussed in the literature concerns constraints on innovation and creativity. Several studies show that a certain level of pressure and constraints, usually present in contests (such as rules, limited time and limited resources available), can have a positive effect on creative and innovative outcomes. The following section will explore these dynamics in greater depth.

2.3 Competition pressure and constraints

As discussed in the previous section, competitions can be regarded as events capable of stimulating creativity and experimentation among participants, contributing to the development of innovation. Yet, these processes typically unfold under conditions of pressure and within a set of rules and limitations that participants are required to respect. This raises an important question about how innovation can emerge in contexts characterized by constraints related to time, resources, and expected outcomes, and why such constraints may stimulate rather than hinder the innovation process.

A growing body of literature has examined how constraints influence creativity and innovation, with some scholars proposing taxonomies to categorize their different types. Building on these frameworks, constraints will be considered not in isolation but within a broader design model that distinguishes between rule-based and innovative approaches, which will then be applied to the context of culinary competitions. Particular attention is devoted to the Bocuse d'Or, widely regarded as the "Olympics of gastronomy" and the primary focus of this thesis, alongside the *La Miglior Frittella del Carnevale di Venezia* competition, offering a comparative perspective between two distinct models.

2.3.1 Input, process and output constraints

A “constraint” is defined in the literature as an externally imposed factor, such as a rule, a deadline, or resource scarcity, that limits creativity and innovation (Acar et al., 2019). Drawing on the model proposed by Hülshager et al. (2009), Acar et al. (2019) identified three clusters of constraints: input, process and output. In addition, they distinguished three distinct mechanisms through which constraints influence the creative process, which are motivational, cognitive and social routes.

The first cluster, about **input constraints**, refers to the limited availability of resources such as time, materials, funds and human capital. Research in the field of organizational behavior suggests that time pressure, which falls within this cluster, can positively influence individual creativity. Seen as a challenge rather than an obstacle, it pushes individuals to find more creative solutions (Ohly & Fritz, 2010, as cited in Acar et al., 2019). Related to this first cluster is the concept of "bricolage", which has been widely studied in entrepreneurship research. When facing limited resources, individuals tend to find new uses for the available resources, also recombining them in innovative ways and encouraging "out of the box" thinking (Acar et al., 2019).

The second cluster concerns **process constraints** and consists of restrictions on the steps and procedures that must be followed during a creative and innovative process (Acar et al., 2019). While prior research suggested that this type of constraint could hinder motivational mechanisms, research in fields such as organizational behavior, operations, and technology management has emphasized that process constraints can play a relevant role by establishing norms and guidelines that positively shape interactions among participants. As a result, knowledge sharing is enhanced, and trust and collaboration are strengthened (Adler & Borys, 1996, as cited in Acar et al., 2019). A relevant example concerns brainstorming sessions, where the absence of constraints and guiding rules may lead participants to withhold some ideas due to fear of judgment, social pressure or low effort. One study, in fact, found that the introduction of clear rules can help members overcome these social barriers, leading to a higher number of shared ideas compared to unconstrained settings (Acar et al., 2019).

The final cluster, about **output constraints**, relates to the definition of the outcome to be achieved at the end of the creative process. This type of constraint has generally been viewed negatively in the literature. A clear example is the introduction of performance or safety standards that a certain product or service is required to meet. Complying with such standards may, in fact, increase costs and, in some cases, result in penalties for non-compliance. At the same time, it is worth noting that, while standards support uniformity and consistency, creativity and innovation often rely on differentiation and variation (Acar et al., 2019). That said, some marketing scholars have pointed out that output constraints can generate positive effects reducing the so-called "path of least resistance". This phenomenon, linked to cognitive mechanism, refers to the tendency to always rely on the

most obvious and familiar solutions, as these require less cognitive effort (Ward, 1994, as cited in Acar et al., 2019).

Although no prior studies have directly addressed culinary competitions through the lens of constraints and innovation, the following section will apply the three clusters outlined above to the context of culinary competitions with particular attention to the Bocuse d'Or. Information about the competition was drawn from Massaro (2018), Ment'or (n.d.) and, above all, from the interviews conducted with four Italian chefs who participated in the competition.

Application of constraints to the Bocuse d'Or

Starting with the first cluster, several rules of the Bocuse d'Or can be associated with **input constraints**. For example, chefs must deal with a strict time constraint of 5 hours and 35 minutes to prepare and complete two dishes. They also face human resource constraints, as each competing chef can be assisted by only one commis during the competition. Although a coach is present, his or her role is limited to keeping track of time and providing verbal instructions. In addition, chefs must deal with material constraints as they work in standardized cooking stations that require careful planning and extensive prior testing of cooking times based on the actual equipment used during the competition. Further material constraints concern ingredients, as mandatory products are announced several months before the contest. As a result, chefs must also engage in what has previously been defined as “bricolage”, relying on available resources to develop creative and innovative solutions and out-of-the-box thinking despite the constraints they face.

Moving to **process constraints**, the Bocuse d'Or is governed by a very strict set of rules. For instance, there are restrictions regarding which ingredients can be pre-cut, while others must be prepared live in front of the judges during the competition. Some ingredients must also be weighed on the day of the competition. Sauces must also be prepared on-site, even though they usually require long preparation times. A clear example is the brown stock, a meat-based sauce that normally takes several hours to make. These constraints encourage chefs to innovate and refine their technical skills, ensuring efficiency in every movement, visual precision, and mastery of both technique and timing. The speed required demands also coordination, collaboration, and complete trust between the chef and the commis, reflecting the social processes discussed earlier.

Finally, turning to **output constraints**, the Bocuse d'Or also imposes strict requirements on the final dishes presented. Competing chefs must prepare two dishes, a plate and a platter, which must serve an exact number of portions corresponding to the number of judges. A detailed set of evaluation criteria must be met, including harmony of flavors, valorization of vegetables, presentation, technical execution and team efficiency. In a post-pandemic edition, an additional constraint was introduced required the presentation of a take-away dish. This proved to be particularly challenging, as the dish needed to remain warm for an extended period while also being easy to eat. In this context, chefs were encouraged to move beyond the "path of least resistance" discussed earlier, developing solutions capable of meeting multiple and often competing requirements. Table 4 below summarizes the three clusters of constraints and illustrates their application to the Bocuse d'Or case discussed above.

Table 4: Overview of the three clusters of constraints (input, process and output) applied to the Bocuse d'Or

Cluster of constraints	Description and examples	Application to the Bocuse d'Or
Input constraints	Time, materials, funds and human capital constraints → "Bricolage" to find new uses for the available resources	Time constraint: 5 hours and 35 minutes Human capital constraint: the chef can only be helped by the commis, while the coach can just give verbal instructions Material constraints: standardized cooking stations and mandatory ingredients
Process constraints	Restrictions about the steps to be followed along the path → Brainstorming: here constraints can help overcome social barriers	Rules concerning food preparations: sauces cannot be pre-made, and ingredients must be weighed on site
Output constraints	Performance and safety standards to be met → Avoidance of the "path of least resistance"	→ A plate and a platter need to be presented within the time limit, serving an exact number of portions → A highly detailed set of evaluation criteria needs to be met

Source: own elaboration

2.3.2 Rule-based and innovative design model

Some authors in the field of engineering design have moved beyond the study of constraints in isolation. Rather than focusing on the nature of constraints itself, they argue that the relationship between constraints and creativity in finding innovative solutions depends on the type of design model adopted (Hatchuel & Weil, 2009; Hatchuel & Chen, 2017). Within this framework, the authors identify two models: the rule-based model and the innovative model. In the rule-based design model, constraints lead to lock-in and limited, if any, innovation. By contrast, within the innovative model, constraints can enhance creativity by triggering processes of expansion and, consequently, innovation.

Within the **rule-based design model**, constraints are regarded as factors that narrow the range of possible solutions. As a result, efforts tend to focus on incremental improvements to existing products rather than thinking “out of the box”, with solutions largely relying on existing knowledge. Here the identity of the product remains unchanged (Hatchuel & Chen, 2017).

Conversely, the **innovative design model** focuses on the exploration of a maximum number of possible alternatives, and the acquisition of new knowledge. Efforts are directed toward challenging the defining characteristics of a product, questioning its identity, and giving rise to new possible pathways. Overall, the authors demonstrate that, depending on the design model adopted, constraints can be interpreted either as limitations or as opportunities (Hatchuel & Chen, 2017).

To better illustrate the difference between these two design models, it is useful to consider an example provided by Winter (2013, as cited in Hatchuel & Chen, 2017) concerning the design of a wheelchair. The case involved a set of conflicting constraints, as the wheelchair had to be suitable for rough terrain, low-cost, compact, and easy to repair. From a rule-based design perspective, the available solutions could not simultaneously satisfy all the requirements, as they appeared to be mutually incompatible. The main issue lay in the conflict among constraints. Designers therefore tended to look for compromise solutions, which often result in an impasse. Reliance on standard solutions and existing knowledge in isolation proved insufficient, making a more innovative approach necessary.

Within the innovative design model, designers did not search for solutions within the existing framework. Instead, they explored new uses, acquired new knowledge, and

questioned the identity of the product, thereby opening up new possibilities. In this perspective, constraints did not hinder the design process but acted as triggers for the development of novel solutions. In Winter's example, replacing traditional propulsion with a lever-based system and using bicycle spare parts allowed all constraints to be satisfied simultaneously. The wheelchair became affordable, suitable for rough terrain, and easy to repair. This example demonstrated that innovation does not arise from ignoring constraints, but from using them as a stimulus to explore new domains of knowledge (Winter, 2013, as cited in Hatchuel & Chen, 2017).

Application of the design model to *La Miglior Frittella del Carnevale di Venezia* competition and Bocuse d'Or

Coming back to the distinction between the rule-based and the innovative design model, two examples from culinary competitions can be associated with these categories. ***La Miglior Frittella del Carnevale di Venezia*** can be related to the **rule-based design model**. This competition, which took place in Venice on 13 February 2026, was directly observed by the author, who had the opportunity to assist the judges, record scores, and manage the timing of tastings. On that occasion, each participant of the competition was required to present 30 *frittelle* prepared according to the original Venetian recipe by Giuseppe Maffioli. The core recipe could not be modified in its traditional structure, except for the shape and flavoring of raisins and pine nuts, which was left open to interpretation. Some contestants, for example, used cinnamon or anise, others decided to soak the raisins in grappa, while some were able to give the *frittelle* a square shape. These constraints clearly reflect the rule-based design model, as only limited variation was allowed while preserving the identity of the dish. Innovation is therefore limited to small adjustments within a predefined framework, without questioning the traditional concept of the *frittella* itself.

