



Uncooking

Anastássios Perdicóúlis

Assistant Professor, ECT, UTAD (<http://www.tasso.utad.pt>)

Affiliate Researcher, CITTA, FEUP (<http://www.fe.up.pt/~tasso>)

Abstract

Have you ever eaten a delicious meal and wondered how it was prepared? or how to make it at home? ‘Uncooking’ follows all the cooking steps backwards: from food to preparation.

1 Introduction

People who enjoy cooking are usually alert when they go to good restaurants, to pick up the secrets of the dishes they appreciate. As they cannot expect the chef to reveal how the dishes are made, this takes a bit of ‘reverse engineering’: they must ‘uncook’ the foods in their minds, to ‘see’ (or, better, guess) how these were made.

‘Uncooking’ can be fun, as much as any guesswork. To be done successfully, though, some basic cooking knowledge is required — for instance, how to boil, broil, or bake; how to make sauces (i.e. colloidal suspensions); or how to hydrate or dehydrate foodstuffs.

The ‘uncooking’ game is best played in the kitchen, starting with a dish prepared by a designated cook: the master chef. The master chef will be the judge for the players’ deciphered recipes. Such recipes — i.e. the cooking process — can be registered in one of the following types of *process diagrams* (PD), depending on the detail required: ‘concise’, or CPD (Perdicóúlis, 2011); ‘extended’, or EPD (Perdicóúlis, 2013b); ‘personalised’, or PPD (Perdicóúlis, 2013c).

2 The dish

In lieu of the actual experience with the dish — i.e. eating it —, players must content themselves with the next best thing: an ‘objective’ description of the dish by the master chef, avoiding value judgements such as ‘delicious’. Let us try some *gnocchi al pomodoro*.

‘The hot main dish consists of small, roundish but irregular pieces of pasta (but the taste is not quite the same as spaghetti), placed in a heap directly on the warm plate. The sauce, poured on top of the heap, is tomato-based, with a hint of basil and garlic, but no cheese.’

3 The cooking

We can make a rough sketch of how to put this dish together, highlighting the major intermediate products (or ‘stages’) in the cooking process, and the tasks required for each one of them — Figure 1.

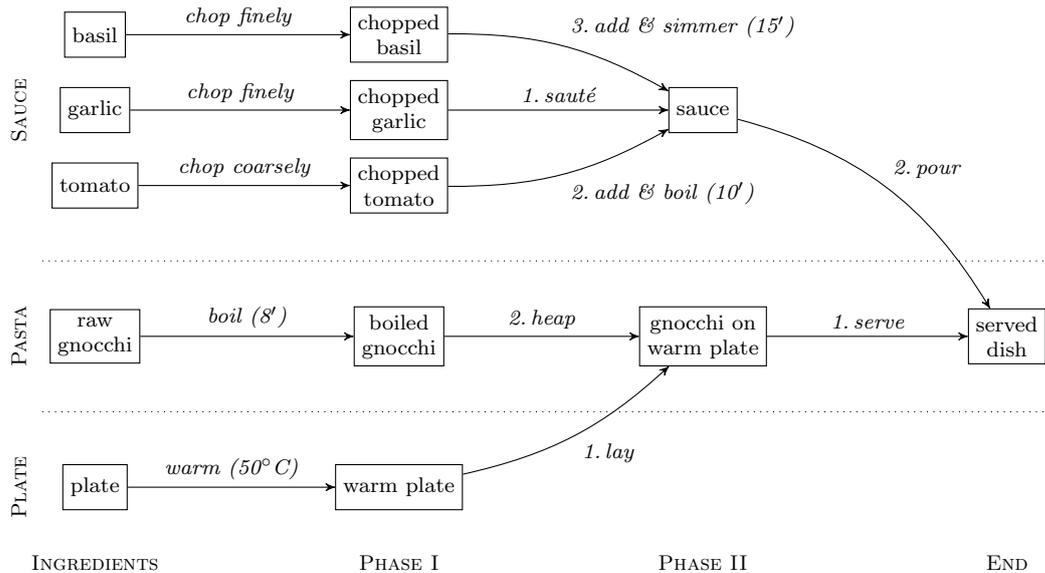


FIGURE 1 Major stages and tasks in the cooking process of *gnocchi al pomodoro*

4 The guesswork

This is not officially part of the game, but an extra challenge: players describe *how* they figured out the ingredients or the techniques that constitute their recipe — that is, how they ‘uncooked’ the presented food. For instance, the presentation of this reasoning can be something like the explanation of Figure 2.

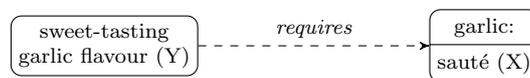


FIGURE 2 Presenting the reasoning behind the guesswork — sample

Exposing the reasoning behind the guesswork, as in the descriptive causal diagram (Perdicoulis, 2011) of Figure 2, formulates hypotheses at a higher level: methodology — or cooking methodology, in this case: not ‘how *this particular food* was made’, which would be the technical hypothesis, or the central part of the game, but ‘how *these cooking results* are achieved’. That is, we apply inductive reasoning to formulate even more general rules than those of the food in question. This creates and shares cooking knowledge.

5 Discussion

Once the recipe is deciphered by the players, the master chef must judge who came closer to the original, perhaps using criteria such as timings, temperatures, ingredients, or the order of execution of tasks. The ‘uncooking’ game becomes quite interesting when the deciphered recipes are reproduced, and the master chef must judge by taste. After all, as the proverb has it, ‘the proof of the pudding is in the eating’ (Perdicoulis, 2013a, p.5).

‘Under the hood’, the ‘uncooking’ game teaches how to formulate hypotheses. In this case, the hypotheses can be presented in the form of diagrams, or in the form of food, which is quite unusual for a hypothesis. Players also learn that in order to formulate hypotheses, they need to have some previous knowledge and understanding of the relevant matter such as materials, methods, and techniques. Also, players shall soon realise that they need to update or widen their scope of knowledge (again, of materials and methods), otherwise their foods will end up tasting quite similar, and may even fail at certain deciphering exercises.

6 Continuation

One could learn to cook by learning the practical rules: ‘do this’, or ‘don’t do that’. However, a real cook must know each and every ‘why’ or ‘how’ behind those rules, even if this requires some chemistry courses — and, in fact, it does. Furthermore, as every culture, the culinary art requires interaction, discussion about methods, techniques, standards, and experiences. A game is a great way to stimulate all this, and there is a lot to be shared and learned from — and contributed to — the worldwide culinary tradition.

References

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