By contrast, the **Bocuse d'Or** represent an example of the **innovative design model**. In this context, competing chefs must comply with a strict set of rules and constraints related to time, mandatory ingredients, team composition, and standardized equipment. However, the prestige of the competition, the high level of expertise, and the explicit evaluation of creativity make innovation and experimentation central elements of the process. Unlike the other model, where constraints limit the range of possible solutions without altering the identity of the product, in the Bocuse d'Or they act as a trigger for

innovation. As shown through the input, process, and output taxonomy, these constraints are not simple limitations to overcome but stimuli that encourage chefs to explore new ingredient combinations, cooking techniques, and presentation styles. In this sense, constraints do not hinder the creative process but rather guide and expand it, opening new conceptual and technical pathways. Chefs are required not only to work with given resources but also to reinterpret and transform them in innovative ways. It is precisely this ability to turn constraints into creative opportunities that enables the emergence of new gastronomic solutions, sometimes even redefining the identity of the dish itself.

Table 5: Overview of the two different design models (rule-based and innovation design model) and their application to two different culinary competitions

Type of design model	Characteristics of the model	Application to culinary competitions
Rule-based design model	- Constraints → factors narrowing the range of possible solutions - Incremental improvements to existing products - Reliance on existing knowledge - Identity of the product: unchanged	<i>La Miglior Frittella del Carnevale di Venezia</i> - Presentation of 30 <i>frittelle</i> following the original Venetian recipe - Only the shape and flavoring of raisins and pine nuts is left open to interpretation → Innovation is limited to small adjustments → Unchanged identity of the dish
Innovative design model	- Constraints → opportunity enhancing creativity by triggering “expansion” and innovation - Exploration of a maximum number of possible alternatives - Acquisition of new knowledge - Identity of the product: questioned	<i>Bocuse d’Or</i> - Constraints as stimuli to explore new ingredient combinations, cooking techniques, and presentation styles → Ingredients are reinterpreted and transformed through innovative ways → The identity of the dish and ingredients can be redefined

Source: own elaboration

2.5 Key culinary competitions in Italy

Italy represents a particularly interesting context for the study of culinary competitions. Its relevance is further highlighted by the recognition of Italian cuisine as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in December 2025 (Commissione Nazionale Italiana per l'UNESCO, 2025). Italian cuisine is therefore not merely an economic sector, but a central element of national cultural identity. One of its key strengths, as highlighted by Italia.it (n.d.), is its remarkable regional diversity. Italian cuisine can thus be considered as a

mosaic of local traditions, each characterized by typical ingredients, techniques, and historical recipes. For this thesis, the Italian context is therefore particularly interesting to consider as it allows to explore how a strong and deeply rooted tradition can be reconciled with innovation within gastronomy. In Italy, a wide range of culinary competitions exists, and for clarity, they can be distinguished for several reasons.

A first dimension concerns the geographical level at which competitions are organized, ranging from local and regional, to national and international. A second distinction can be drawn between competitions aimed at amateur cooks and those designed for professional chefs. Another important dimension relates then to visibility. Setting aside smaller local competitions with limited territorial reach, a distinction can be made between competitions with a predominantly professional and sector-based visibility and those with a more commercial orientation, characterized by greater media exposure through television programs, digital platforms, and similar channels. In addition, the type of organizing body can vary, which can include professional and institutional organizations, educational and training institutions, territorial authorities and consortia, trade fair and event organizers, as well as media and broadcasting companies.

Given the heterogeneity of the Italian context, it would not be possible to provide an exhaustive list of all existing competitions. However, it is possible to identify some categories representing the different facets of culinary competition in Italy.

At a more **local and regional level**, several competitions are designed to celebrate local identity and origin-based products. A significant example is the *Campionato Mondiale del Pesto al Mortaio*, held in Genoa. Despite being an international competition, participants are required to prepare *pesto* using the traditional method, with strict respect for the original recipe (Associazione Palatiferi, n.d.). Other examples include the *Matterello d'Oro*, dedicated to traditional Emilian pasta sheets, the *Chicco d'Oro*, focused on *Vialone Nano* rice from Verona, and the *Tiramisù World Cup* held in Treviso. These competitions are generally oriented toward the valorization and preservation of tradition, although some also include spaces dedicated to creativity and innovation. Alongside categories strictly bounded to traditional recipes, some sections are introduced to reward reinterpretation, creativity, and experimentation, such as the “creative risotto” category in Verona (Ente Fiera di Isola della Scala, 2023) or “the most creative tiramisù” section in Treviso (The Independent Tourism Company S.r.l.s., n.d.). Here participants are mostly amateur cooks,

while only a few competitions, such as the *Chicco d'Oro*, are reserved for professionals. This is likely due to the centrality of tradition, which makes many of these contests accessible also to non-professional cooks.

Moving from regional and local competitions to **national** ones, a relevant example is represented by the *Campionati della Cucina Italiana*, organised by the FIC (Federazione Italiana Cuochi). This event constitutes an important moment of comparison for professionals at a national scale and are recognized by Worldchefs, the global chefs' organization of which the FIC is a member. The competition is structured into several categories, including individual and team hot cuisine, pastry, vegan cuisine, as well as specific contests such as "best culinary student", "special categories", "lady chef", "mystery box", and "street food" (Italian Exhibition Group S.p.A., n.d.). Another relevant national competition is the *Campionato Italiano di Pasticceria Gelateria Cioccolateria* FIPGC, organized by the *Federazione Italiana Pasticceri* and held every two years in Massa Carrara (Federazione Internazionale Pasticceria Gelateria Cioccolateria, n.d.). *Premio Emergente* is also worth mentioning. It is dedicated to under-30 talents across different areas of hospitality including cuisine, pizza and pastry, with a focus on valorizing the creative vision of young professionals (Redazione Italia a Tavola, 2026). At the national level, competitions can be primarily interpreted as tools for selection, recognition and technical comparison, representing a space in which culinary talent is identified and valued.

Before moving to the international level, **cooking shows** such as *MasterChef Italia* and *Bake Off Italia* represent another dimension. These formats are often the first that come to mind when thinking about culinary competitions, due to their strong media exposure and wide popularity, which make them highly visible and well known to the general public. They often include reinterpretations of classic dishes, creative use of ingredients, and experimentation. However, they are strongly shaped by entertainment and storytelling logic, making them more distant from the technical processes of professional cooking.

Finally, competitions at **international** level can be seen as key contexts for experimentation, the overcoming of technical limits and constant dialogue with the world's leading culinary schools. These competitions are generally organized in multiple stages that culminate in an international phase, where different countries compete and thus contribute to the exchange of ideas and innovative approaches while bringing also their own culinary identity. Among the most important international competitions are the

Global Chefs Challenge, the IKA/Culinary Olympics, and the World Pastry Cup. Particular focus is now placed on comparing two international competitions: the San Pellegrino Young Chef Academy Competition and the Bocuse d'Or (the main focus of this thesis).

On the one hand, the **San Pellegrino Young Chef Academy Competition** stands out as a contest where innovation does not concern technical execution alone but rather focus also of the mindset that drives the creation of the dish. Dedicated to chefs under 30, it represents a context where the role of contemporary chefs is redefined, as participants are expected not only to cook but also to express a broader vision. Themes such as sustainability and waste management play a key role, pushing contestants to make full use of ingredients and generate new textures and flavors from elements that are traditionally thrown away. At the same time, strong importance is given to storytelling and cultural identity, as participants are required to present a signature dish. In this contest, constraints are relatively flexible, and the evaluation considers not only technical skills but also creativity, vision, and the message conveyed by the dish. In this sense, the competition promotes a form of innovation that concerns not only how food is prepared but, above all, why, placing the chef's vision and his creative identity at its core. The competition is articulated into four main stages before the Grand Final, usually held in Milan. Initially, candidates submit an online application in which they present their signature dish, functioning not just as a recipe but also as a true expression of their culinary philosophy. This is followed by an evaluation phase conducted by a jury after which selected candidates compete in live regional finals. The winners of each region advance to the global final and are paired with internationally renowned mentors, who support them in refining both the dish and its presentation in the months before the final (S.Pellegrino Young Chef Academy, n.d.)

On the other hand, the **Bocuse d'Or**, universally recognized as the "Olympics of gastronomy", represents a context in which innovation can emerge primarily through structure and constraints. Competing chefs must comply with a very strict set of rules regarding time, ingredients, equipment, and preparation methods. In this setting, creativity is not completely free but rather develops as a response to constraints. Chefs are required to optimize every gesture, refine techniques, and find effective solutions to overcome strict operational limits. Innovation is therefore mainly technical and performative, linked to the ability of achieving extreme levels of precision, efficiency, and

control, although an important dimension of innovation also concerns aesthetics and *mise en place*. Finals take place every two years in Lyon, with a highly selective path leading to it. Each country organizes national selections to identify its candidate chef, who then competes in continental selections together with a commis, an assistant chef under 22. For Italy, it is represented by the Bocuse d'Or Europe, where only the first ten top-ranked participants qualify for the world final in Lyon. On the day of the competition, the team consists of three key figures, since the chef and the commis are also supported by a coach who, according to the rules, can provide only verbal assistance. The challenge consists of preparing two distinct dishes within 5 hours and 35 minutes: a platter and a plate. The strict rules impose tight constraints on mandatory ingredients, which are revealed only a few months before the competition, as well as on cooking techniques, equipment, and pre-preparations. The evaluation is carried out by an international jury composed of representatives from all the participating countries and it is based on a detailed set of criteria (Massaro, 2018; Ment'or, n.d.).

In summary, while the latter may promote innovation emerging from overcoming technical constraints within a highly regulated system, the San Pellegrino Young Chef Competition may stimulate a more open form of innovation, based on the creative expression and identity of the chef. These two competitions therefore show how innovation in gastronomy can arise both from highly structured contexts and from more open spaces encouraging individual experimentation.

Considering the gap previously identified in the literature on culinary competitions as drivers of innovation, the following chapter will present an empirical analysis based on four interviews with Italian chefs who have participated in the Bocuse d'Or final, in comparison with the perspective of an international expert of the competition. These interviews will be examined through a thematic analysis to explore whether innovation can really emerge within such competitions, how it is subsequently diffused, and whether these effects extend to the broader gastronomic sector.

Table 6: Key culinary competitions in Italy

Category	Objective	Examples
Local and regional level	Celebrating local identity and origin-based products	- <i>Campionato Mondiale del Pesto al Mortaio</i> - <i>Matterello d'Oro</i> - <i>Chicco d'Oro</i> - <i>Tiramisù World Cup</i>
National level	Tools for selection, recognition and technical comparison, representing a space in which culinary talent is identified and valued	- <i>Campionati della Cucina Italiana</i> - <i>Campionato Italiano di Pasticceria Gelateria Cioccolateria FIPGC</i> - <i>Premio Emergente</i>
Cooking Shows	Entertainment and storytelling logic	- <i>MasterChef Italia</i> - <i>Bake Off Italia</i>
International level	Contributing to the exchange of ideas and innovative approaches while bringing also their own culinary identity	- Global Chefs Challenge - IKA/Culinary Olympics - World Pastry Cup - San Pellegrino Young Chef Academy Competition - Bocuse d'Or

Source: own elaboration

Chapter 3 – Empirical findings

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Research aim and design

The aim of this study is to investigate whether and how culinary competitions act as drivers of innovation in the gastronomic sector, with particular focus on the Bocuse d'Or as an empirical setting, and which the role the chef assumes in this process. A **qualitative approach** was chosen to conduct this empirical inquiry, as it best suits the exploratory nature of the study and allows for a detailed and flexible analysis of the research topic (Creswell, 2014). More specifically, it enables a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of chefs involved in the Bocuse d'Or, capturing nuances that a quantitative approach would likely overlook.

The research adopts an interpretivist framework, which can be associated with **social constructivism**, where reality is understood not as fixed and objective, but as dynamic and shaped by social interactions and individual experience (Creswell, 2013). This is reflected in the interviews themselves since chefs responded to the questions by offering their own interpretation of reality, which did not necessarily coincide among all participants.

Moreover, an **abductive** perspective was employed to allow for a continuous dialogue between theory and empirical data, rather than strictly testing an existing theory (deduction) or building one entirely from scratch (induction) (Saunders et al., 2023). While a theoretical framework is established in the first two chapters, the insights emerging from the interviews may uncover new mechanisms or offer alternative interpretations of how innovation develops within culinary competitions.

3.1.2 Data Collection Process

Sample selection and interviewees

Primary data has been collected through **semi-structured interviews** (Creswell, 2013), offering a balance between comparability across interviews and flexibility to investigate themes as they naturally arise throughout the discussion.

Regarding the sample selection, **purposive sampling** was adopted since the sample was small and some informative cases needed to be selected (Saunders et al., 2023). Participants,

in fact, were chosen based on a specific criterion: their recent participation in the Bocuse d'Or representing Italy at the European or world finals. Among the six chefs contacted, four agreed to participate in the interviews, and their contribution proved essential to the development of this thesis. In addition, Dr. Arne Sørvig, CEO of Stiftelsen Norsk Gastronomi (formerly Bocuse d'Or Norge), was interviewed to provide a comparative and international perspective on the competition from a very different contextual setting. His involvement, made possible through the support of the thesis supervisor, proved a valuable complement to the chefs' perspectives given his privileged insight into the Bocuse d'Or dynamics. Additional background information on the chefs was also gathered from a range of online sources, including their official websites and culinary media publications, which are outlined in Table 7.

Table 7: Description of the four interviewed chefs

Chef	Description
Marcelino Gomez (chef C1)	Italo-Argentinian by origin, he graduated in Gastronomy before studying at the Basque Culinary Center and Fundación Alicia. He then joined the elBulli Foundation, co-authoring <i>Te cuento en la cocina</i> with Ferran Adrià. After working at Geranium and as an R&D chef at Alchemist, both in Copenhagen, he joined Mirazur in Menton, France, where he currently works. Before competing as a candidate, he attended the Bocuse d'Or finals twice: as a judge for the Argentinian team in 2019 and as a coach for the Colombian team in 2021. In 2023, he won the Italian national selections in Rimini, went on to finish 7th at the European final in Trondheim (Norway), and ultimately placed 9th at the world final in Lyon (Gomez, n.d.)
Alessandro Bergamo (chef C2)	Originally from Como, he began his career in prestigious hotels across Bergamo, Venice, and Taormina before moving to Lyon in 2009, refining his skills under Pierre Orsi, Yannick Alléno, and Régis Marcon. As sous-chef for Benoît Vidal in 2013, he then helped the restaurant earn its second Michelin star. After a period in Montreal, he returned to Italy as assistant coach for the Bocuse d'Or Italy Academy during Martino Ruggieri's campaign and later joined Carlo Cracco at <i>Cracco in Galleria</i> as sous-chef. In 2019, he won the San Pellegrino Young Chef Academy Regional Final, qualifying for the global final. In January 2020, he won the Italian Bocuse d'Or selections in Alba, leading the Italian team through the European final in Tallinn and to a 10th-place at the 2021 World Final in Lyon (Identità Golose, n.d.)

Martino Ruggieri (chef C3)	Originally from Taranto, he gained early experience in Sardinia and Germany before moving to Venice's Hotel Cipriani and Turin's Ristorante Del Cambio. Working under Riccardo Camanini at Villa Fiordaliso introduced him to French cuisine, leading him to L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon. He then returned to Italy to work under Heinz Beck at La Pergola and Café Les Paillotes. He then joined Yannick Alléno at Pavillon Ledoyen in Paris, rising from sous-chef to chef adjoint. In October 2017, he won the Italian Bocuse d'Or selection in Alba, representing Italy at the 2018 European final in Turin and leading the team to a 15th-place at the 2019 World Final in Lyon. In 2022, he opened Maison Ruggieri at the Palais Royal in Paris, earning two Michelin stars in less than two years (Pertini, 2025)
Matteo Terranova (chef C4)	Originally from Varese, he began his career in Paris, working in a restaurant-pizzeria before even finishing high school, a vegetarian restaurant, and a five-star hotel. He then refined his skills under Georges Blanc in Lyon, Pierre Gagnaire in Courchevel, and spent three years under MOF chef Olivier Nasti, specializing in sourdough bread-making. After a decade in France, he returned to Italy in 2023. Following a year at Cucine Nervi in Gattinara, he joined chef Simone Cantafio at Hotel La Perla in Corvara, Alta Badia. It was there that he encountered the Bocuse d'Or up close when Cantafio invited him to taste the competition platter for the Italian candidate, Marcelino Gomez. He won the Italian national selections in Turin in 2025, followed by a 3rd place at the European stage in Marseille in March 2026. He is currently preparing for the World Final in Lyon in January 2027 (Radman, 2026)

Source: own elaboration

Interview procedure and structure

The data collection process took place remotely via videoconferencing between March and April 2026, with each of the five interviews lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of the collected data, after which their consent to record the conversation was requested and obtained. Interviews with the four chefs were conducted in Italian, being their native language, while the one with Dr. Sørvig was held in English, given his Norwegian nationality. All five sessions were conducted following a dedicated outline previously developed in consultation with the thesis supervisor: one tailored for the four chefs and one for Dr. Sørvig (see Appendices A and B). These outlines served as a guide to

cover the key themes addressed in the theoretical part of the thesis, although the discussion was not strictly confined to it.

3.1.3 Analysis of the primary data

Following the verbatim transcription of all five interviews, the four conducted in Italian were translated into English. With all transcripts available, the **thematic analysis** (Riessman, 2008 as cited in Creswell, 2014) was then carried out manually due to the limited number of participants. Since the interview outline was specifically designed to address the key themes explored in the theoretical framework, the first step consisted of organizing the responses into macro-themes reflecting the structure of the outline. For each theme, responses were then analyzed to assess their consistency with the theoretical framework and to identify whether participants shared similar or different perspectives.

As Dr. Sørvig's interview was conducted after the others, his outline was specifically designed around the topics that had already emerged from the Italian chefs. Including an international expert was a deliberate choice given the recurring references to the Nordic system throughout the interviews. That is why it became important to assess how much of what emerged was specific to the Italian context and how much reflected broader dynamics within high-level culinary competitions. His perspective therefore serves both to triangulate findings and to offer a comparative point of view, highlighting how different national systems can shape the experience and perception of innovation within the same competitive arena.

3.1.4 Methodology limitations

To better frame the scope of the research findings some limitations are worth acknowledging.

The first limitation concerns the **limited sample size**. Although appropriate for a qualitative analysis, the limited number of interviews does not allow for a generalization of findings. The perspectives collected reflect the specific experiences of Italian candidates who participated in the Bocuse d'Or at the European or world finals, and may therefore not be representative of the broader population of chefs involved in culinary competitions more generally.

Furthermore, the study focuses exclusively on a **single culinary competition**. While particularly significant in the gastronomic landscape, the contest represents a highly specific and elitist context. The obtained results may therefore not be applicable to other types of culinary competitions characterized by different structures, objectives, or levels of prestige.

The third limitation concerns the comparative dimension introduced through the perspective of Arne Sørvig which, while valuable, remains limited to a **single international viewpoint**. A broader and cross-national analysis, involving chefs and experts from different national systems, would allow for a more robust comparison and a deeper understanding of how contextual factors influence the relationship between competition and innovation not only across different competition structures but also across different national contexts.

Finally, a further limitation concerns perceived **data subjectivity**. The data rely on interviews and therefore reflect chefs' retrospective narratives and subjective perceptions. Consequently, the findings are shaped by their memory, their emotional engagement in the competition, and their personal interpretation of the concept of "innovation". No direct field observation was conducted during the months of training, such as ethnographic observation. Consequently, the study captures innovation as perceived and narrated by the participants rather than as directly observed by the researcher.

In summary, despite these limitations, the methodological design adopted in this research allowed the study to gather valuable data and to bring out significant perspectives on the role of culinary competitions as drivers of innovation. The next section will present the empirical findings, structured around the main themes identified through the analysis of the five interviews.

3.2 Discussion and findings

3.2.1 Introduction to the thematic analysis

The previous chapter addressed the concept of events as arenas for innovation with a growing focus on the specific role of competitions. After tracing some historical examples on contests, the chapter examined the main contexts and sectors in which these events have been studied. These include, for instance, hackathons in the technological sector,

contests on the public procurement field, innovation contests and open innovation platforms in management studies. The chapter then analyzed constraints and pressures that typically affect creativity and innovation, applying them to the specific setting of competitions. Within this framework, a taxonomy about input, process, and output constraints was introduced, alongside two design models, rule-based and innovative. Two practical examples from the culinary world were then used to better illustrate them. The chapter concluded with an overview of culinary competitions in Italy and a deeper description of two major international events, the San Pellegrino Young Chef Academy Competition and the Bocuse d'Or. The latter has been selected as the empirical setting for this research, given its leading position in the global gastronomic landscape and its particular significance for the study of gastronomic innovation.

After a brief overview of the previous chapter, this one presents a thematic analysis of five semi-structured interviews. Participants include four Italian chefs and Dr. Arne Sørvig. Three of the chefs (Marcelino Gomez, Alessandro Bergamo, and Martino Ruggieri) took part in the world finals of the Bocuse d'Or in Lyon, while Matteo Terranova is set to compete there in January 2027. Beyond these four interviewees, Dr. Arne Sørvig, CEO of Stiftelsen Norsk Gastronomi, offers a complementary and international perspective. On the one hand, he brings the viewpoint of one of the most competitive countries in the competition, and on the other hand, as a non-chef, he introduces a systemic perspective that goes beyond the strictly technical and culinary dimension.

The main objective of this thematic analysis is to understand how innovation processes develop, if present, within a highly competitive and regulated context such as the Bocuse d'Or. The analysis will identify a set of themes that will be examined by connecting the empirical evidence gathered from the interviews with the theoretical concepts introduced in the previous chapters. Furthermore, convergences and divergences among the interviewees will also be highlighted.

Before moving to the thematic analysis, it is worth reflecting on the motivation that drives chefs to participate in the first place. In a context characterized by strict constraints, time pressure, and high operational complexity, motivation does not act as a secondary element but as an enabling factor. Without it, the conditions of the competition would likely lead to conservative strategies, while in its presence, chefs show a consistent tendency to experiment and push past the boundaries of established culinary practice. The interviews

reveal different nuances about this topic. For Marcelino Gomez, the competition is a lifelong planned dream where gastronomic research, design, and 3D technology can merge. For Alessandro Bergamo, it represented a path toward professional “completeness” driven by a promise he made to himself in 2009 after meeting Paul Bocuse, the founder of the competition. Martino Ruggieri approaches it as an instinctive challenge, comparing himself to a “street football player” testing his abilities in a context of global excellence. Finally, Matteo Terranova entered the competition after training alongside figures already involved in the international circuit, motivated by the desire to elevate Italy's status within the global gastronomic landscape. For these chefs, Bocuse d'Or is perceived as a symbolic milestone built over time, where the journey itself matters as much as, if not more than, the final result, and where participating means carrying and reinterpreting Italian gastronomic identity on an international stage. These motivations provide an important context for reading the themes analyzed in the following sections.

3.2.2 Relationship between tradition and innovation

A first theme emerging from the interviews concerns the concept of **tradition** and its relationship with innovation. As discussed in the first chapter, innovating does not mean breaking with the past, as these two dimensions are in continuous dialogue with each other. Tradition has been previously described as a **knowledge base** and a means of ensuring continuity with the past. In some cases, a strong traditional foundation can also lend greater **legitimacy** to innovation when it reaches the market, while also playing an important role in **protecting a country's cultural identity**. These theoretical concepts have been confirmed by the interviews, even if one position stands out as being in apparent disagreement with the rest.

A first element to consider is the concept of tradition as a **knowledge base** and necessary starting point for innovation. C1 explicitly states that “to innovate, you need to understand where you come from. To be able to create, if you don't have a knowledge base, it doesn't make much sense”. C2 agrees with this perspective and describes tradition as a necessary starting point from which to develop and create a unique dish. For both chefs, tradition is not seen as a constraint slowing down the innovation process, but rather as a resource on which to build it.

Another element that finds support in the interviews is the concept of tradition as an **expression of cultural identity**. At the Bocuse d'Or, cooking is not only technical

performance but also cultural storytelling about the country that a team is representing. C1 talks about “a flavor identity brought to a “wow” aesthetic”, emphasizing the importance of drawing inspiration from tradition and reinterpreting it. C2 highlights how every chef carries a background that inevitably shapes their work, a sort of backpack they always carry with them. C4 goes further by explicitly referring to the Italian gastronomic heritage, recognized as an UNESCO intangible cultural heritage in December 2025, as a sort of **symbolic repertoire** from which to draw inspiration. In this context, recognizability becomes a key element, especially considering the presence of an international jury. As C1 and C3 point out, dishes must be recognizable in terms of flavors even to judges coming from very different countries and cultural backgrounds, leading candidates to favor more “classic” options. This closely relates with the concept of **legitimacy** of tradition also addressed in the literature review.

That said, C3's perspective on tradition stands apart from the other chefs at a deeper level. Unlike the other interviewees, he conceives tradition and innovation as separate dimensions that are difficult to reconcile. To better explain his point of view, C3 provides an emblematic example, stating that innovating a traditional preparation would be like “taking a Caravaggio painting and splattering it with paint in the style of Pollock”. In his view, tradition is a corpus to be preserved in its integrity, while innovation should develop in an autonomous space, since “innovation looks outward, while tradition looks inward”. Despite this statement, a closer analysis of his words reveals that the inspirational process he describes does not differ substantially from that of the other interviewees. Indeed, C3 himself states that he drew inspiration from *vitello tonnato*, a traditional dish, transforming it through technique and reinterpretation. For this chef, tradition operates almost as **an authority** that does not allow modifications without them resulting in something ontologically different. The concept of reinterpretation he describes, however, does not substantially differ from that of the other chefs, demonstrating that the separation between tradition and innovation does not represent a rupture between the two dimensions, but rather a more conscious form of respecting it.

This position aligns with the perspective of Dr. Arne Sørvig. During the interview, he highlighted how the concept of tradition differs significantly between countries such as Italy and France compared to Norway. On the one hand, he describes Italy as a country with a very strong and codified tradition, with “volumes explaining exactly how a dish is

made”, which in his opinion generates a certain rigidity he refers to as an “authority from the past”. On the other hand, countries such as Italy and France, according to Sørvig, tend to consider tradition almost as a set of binding rules rather than as a starting point. Norway, by contrast, has a tradition rooted in a context of subsistence shaped by fishing, agriculture and harsh climatic conditions, where food was primarily a means of sustenance rather than an occasion for conviviality. This has historically granted a greater degree of creative freedom over tradition.

However, Sørvig clarifies two aspects. First, greater freedom from tradition does not automatically generate excellence, which instead depends on structure and work organization. Second, he agrees that every chef, regardless of their cultural background, carries his or her own “bag of thoughts, traditions and heritage”, both as a way of representing the country and as an element of personal and professional identity and pride.

3.2.3 Innovation under constraints

A further theme emerging from the interviews concerns the role of **constraints** and pressures within the Bocuse d’Or. As discussed in the second chapter, the literature identifies three clusters of constraints (input, process, and output) and shows how these, rather than limiting creativity, can instead stimulate it by pushing participants toward solutions that would not emerge in their absence. The interviews confirm this theoretical view while also providing an experiential perspective of how such constraints are perceived and managed in practice.

Concerning **input constraints**, time is unanimously identified as the most critical factor. C2 defines it as “the greatest enemy of the Bocuse d’Or”, being the only variable that can neither be controlled nor stopped. Its management requires rigorous planning, not only during the 5 hours and 35 minutes of the competition itself, but also beforehand, considering intermediate deadlines such as recipe submissions, dish photographs, and the finalization of the creative phase, leading teams to structure the entire preparation process into sequential stages. Yet C2 himself acknowledges that time can also represent an advantage, as the pressure it creates pushes creative choices to be finalized. “Being chefs, you could sometimes be in creation until the last day”, he says, but time constraints can prevent continuous adjustments that would reduce stability and increase errors. This confirms the theoretical view of constraints as opportunities rather than merely obstacles.

Another input constraint mentioned by C1 concerns what can be defined as an “information constraint”. Since the mandatory ingredients are communicated only a few months before the competition, teams are required to develop a flexible creative structure capable of adapting to delayed information. As a result, the ideation phase must begin before the ingredients are officially announced, otherwise there would not be enough time to train adequately. This is further complicated by the possibility of last-minute regulatory changes, which transform innovation from a purely planned process into a more reactive one, requiring high levels of adaptability. Such reactivity, however, should not be interpreted as improvisation. As Sørvig states, “there is no room for instability (...) even if there is room for uncertainty” emphasizing that, despite the presence of unpredictable variables, nothing can be left to chance. Innovation therefore relies on a structured and almost scientific approach in which adaptability and control coexist.

C4 instead introduces a **process constraint** regarding a new rule requiring ingredients to be weighed directly on the day of the competition, with meat and fish also needing to be selected, weighed, and cleaned on site. This shifts an activity that previously took place outside the competition into the competition itself, increasing stress level and draining mental energy from both the chef and the commis even before the official start.

The interviews also reveal some reflections concerning **output constraints**. C2 highlights how the real challenge lies not in producing a single excellent dish, but in replicating 14 identical portions with absolute precision within strict time limits. This therefore requires balancing innovation and replicability, often leading chefs to scale back overly ambitious creative choices. Similarly, C4 provides an emblematic example regarding sauce preparation. Having to complete a reduction sauce in under three hours, a process that normally takes days, pushes chefs toward accelerated technical experimentation, overcoming the so-called “path of least resistance”. On the one hand, the time constraint prevents the use of conventional techniques such as prolonged boiling. On the other hand, the output constraint does not allow compromises in quality, since the final dish must still achieve excellence. This tension between temporal and qualitative constraints becomes the driving force behind innovation and, as C4 states, the greatest challenge is “minimizing time while pursuing excellence”.

C3 stands out as the only chef to describe constraints in predominantly negative terms, despite acknowledging that they “still allow you to work harder and go much further”.

While his view sits closer to the **rule-based design model**, the prevailing approach among the chefs interviewed is more consistent with the **innovative design model**, treating constraints as generative rather than limiting.

Overall, the analysis highlights how constraints within the Bocuse d'Or should not be understood merely as operational limitations, but as structuring elements of the creative process itself. Innovation does not occur despite constraints, but through them, transforming creativity into a process of continuous adaptation. How constraints are interpreted, whether as limiting barriers or as generative opportunities, is therefore essential.

3.2.4 Innovation diffusion: gastronomic “fashion week” vs “innovation lab”

Another relevant macro theme emerging from the interviews concerns the ways in which innovation generated by the Bocuse d'Or spreads beyond the boundaries of the competition itself. The four chefs and Dr. Sørvig describe the competition not as an isolated event, but as a space where ideas can circulate, diffuse and progressively shape the broader gastronomic sector.

However, a significant difference in perspective emerges between the chefs and Dr. Sørvig. On the one hand, the chefs tend to describe the competition as a **“fashion week”** of haute cuisine, a showcase and a trendsetter capable of anticipating aesthetic trends within the industry. Sørvig, on the other hand, considers this interpretation as being reductive. For Stiftelsen Norsk Gastronomi, he states, “Bocuse d'Or is not the goal (...) Bocuse d'Or is like an engine that ignites the system”. In his view, the competition should instead be understood as a driver that triggers a broader system, generating secondary effects such as media visibility, greater public interest in what chefs and gastronomy can offer and a greater willingness among consumers to recognize and reward culinary excellence. The expert also describes the competition as a **laboratory of innovation**, a starting point from which something broader can develop.

This macro-theme concerning the diffusion of innovation can be further broken down into two sub-themes. The first relates to the phenomenon of imitation, while the second concerns the role of post-competition events.

3.2.4.1 Innovation diffusion: imitation

Imitation represents a first and significant channel through which the innovation generated at the Bocuse d'Or spreads beyond the competition. Although imitation is often perceived as a threat to competitive advantage, the theory discussed in the first chapter highlights that imitation and innovation are not necessarily in contradiction. While creativity is what generates innovation, imitation represents one of the mechanisms through which it circulates and spreads throughout the system. The interviews confirm this view, showing how chefs perceive imitation not as a risk, but as a signal of value and, in some cases, even as a starting point for strategic collaborations with industry partners.

C1 provides an emblematic example regarding the molds used by the different teams at the Bocuse d'Or, which are often replicated and commercialized by some Chinese e-commerce platforms immediately after the competition. As noted in the theoretical section, this phenomenon illustrates the **absence or weakness of intellectual property rights** within this field. Nevertheless, the chef interprets this viral circulation positively, highlighting how it gave rise to sponsorships and collaborations with companies specializing in the production of molds and technical equipment.

C4 draws a relevant distinction between post-competition imitation and imitation occurring during the competition itself. The former, often interpreted as a form of inspiration, is welcomed with a sense of pride, as it signals that an innovation has achieved the legitimacy needed to become a sort of reference standard. Conversely, copying or imitating other contestants across different stages or editions is considered counterproductive. In an environment that is so strongly oriented toward innovation, presenting "something already seen" inevitably penalizes the participant, even if a certain degree of inspiration remains legitimate. This perspective echoes the norm-based IP system addressed in the first chapter where some informal rules among chefs serve to discourage pure imitation within the community.

Similarly, C2 addresses the spread of molds and *tuiles* and, much like C1, describes the Bocuse d'Or as a gastronomic "**fashion week**". In other words, a space where new forms, aesthetic details, and presentation styles emerge and gradually trickle down into restaurants and the wider sector over time. The chef cites, for example, the evolution of *tuiles*, which have become increasingly thin, precise and technically sophisticated thanks to advancements in 3D printing and silicone technologies. This mechanism aligns with the

trickle-down effect discussed in the first chapter, whereby innovation originating at the highest levels of a system gradually spreads and adapts throughout the sector.

It is worth noting that chefs consistently refer to imitation primarily in relation to the aesthetic dimension of dishes, the most visible and immediate aspect, which explains the recurring "fashion week" metaphor. Sørvig, however, does not fully share this interpretation, considering it as being partial and reductive. In his view, aesthetics matter, but do not constitute an autonomous dimension. Performance matters more, being "more material than aesthetics". In general, design, technique, taste, organization and execution must work together within a coherent system. That said, Sørvig agrees on the importance of diffusing the competition's innovations into the broader industry, while cautioning that this should not be a mere copy-paste of competition dishes, which are too specific and intense for direct replication. Rather, it is a process of translation in which tastes, textures, techniques and approaches are absorbed, reinterpreted and adapted to the market. It is precisely in this translation process that industrial sponsors find value, recognizing the competition as a space capable of generating transferable innovation.

Overall, a significant difference in perspective emerges. While the Italian chefs tend to conceive the Bocuse d'Or primarily as an aesthetic showcase and trendsetter of haute cuisine, Sørvig interprets it as an innovation laboratory capable of triggering deeper and systemic changes within the gastronomic field. The "fashion week" and the "innovation lab" are therefore not opposing readings. While the former captures what is most visible, the latter offers a deeper explanation of what drives the process. Diffusion is ultimately carried out by the chef's role and media visibility, but it is the competition itself that acts as the engine triggering the entire process.

3.2.4.2 Innovation diffusion: post-competition events

Beyond imitation, the diffusion of innovation generated by the Bocuse d'Or is also driven by post-competition events. As discussed in the second chapter, the literature on **Field-Configuring Events** (FCE) emphasizes how certain events, such as workshops, conferences, and competitions, act as spaces for the circulation of knowledge, setting new standards able to shape entire sectors. The Bocuse d'Or perfectly embodies the characteristics of an FCE by concentrating processes of evaluation, networking, and legitimation within a limited space-time framework, bringing together key actors of the gastronomic field, such as chefs, sponsors, companies, designers, academies and media.

However, the event acquires a fully “field-configuring” nature only when the produced innovation transcends the competitive arena. Consequently, while the competition acts as a core FCE, post-competition activities (events, demonstrations, workshops, training sessions) operate as the essential diffusion mechanisms needed to extend this impact across the broader gastronomic sector.

The interviews reveal that such diffusion occurs primarily through workshops, pop-ups, training events and international collaborations, although the Italian landscape still appears fragmented not realizing its full potential of innovation diffusion. C1 notes that most of his post-competition dissemination activity, through pop-ups and workshops, took place almost exclusively abroad across Spain, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Norway. This reflects the still-limited visibility of the Bocuse d’Or in Italy compared to other international contexts. This perception is shared by C2, who stresses the need to create a genuine and more coordinated movement involving top chefs, institutions, tourism bodies, and hospitality schools, turning the competition into a driver of collective growth. Despite these challenges, interest in the educational and communicative dimensions of the competition is growing. C4 highlights an increasing demand from Italian hospitality schools interested not only in learning the techniques developed during the competition, but also in hearing about his experience as a source of motivation and inspiration for students.

In this regard, the diffusion of innovation extends beyond techniques and recipes to encompass values, approaches to work and professional culture, recalling the distinction between **technological and soft innovation** discussed in the first chapter. Post-competition events therefore become spaces for sharing not only aesthetic or technical results (technological innovation) but also values, experiences and tacit knowledge transferable beyond the competitive context (soft innovation).

These activities also foster **open innovation** processes, as discussed in the second chapter. Here, ideas and knowledge circulate through international networks, workshops, and collaborations (such as the Franco-Italian menu mentioned by C4), fueling gastronomic contamination and cross-national knowledge exchange. Interestingly, both C2 and C4 voice a profound “sense of duty” toward knowledge transmission, almost a moral obligation to give back to the sector what the competition has provided them. This suggests that, at least in the Italian context, innovation diffusion is neither automatic nor

institutionalized, but depends both on the individual motivation of participants and on the sector's capacity to welcome and give value to their contributions.

A different perspective emerges from Sørvig's contribution. Rather than organizing physical events and workshops, the Norwegian system leverages digital tools as accelerators of knowledge and innovation diffusion. While in Italy post-competition diffusion appears to depend on the physical mobility of the chefs (travel, pop-ups and in-person workshops), Norway has institutionalized what Sørvig calls a "**continuous workshop**". Operating without unlimited financial resources, the Norwegian system shifted its focus from physical workshops to mass digital diffusion. Through the strategic management of social media and its own website, the Academy extracts and democratizes the intellectual capital of its talents, transforming small-scale events into an educational platform for thousands of professionals and enthusiasts. Furthermore, Sørvig highlights the importance of live streaming of the competition as a tool for immediate and widespread dissemination. By hosting a national live stream with technical commentary during the competition, Norway transforms the event into a collective learning experience broadcasted "into every kitchen in Norway", fostering horizontal discussions among teams and significantly amplifying the competition's impact.

In conclusion, the comparison between the Italian interviewees and Sørvig's perspective reveals how each country represents a distinct ecosystem. In Italy, despite the presence of an academy, innovation diffusion remains fragmented and largely dependent on the talent and passion of individual participants. In Norway, by contrast, it constitutes a primary and institutionalized function of the Academy, acting as a centralized engine. The effectiveness of the competition as a driver of innovation therefore depends not only on the ideas born during the competition but also on the national system's ability to capture and disseminate them.

3.2.5 The importance of teamwork

A cross-cutting theme strongly emerging from the interviews is the importance of the team, whose value can be broken down into three dimensions: its creative and preparatory contribution before the competition, its operational role on competition day, and its function as a long-term accumulator of knowledge.

Starting with the first dimension about the **importance of the team during the creative process**, the interviews make clear that developing the dishes to be presented at the competition is a highly complex process that is rarely carried out by the chef individually, but rather relies on collective work. This directly reflects the gastronomic trend of the **professionalization of creativity** discussed in the first chapter. Creativity is no longer understood exclusively as the result of a single chef's spontaneous intuition or individual genius, but increasingly as a structured and organized process embedded within professional routines and collaborative practices. As also highlighted by the interviews, the creative process becomes an activity distributed across specialized roles, such as mentors, brigades, and support structures that collectively contribute to the development, refinement, and execution of innovative ideas. All four chefs described the preparatory process for the competition as being structured into different phases: an initial creative phase dedicated to the development of the platter and the plate, a phase of technical refinement, and, finally an intensive training phase in which preparations are repeated countless times in order to perfect every single gesture.

However, an interesting difference emerges regarding the approach to these phases. While C1 describes the initial ideation phase as a more individual process, with the team playing mainly an operational role during training, C2 and C4 describe a system in which the team is involved from the earliest creative stages. C2 refers to a “niche” of around ten chefs participating from the very beginning, where “everyone brings their grain of sand”. C4 reinforces this view by describing teamwork as an “harmony” in which each member assumes the role most suited to their skills and inclinations, whether in mold design or flavor balancing. He then emphasizes that it is not the candidate chef who directs the process, but the entire team moving toward a shared direction. In this regard, it is worth noting that the chefs do not approach creativity randomly but follow specific steps that echo Leone's theoretical framework on creativity discussed in the first chapter.

While the professionalization of creativity helps explain the team's value in the pre-competition creative phase, its **role during the competition** itself calls for a different lens. This second dimension can be better explained through another gastronomic trend discussed in the first chapter: the **standardization of the exceptional**. Under conditions of extreme pressure, the team's primary function is to minimize operational variance, transforming an extraordinary idea (the exceptional) into a highly repeatable and

consistent execution (the standard). As C2 highlights, the final objective of preparing fourteen identical, flawless portions can only be achieved through meticulous coordination. Although on competition day only the chef and the commis are actively working in the box, under the verbal guidance of the coach, the broader team's upstream contribution remains crucial. It is the collective work carried out beforehand that guarantees the effectiveness of processes and the perfect execution of the dishes. During the competition, coordination between chef and commis is fundamental, and every movement is practiced repeatedly to the point that C4 describes himself as a “dancer” inside the box, knowing every gesture by heart.

Finally, the third dimension concerns the **value of the team as a cumulative process** of knowledge building over the long term. C2 highlights the competitive advantage of Nordic countries, whose candidates are often former commis with six to eight years of experience within the Bocuse ecosystem. This starkly contrasts with the Italian framework, where candidates are typically selected directly from independent restaurants without having accumulated that experiential background. It is precisely to address this gap that the Bocuse d’Or Italy Academy was established, modeled after the Stiftelsen Norsk Gastronomi, with the aim of cultivating a stable ecosystem of talents, sponsors, and knowledge.

Sørvig confirms this information about the pathway of Norwegian candidates and describes the Norwegian system as a flat and efficient organization where “becoming a Bocuse candidate is a long-term process disguised as a competition” and where “being a commis is the most efficient education you can have”, since through that experience “you learn that good enough is not enough”. In Norway, the team functions as a quality infrastructure, enabling the chef to assume full responsibility for the final result without losing the collective contribution of the group. Winning innovation is the one that has been tested, trained, and made replicable to reproduce fourteen identical portions. Sørvig captures this with a formula that serves as a key interpretative lens for the entire theme: “individual brilliance does not win the Bocuse d’Or, organized excellence does”.

3.2.6 The “nature” of innovation at the Bocuse d’Or

Each of the themes analyzed in the previous sections has approached innovation within the Bocuse d’Or from a different angle: its relationship with tradition, its capacity to emerge despite the constraints imposed by the competition, the mechanisms through

which it spreads and the role of the team in structuring and making it replicable. None of these sections, however, explicitly addressed a fundamental question: what type of innovation is the Bocuse d'Or capable of generating? Yet the answer that emerges from the interviews is consistent: the innovation produced by the competition is **incremental**. What is particularly interesting to note is how each theme discussed does not stand alone, but rather contributes to explaining this specific form of innovation.

Tradition, first of all, represents a necessary starting point, as innovation builds on a consolidated foundation by reinterpreting the familiar rather than inventing something from scratch. Innovation at the Bocuse d'Or is not about reinventing cuisine, which would constitute radical innovation, and such cases are extremely rare. Both C2 and Sørvig cite Ferran Adrià as an example, pointing to his disruptive contribution through the introduction of molecular gastronomy. C1 expresses this concept in his own way, explaining that the Bocuse d'Or is not the right place for creative risks, such as a provocative "white chocolate parmigiana", because the final output must remain intelligible. Judges, as elite professionals, must be able to recognize what is on the plate (tradition), while being surprised by how it was achieved (innovation).

Constraints operate then in this same direction, by preventing improvisation and unrestrained experimentation, and forcing teams to refine existing solutions rather than introducing radical disruptions. Sørvig describes the competition as a scientific laboratory with hundreds of variables, where every modification is rigorously tested and controlled. Indeed, according to him, "there's no room for experimentation without control". In this sense, the rigidity of the constraints governing the competition acts as a filter that, from a multitude of original ideas, selects those that are the most controllable, replicable, and executable.

Post-competition diffusion through imitation and events goes further, allowing these incremental improvements to spread across the broader gastronomic sector as new standards that progressively redefine what is considered possible. C2 captures precisely this logic through the smartphone analogy: a new model is released every year, improved in its details but never truly revolutionary in its substance. This image accurately describes the cumulative and progressive nature of innovation at the Bocuse d'Or.

The team represents, finally, the mechanism through which this process of refinement consolidates and becomes cumulative over time. Each edition builds upon the previous ones, every candidate learns from those who competed before, and each improvement is the product of months of collective work. This awareness is partly what led Italy to establish its own academy, acknowledging that excellence in competition cannot be built individually or within a single edition, but requires a long-term investment in people, skills and shared experience.

Furthermore, considering the OECD taxonomy introduced in the first chapter, the innovation generated at the Bocuse d'Or is not strictly limited to **product innovation** (ingredients, dishes and aesthetic techniques themselves). It also encompasses **process innovation**, in the way teams structure preparation and manage constraints, and **organizational innovation**, in the way academies, training systems and national ecosystems are built around the competition.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that incremental innovation should not be considered as weak or less significant than radical innovation. On the contrary, it can be considered as being more complex to develop, as it requires a deep understanding of the boundaries of what already exists in order to push them further. Sørvig, in fact, describes innovation at the Bocuse d'Or as something where “you push the limits of what already existed”. According to him, two elements are required: the maturity to know where those limits lie and the courage to go beyond them. As he puts it, “you cannot push boundaries if you don't understand them or if you are afraid of negative reactions”. He further summarizes by saying that innovation “doesn't come from something that is completely new but from something that is unexpectedly better”. This is precisely the reaction that the finest dishes at the Bocuse d'Or evoke in the jury: not the astonishment of the unknown, but the admiring recognition of something familiar pushed beyond its own limits.

3.2.7 Summary of the thematic analysis

Before presenting the conclusions of this thesis, a summary of the thematic analysis is provided below in order to clarify the insights that emerged from the elaboration of each theme. Finally, Table 8 will schematically present all the themes that emerged, indicating the underlying theory, the contribution of Italian chefs who participated at the Bocuse d'Or (BdO), and the external perspective of the international expert Arne Sørvig.

The **first theme** that emerged from the analysis concerns the relationship between **tradition** and innovation. Overall, the interviews revealed a shared view of tradition not as a rupture between past and future, but as a knowledge base, values, and cultural identity from which innovative ideas can unfold, showing that tradition and innovation are not opposing forces but rather deeply intertwined. Among the chefs interviewed, one expressed an apparently different view from the others, describing tradition and innovation as virtually irreconcilable. However, a closer analysis of his words showed that, in reality, the difference in perspective lies mainly in his different perception of tradition, seen as something "sacred" and unchangeable. This image closely resembles what the expert defines as an "authority from the past": a view that differs ontologically from that of the other chefs, but which in substance equally consists of a reinterpretation of tradition, confirming the others' opinion and what was already presented in the theoretical section.

The contribution of the international expert Arne Sørvig also highlighted how the relationship between the two dimensions considered is not universal, but is deeply influenced by the cultural and historical context of each country. In Italy, for example, tradition is strongly codified and tied to the country's cultural identity, making the balance between preservation and innovation more delicate. In Norway, by contrast, tradition appears less constraining and rooted in a context of subsistence that has historically favored greater creative freedom. Nonetheless, what all interviewees have in common is the awareness that each chef's cultural background represents a source of identity and competitive strength, proving the central role of tradition in the context of the competition.

The **second theme** that emerged from the interviews concerns the role of **constraints** and pressure within the Bocuse d'Or. As discussed in the second chapter, the literature identifies three clusters of constraints (input, process, and output) and shows how these are not perceived solely as limitations, but also as factors capable of stimulating creativity and guiding the innovation process, pushing participants towards solutions that would not emerge in their absence.

Among the input constraints identified by the chefs, time is unanimously recognized as the most critical factor. On the one hand, it is described as "the worst enemy of the Bocuse d'Or" (C2), while on the other, it proves to be an unexpected ally. Beyond time constraints

during the competition, the limited time available in the pre-competition creative phase forces the chefs to finalize their creative choices, avoiding constant adjustments that would be counterproductive in the run-up to the competition. An additional input constraint concerns the late communication of mandatory ingredients, which forces teams to develop a flexible creative structure capable of adapting to incomplete information and unforeseen situations. As Sørvig emphasized, however, this reactivity should not be confused with improvisation. On the contrary, adaptability and control must coexist.

Among the process constraints lies the new rule requiring ingredients to be weighed directly on the day of the competition, adding an additional layer of pressure to an already extremely demanding context.

Finally, output constraints prove equally significant. The need to replicate fourteen identical portions with absolute precision imposes a constant balance between creative ambition and replicability, often leading teams to scale back overly audacious choices. The tension between time constraints and quality constraints thus becomes a key factor for innovation in this context, where the challenge lies in "minimizing time while pursuing excellence" (C4). Considering the interviewees' approach to constraints in general, it is also possible to observe consistency with the innovative design model presented in the previous chapter, which treats constraints as generative rather than limiting elements. Innovation at the Bocuse d'Or, therefore, does not occur despite constraints, but through them, transforming creativity into a process of continuous adaptation and refinement.

A **third theme** that emerged from the interviews concerns **imitation** as a first mechanism for the diffusion of innovation. The interviews confirm the theoretical perspective discussed in the first chapter, according to which the structural characteristics of gastronomy result in this phenomenon being viewed not negatively, but rather as one of the main channels through which innovation can circulate and spread across the industry.

The chefs interviewed do not perceive it as a risk, but rather as a signal of value and, at the same time, a form of recognition that gives visibility to the event, representing a potential starting point for collaborations and sponsorships with specialized companies. An emblematic example concerns the spread of the molds used by competing teams, which are rapidly replicated and commercialized by e-commerce platforms, illustrating the

weakness of intellectual property protection in the gastronomic sector. At the same time, however, it allows ideas born from the competition to spread towards mass production, favoring the trickle-down effect analyzed in the gastronomic trend concerning the standardization of the exceptional.

The chefs interviewed describe the Bocuse d'Or as a "fashion week" of gastronomy, a space where new shapes, combinations, and aesthetic details emerge and gradually spread to the rest of the industry. Sørvig, however, partially disagrees with this interpretation, considering it partial and reductive. In his opinion, the Bocuse d'Or goes far beyond mere aesthetics, being also highly tangible and "material". He sees the competition as more of an "innovation laboratory", an engine capable of diffusing emerging innovation, where the role of the Academy is to help disseminate it throughout the industry, acting as the fuel that triggers it. These two visions should not be considered contradictory: the former captures what is more visible, while the latter offers a deeper explanation of the underlying process.

A **fourth theme** focuses on the role of **post-competition events** as another mechanism for diffusing innovation, beyond imitation. The theoretical section analyzing the role of events for a sector emphasizes how some of them, including competitions, can serve as spaces for knowledge circulation, capable of defining new standards for the entire industry, considered as field-configuring events (FCE). The Bocuse d'Or perfectly embodies these characteristics, concentrating evaluation, networking, and legitimization processes within a limited space and timeframe. However, its fully "field-configuring" nature is only realized when the innovation produced is disseminated beyond the boundaries of the competition itself. The interviews reveal that this diffusion occurs primarily through workshops, pop-ups, training events, and international collaborations.

Yet a significant difference emerges between the Italian and Norwegian contexts. In Italy, diffusion still appears fragmented and dependent on the individual motivation of participants, with activities often conducted abroad rather than within the country itself. Nonetheless, growing interest is emerging among Italian hospitality schools, not only in the ideas and techniques developed during the competition but also in the experience and values it conveys, emphasizing the importance of soft innovation alongside technological innovation. In this sense, two chefs expressed a profound "sense of duty" toward the transmission of knowledge, almost a moral obligation to give back to the industry what

the competition has offered them. The Norwegian system, on the other hand, offers a more institutionalized model, described by Sørvig as a "continuous workshop", built on the Academy's strategic management of social media to achieve mass digital diffusion. Live streaming of the competition is also significant in the country, particularly in the kitchens of Norwegian restaurants, transforming each edition into a collective learning experience. The comparison between the two systems reveals how the competition's effectiveness as a driver of innovation depends not only on the ideas generated there, but also on the academies' ability to spread innovation beyond the event itself and on the industry's ability to embrace the value created and disseminated.

The **fifth theme** concerns the **importance of the team**. Its value can be articulated across three different dimensions: the creative and supportive contribution during the preparation phase, the operational role of the day of the competition, and the function of accumulating knowledge over the long term.

The first dimension shows how the creative process of the dishes to be presented at the competition is a highly complex process, rarely carried out individually by the competing chef, but rather based on collective effort. This directly reflects the trend of the professionalization of creativity discussed in the first chapter, where creativity should not be considered exclusively as the product of individual intuition, but as a structured process made of phases, routines and trials. However, an interesting difference emerges among the interviewees. While one chef describes the ideation phase as a more individual process, emphasizing the importance of the team, emphasizing the team's role primarily in training and execution, two others describe a system in which the team is involved from the earliest creative stages, where "everyone brings their own grain of sand" to the final product.

The second dimension recalls the trend about the standardization of the exceptional. In a context of extreme pressure, the team's primary function is to minimize operational variance, transforming an extraordinary idea into a highly replicable and consistent execution. Coordination between the chef and the commis on the day of the competition thus becomes essential, as every movement is studied and repeated until it becomes automatic. The competing team must also remain in harmony with the coach who, even if only verbally, provides essential guidance for the competition's success.

Finally, the third dimension concerns the team as a cumulative process of building knowledge over the long term. Norway, in this regard, enjoys a significant competitive advantage, as its candidates often have years of experience within the Bocuse ecosystem behind them, whereas in Italy candidates are typically selected directly from restaurants without that experiential background. It is precisely to bridge this gap that the Bocuse d'Or Italy Academy was established. Sørvig summarizes the entire theme with a formula that represents the key interpretative lens: "individual brilliance does not win the Bocuse d'Or, organized excellence does".

The **sixth theme** addresses a fundamental question that does not emerge explicitly from the previous themes, but which becomes clear through their careful analysis: the kind of innovation that the Bocuse d'Or is able to generate. What emerges from these themes is that the innovation produced by the competition is **incremental**. What emerges is how each of the themes analyzed does not constitute an isolated topic, but rather contributes to explaining this specific form of innovation.

Tradition, first of all, represents the necessary starting point and a consolidated foundation on which to build innovation by reinterpreting the familiar rather than inventing something from scratch. As one chef pointed out, the Bocuse d'Or is not the right place for radical creative risks, since the final result must remain "recognizable" to the judges, while still surprising them in terms of execution.

Constraints operate in the same direction, preventing improvisation and forcing teams to refine existing solutions rather than introduce radical discontinuities.

Post-competition diffusion then allows these incremental improvements to spread throughout the industry as new standards, in a cumulative and progressive process that is refined in its details but never revolutionary in substance. It is also worth noting that innovation at the Bocuse d'Or is not limited to **product innovation** alone. It also encompasses **process innovation**, in the way teams structure their preparation and manage constraints, and **organizational innovation**, in the way academies, training systems, and national ecosystems are built around the competition.

Finally, it is worth remembering that incremental innovation should not be regarded as less significant than radical innovation. On the contrary, it requires a deep understanding of the boundaries of what already exists in order to push them further. As Sørvig puts it,

innovation “doesn't come from something completely new, but from something unexpectedly better”. It is the admiring recognition of something familiar pushed beyond its own limits.

Having briefly summarized the main themes that emerged from the analysis of the five semi-structured interviews, the following section will present the conclusions of the thesis, outlining the main findings, providing some practical suggestions structured around three stakeholder groups, and identifying possible directions for future research based on the methodological limitations identified at the beginning of this chapter.

Table 8: Summary about the thematic analysis

Theme	Theoretical match	Chefs' perspective	The expert perspective
Relationship between tradition and innovation	Tradition as: - knowledge base - legitimacy when introducing innovation - protection of cultural identity	Tradition as knowledge base, cultural identity and symbolic repertoire where recognizability is key [C1, C2, C4] vs Tradition and innovation as separate dimensions [C3] → Conceptual more than operational difference: C3 reinterprets traditional dishes as other chefs do	Italy and France → rigid tradition as an " authority from the past " Norway → freer tradition for historical reasons Nevertheless, it is not "freedom from tradition" that creates excellence, but rather the structure of the work
Innovation under constraints	- Input, Process, Output constraints - Rule-based design model vs innovative design model	<u>Input constraints</u> → Time (mentioned by all chefs) Worst enemy but also an advantage forcing decisions to be finalized (positive view) [C2] → Information constraints about ingredients Flexible creative structure required [C1] <u>Process constraints</u> → Weighing ingredients on site [C4] → Meat and fish to be selected, weighed and cleaned on site [C4] <u>Output constraints</u> → Preparation of 14 portions with absolute precision within strict time limits [C2] → Innovative and replicable results [C2] C1, C2, C4 → positive view of constraints (closer to the <u>innovative design model</u>) C3 → constraints seen mostly negatively (closer to the <u>rule-based design model</u>)	Despite information constraints about ingredients and unpredictable variables, nothing can be left to improvisation → "there is no room for instability even if there is room for uncertainty " Innovation requires a structured and scientific approach in which adaptation and control coexist

Source: own elaboration

Table 8 (continued)

Theme	Theoretical match	Chefs' perspective	The expert perspective
Innovation diffusion: imitation	- Absence/weakness of IP rights within the gastronomic sector - Trickle-down effect as mechanism of innovation diffusion	Not a threat but a signal of value → example of Chinese platforms replicating competition molds [C1] → rise of sponsorships and collaborations with specialized companies [C1] Post-competition imitation (indicator of legitimacy) VS in-competition imitation (counterproductive) [C4] BdO as a “fashion week”: gradual trickle-down effect across the sector [C1, C2]	Not fully aligned with the “fashion week” vision → performance is more important than aesthetics → diffusion is not a copy-paste but a translation of what you are doing Italian chefs → BdO as a “fashion week” Sørvig → BdO as an “innovation lab”
Innovation diffusion : post-competition events	- Field-Configuring Events (FCE) - Open innovation - Soft beyond technological innovation	In Italy BdO still has limited visibility → Post-competition events carried out almost exclusively abroad [C1] → Willingness to create a “movement” to transform BdO into a driver of collective growth [C2] Open innovation with soft and technological innovation being diffused: → “sense of duty” to transmit knowledge [C2, C4] → Invitation by some Italian hospitality schools to transmit knowledge and motivate students [C4] → Created of Franco-Italian menu, fostering cross-contamination [C4]	The Norwegian system focuses more on a digital “continuous workshop” → Social media and the Academy’s website act as platforms to democratize the intellectual capital of talents → National streaming of the competition to multiply the impact of the event Norway: more systemic diffusion Italy: more fragmented diffusion

Source: own elaboration

Table 8 (continued)

Theme	Theoretical match	Chefs' perspective	The expert perspective
The importance of teamwork	- Professionalization of creativity: importance of the team during the creative process - Standardization of the exceptional: importance of the team during the competition (+ cumulative process of knowledge building over the long term)	Before the competition (creative process): C1 → ideation phase as a more solitary moment, team as the operational backbone during training C2, C4 → the team is involved from the very first creative sessions During the competition: → Importance of communication among chef, commis and coach [C2, C4] Value of the team as knowledge cumulation → Bocuse d'Or Italy Academy to address the Italian gap [C2]	The Norwegian system is a flat and efficient organization in which the team functions as a quality infrastructure → gap between the Norwegian model (candidates are ex-commis with years of experience within the BdO) and the Italian one (candidates selected from restaurants) → “individual brilliance does not win BdO, organized excellence does”
The “nature” of innovation at the Bocuse d’Or	- Incremental innovation (degree) - Not only product, but also process and organizational innovation	Incremental innovation → BdO is not the place for creative risks [C1] Judges must recognize the dish yet remain surprised by how it was achieved Smartphone analogy: a new model is released every year, refined in its details but never truly revolutionary in substance [C2] Ferran Adrià as an extremely rare case of radical innovation, contrasted with the BdO norm	Sørvig also cites Ferran Adrià as a rare radical exception, confirming the incremental innovation of the BdO → Innovation “doesn’t come from something that is completely new, but from something that is unexpectedly better” → Two elements needed to push the boundaries of what already exists: maturity (knowing where the limits lie) and courage (going beyond them)

Source: own elaboration

Conclusions

Main findings

This thesis aims to explore the role of culinary competitions as potential drivers of innovation in gastronomy. Specifically, the research was guided by two main research questions: Can culinary competitions act as a driver of innovation within gastronomy? What role does the chef assume in the innovation process?

In order to address these two research questions, the first two chapters provided the theoretical foundations necessary to understand and develop the empirical analysis.

The **first chapter** examined the concept of innovation in the broad food sector, progressively narrowing the focus to gastronomy and, more specifically, to haute cuisine, considered as a niche and innovative laboratory within the domain. In this context, three gastronomic trends were presented in order to understand the complexity of the sector, and to better grasp the environment in which culinary competitions take place. The trends explored were the professionalization of creativity, the standardization of the exceptional and, finally, the central role of the chef, the latter representing the end point of the conceptual funnel that began from the food sector.

The **second chapter** focused on the importance of events in a sector as arenas of innovation, focusing then on the specific role of competitions. Drawing on the academic literature, it was highlighted how competitions represent unique contexts of open innovation capable of diffusing learning and change. The chapter also introduced the main theoretical frameworks related to the role of constraints and pressure on competitions, distinguishing among input, process, and output constraints and between rule-based and innovative design models as different approaches to creativity. These frameworks, initially considered in general contexts, were then applied to the food domain and, in particular, to the Bocuse d'Or competition, which represents the main focus of the empirical analysis, and to *La Miglior Frittella del Carnevale di Venezia*.

The literature review, however, identified a significant **gap** in the study of culinary competitions. Although this type of event has been widely studied in several sectors as a mechanism capable of generating innovation and transformation, its role within gastronomy has so far received very little scholarly attention. For this reason, the Bocuse d'Or has been selected to carry out the empirical analysis with the final aim of

understanding whether and how a culinary competition can contribute to the generation and diffusion of innovation. This study therefore aims to contribute to filling this gap, offering an empirical perspective on culinary competitions as drivers of innovation and providing a foundation for future research in this underexplored area. The empirical analysis of this thesis was based on a qualitative approach, relying on semi-structured interviews with four Italian chefs who participated in the Bocuse d'Or, complemented by an interview with Dr. Arne Sørvig, whose perspective as an international expert provided a comparative point of view on the competition. The thematic analysis, conducted on the interviews and identifying six main themes, made it possible to draw conclusions that address the research questions and contribute to the understanding of culinary competitions as drivers of innovation. The main findings are presented below.

With regard to the **first research question**, the answer that emerges from the analysis is not dichotomous, but rather nuanced. The study showed that culinary competitions can indeed act as drivers of innovation, but this strongly depends on their structure and the mechanisms that characterize them. Not all competitions, therefore, are automatically capable of generating innovation. In particular, the case of the Bocuse d'Or highlights how a competition can become an arena of innovation when it is designed to stimulate experimentation through constraints, competitive pressure, and the continuous pursuit of excellence. In this context, constraints do not limit creativity but rather direct it toward new solutions, confirming a logic close to the innovative design model discussed in the second chapter. By contrast, other competitions are designed primarily to preserve traditional practices, techniques, and recipes, rather than to foster innovation. Events such as *La Miglior Frittella del Carnevale di Venezia* competition or the *Campionato Mondiale del Pesto al Mortaio* exemplify contexts in which innovation is structurally excluded from the evaluation criteria, and in which creativity is subordinated to adherence to predefined standards, reflecting a logic closer to the rule-based design model.

First, **context matters**. The difference between Italy and Norway, emerging from the thematic analysis, represents an emblematic example to better understand this concept. Compared to Italy, Norway approaches the Bocuse d'Or competition with a significantly more structured and professional mindset, with Stiftelsen Norsk Gastronomi playing a central role in supporting both the chef and the commis through dedicated training. At the same time, the country's relationship with tradition is considerably more flexible than

that of Italy, since the latter remains far more deeply rooted in its traditions. In this sense, context plays a pivotal role, and each country, with its own cultural background, should be considered as a separate unit of analysis, where innovation can emerge and circulate differently.

The second aspect concerns the true nature of a competition: not an isolated event, but rather an **engine for innovation**. The Bocuse d'Or should not be understood as isolated events where participants bring something new on the day of the competition and a winner is named. It should rather be considered as the starting point of an innovation process destined to continue beyond the competition itself. As a real engine, it therefore needs a trigger, represented by a system able to capture the innovation that emerges, diffusing it further. In the case of the Bocuse d'Or, for example, national academies play a pivotal role in supporting the chefs throughout their journey and leveraging the innovation generated. One of the reasons behind Norway's strength in this respect is precisely that the country has a particularly well-structured system behind it, one that also deploys social media and associated events to diffuse and amplify what emerges from the competitive arena.

The third aspect concerns the fact that the innovation emerging from the competition is **incremental**: nothing completely new, but "unexpectedly better". The importance of tradition in the culinary context, the presence of strict constraints and rules, and, more generally, the structure of the competition lead chefs to create extraordinary dishes that retain a certain degree of recognizability, while still pushing beyond the boundaries of what has already been done in the past.

With regard to the **second research question**, the chef can be said to play a pivotal role as a **key agent of innovation diffusion**. This position, however, deserves greater attention. In the literature review, the chef appeared to play a central role in gastronomy, being considered, among other roles, a gatekeeper, a change-maker, and a cultural intermediary. Yet the empirical analysis revealed that the chef's role is in fact far more complex, as it cannot be understood in isolation, but rather within a broader and articulated context.

On the one hand, in the competition setting, the chef is a mediator, continuously asked to balance opposing tensions, between tradition and innovation, or between extreme

creativity and competitive constraints. At the same time, however, the chef does not act as a solitary genius, but rather as a fundamental actor within a complex network in which the team, the academy, media, and institutions all interact. As Sørvig stated during his interview, "individual brilliance does not win the Bocuse d'Or, organized excellence does". Innovation, therefore, is not the product of individual talent alone, but the result of a collective and cumulative process in which the chef innovates by interacting with other actors, first and foremost the team and the surrounding academy. It is precisely this surrounding system that is responsible for valorizing and diffusing the contribution coming from the chef as an innovator. Considering the mediating role of the chef also addressed in the theoretical section, it is worth noting that the chef enjoys a degree of individual visibility and reputation, further enhanced by participation in the competition. Behind this, however, stands a team that supports and enables this capacity for action, but which often remains largely unseen. The chef is therefore a key agent of innovation whose role cannot be considered in isolation.

Suggestions and future research

Building on the findings presented above, it is also possible to draw some practical recommendations, structured around three main stakeholder groups: Bocuse d'Or academies, policymakers and companies.

A first recommendation is addressed to the **academies** that support competing teams at the Bocuse d'Or. One of the most significant takeaways of this research concerns the importance of building an organized ecosystem around the competing chef, one that invests in people, structures, and knowledge over the long term. As emerged from the analysis, competitive advantage is not built in a single edition, but through continuous and cumulative investment. Academies should therefore focus on long-term training, encourage knowledge transfer among candidates across different editions, and create opportunities for exchange between academies from different countries, fostering a form of cross-contamination among national systems. In parallel, academies should also invest in dedicated pathways for young chefs who aspire to compete in this type of competition. Taking Norway as an example, the practice of spending a significant period as a commis before becoming a competing chef allows candidates to accumulate valuable experience and deep knowledge of the competition's dynamics in order to perform at the highest level. Following Sørvig's suggestion, then, academies could also develop digital platforms

capable of transforming the knowledge accumulated by their chefs into a "continuous workshop", permanently accessible to the broader community.

A second recommendation is addressed to **policymakers and public institutions**. The analysis shows that the diffusion of innovation in Italy still appears fragmented compared to the Norwegian system. Competitions such as the Bocuse d'Or should therefore not be regarded by these bodies as mere promotional events, but rather as strategic tools for innovation, deserving structured support from government institutions and tourism boards. An emblematic example in this respect comes from Denmark, where the government included in its 2026 budget proposal a multi-year funding allocation for the Bocuse d'Or and the Danish Chefs' Team, amounting to 5.5 million DKK per year for the period 2026–2028, and 4 million DKK in 2029 (Horesta, 2025). This demonstrates how a country can formally recognize the strategic value of such a competition, treating it as a genuine driver of national innovation and gastronomic excellence. Particular attention should also be given to hospitality schools, which fall under the remit of the Ministry of Education. The interviews reveal that culinary competitions such as the Bocuse d'Or remain relatively unknown in these environments. Greater visibility and awareness of such competitions could therefore attract more young chefs to this professional path. Investing in this context is particularly relevant since it is here, alongside individual restaurants, that future chefs are trained, making it a key entry point for future competing chefs.

A third recommendation concerns **sponsors and companies** operating in the food sector. The findings of this research show how the imitation of ideas developed at the Bocuse d'Or, in particular molds, techniques, and aesthetic details, is often intercepted by external actors, such as international e-commerce platforms, before companies can establish their own collaborations with the candidates. A more proactive approach, involving collaborations initiated during the preparation phase of the competition, would allow sponsors and companies to become active participants in the innovation process, thereby benefiting early from techniques and solutions that will only later be disseminated and imitated throughout the rest of the industry.

After presenting the main findings together with some practical suggestions, it is possible to outline some **directions for future research**. The methodological limitations discussed in the previous section not only define the scope of the present study, but also

point to potential avenues for further investigation. These include the limited sample size, the focus on a single competition, the limited comparative scope, and the inherently subjective nature of the collected responses. Building on these limitations, and on the results of the empirical analysis, four main research directions can be proposed.

A first direction concerns a **comparative analysis across different culinary competitions**, beyond the Bocuse d'Or. Having analyzed only a single case, the study is not representative of international competitions, or of the culinary competition landscape more generally. Considering a wider sample would make it possible to better understand the different ecosystems surrounding them, and how their structure and constraints influence the way innovation spreads to the broader gastronomic sector.

A second direction involves a **cross-national analysis** of the competition. The current study showed that each country represents a distinct system, shaped by its own cultural background and institutional structures, making a comparison across different national contexts particularly relevant. While this thesis included the perspective of Dr. Arne Sørvig to provide an external, comparative viewpoint, future research could extend this comparison to a larger number of countries, involving chefs and experts from different national systems. Such an approach would allow for a more systematic understanding of how cultural, institutional, and also economic factors shape the way innovation is generated and diffused within culinary competitions. Since the results of this research suggest that innovation within the Bocuse d'Or depends on a complex system, future research could adopt this perspective to analyze the composition of different "national gastronomic ecosystems", investigating the role of academies, educational institutions, sponsors, professional networks, and public actors in supporting knowledge transfer, talent development, and the diffusion of innovation.

A third direction concerns a study on **the role of digital platforms and social media in the diffusion of innovation** and knowledge generated by the competition. Sørvig's contribution opens an interesting direction in this regard. The Norwegian case demonstrates how strategic management of digital channels can transform a limited-scale event into a collective learning experience, reaching a much wider audience than traditional channels such as workshops and pop-ups. Such work would allow researchers to overcome the limitations of subjective perceptions gathered through interviews, providing a more concrete measure of the speed and extent with which innovation

spreads across the sector. It would also be interesting to compare the diffusion effectiveness between countries with different degrees of institutionalization of their digital strategies, from highly structured systems such as Norway, to contexts where this dimension relies primarily on the individual initiative of chefs, as is the case in Italy.

To conclude, these findings suggest that the true value of a culinary competition lies not in the event itself, but in the broader system that surrounds it. It is precisely this system that enables the competition to function as a true driver of innovation, capable of diffusing innovation well beyond the competition itself. At the same time, it also sustains the figure of the chef, who plays a central role as a key agent of innovation, able to leverage his or her personal visibility and reputation to accelerate the diffusion of innovation across the broader gastronomic sector. Academies supporting competing chefs prove to be fundamental actors, both in the preparation phase and in the period following the competition, as they are responsible for capturing, valorizing, and disseminating what emerges from the competitive experience. Future research extending this analysis across different countries and different types of culinary competitions would therefore be particularly valuable, not only to further address the existing gap in the literature, but also to deepen the understanding of how different cultural, institutional, and organizational contexts shape the relationship between competitions and innovation in gastronomy.

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Appendix A – Outline of the interviews with the four Italian chefs

While the same core themes were systematically addressed across all conversations, the sequence and phrasing of questions were flexibly adapted, allowing the discussion to naturally follow the flow of chefs' responses.

Question 1: You recently participated in the Bocuse d'Or. Why is it important for you to take part in this type of competition? Did it push you to innovate in any way? What does it give you from an innovation standpoint?

Question 2: What about the creative process? When developing the competition platter and plate, what do you focus most on? To what extent do you aim for innovation, and through which dimensions (e.g., combination of ingredients, techniques, aesthetics, etc.)?

Question 3: How critical is the role of the team in supporting the preparation and creative process and during the competition itself?

Question 4: What kind of pressures or constraints do you face during the preparation phase and the competition itself? How do these factors influence your creative process and the final outcome of your work?

Question 5: Since at the Bocuse d'Or chefs represent their country, which role does tradition play in this context? How does tradition interact with innovation and creativity?

Question 6: What does the event itself give you? Do you learn from the other competitors as well? Is there any form of cross-contamination or diffusion of ideas?

Question 7: Looking at the aftermath of the competition, what direct impacts or positive effects were you able to notice? Has your participation led to more visibility, for example? Did the way you work in your restaurant and with your team change?

Question 8: Have you noticed whether the developed innovation has been replicated by others in the gastronomic sector? Was there any form of imitation that you were able to observe?

Question 9: Have you been involved in post-competition events, such as workshops or training sessions to diffuse this knowledge? Were you able to notice any effects on other restaurants, or other operators in the gastronomic field?

Appendix B – Outline of the interview with the international expert

This outline was sent in advance to the international expert in order to prepare for the interview and address all the topics relevant to the thematic analysis of this study.

1- Main academy role in Norwegian gastronomy competitive system

2- Training and preparation of candidates

- How do they typically enter in the “system”? How long does the preparation process typically last?
- Italian chefs underlined the fact that it is quite common for Norwegian *commis* to become a candidate a few years later. Is there a specific pathway or structured progression behind this?

3- Work culture and Nordic “mindset”

- Is the way of working in Nordic restaurants similar to what the Bocuse d'Or requires?
- Importance of teamwork, organization, and working culture in achieving high performance
- What could other countries learn from the Norwegian model?

4- Innovation

- How are innovations from the Bocuse d'Or diffused beyond the competition? Specific events, networks?
- Do dishes, techniques, or presentations developed for the Bocuse d'Or influence professional kitchens? Is there a form of imitation?
- Some chefs describe the Bocuse d'Or as a “fashion week of gastronomy”. Do you agree with that?

5- Relationship with tradition

- In countries like Italy, culinary tradition is very strong, while in Norway it is less codified. Do you think this allows more freedom for experimentation in competitions like the Bocuse d'Or? Or are other factors more important in explaining Nordic success?

6- Investment and financial support

- Who funds the Norwegian system?
- Are candidates able to dedicate themselves full-time to their preparation?
- What role do sponsors and public institutions play?