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Finite Dining: Supply and Care in the Professional Kitchens of North East England

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Gavin Maclean**

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Abstract

The professional kitchen is an often hostile and dangerous environment. This article explores the connection between the enactment of care in this environment with the supply of both labour and produce. Drawing on qualitative research in restaurants in the North East of England, findings identify three important factors in the organisation of care. First, that professional chefs operate with an uneven logistical imaginary that influences how they imagine the long-term viability of food supply chains. Second, that restrictions in labour supply precipitate opposing forces: in one direction, an increase in the value of labour of chefs; and in the other, the deskilling of the professional kitchen. And third, that accelerated promotion through the traditional hierarchy of the professional kitchen destabilises the organisation of communitas, leading to withdrawal of care to those deemed to occupy undeserved positions. These factors interrelate in the following ways: food insecurity and supply chain disruption lead to effective deskilling as restaurant menus are simplified; deskilling is locked in when it coincides with restriction in the supply of chefs, which leads to accelerated promotion and redundancy of specialised sections; and deskilling motivates the withdrawal of care, as those in a position to nurture colleagues withhold this labour both out of a sense of injustice and because of increased intensification of work. It is concluded that the future of the professional kitchen hinges on the balance of the finite supply of produce and of labour with the renewable but fragile dimension of care.

Keywords

chefs, ethics of care, food service, restaurants, supply chains

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The professional kitchen socialises chefs into intense, often dangerous, or even violent working environments (Burrow et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the status afforded to those who move up through the strict hierarchy of the kitchen can justify this experience of extremity. The French brigade system – rarely found in full outside of fine dining restaurants – still structures many professional kitchens, with a head chef at the top, sous chefs as trusted lieutenants, chefs de partie in charge of sections, and commis chefs at the bottom (Fine, 1996). This organisational structure is entangled with the sprawling structures of the agri-food system, the growers, suppliers, and logistics companies that supply the produce for the chefs to cook (Böhm et al., 2020). What chefs cook is a product of the relationship between these two structures. But what happens when chefs cannot get hold of the produce they need? What happens when it becomes difficult to staff kitchens with people of the requisite skill to determine what and how we should eat?

This is an article about the interrelation of supply – both produce and labour – and the organisation of care in the professional kitchen. The work is derived from qualitative research in the North East of England, undertaken in 2022 to a backdrop of post-lockdown difficulties, surging energy prices and supply chain disruption from conflict in Ukraine, and the effects of Brexit. The argument that follows is that chefs deploy an uneven ‘logistical imaginary’, in parts nuanced and in other parts flat, that both reveals and obscures the entanglement of the kitchen in the agri-food system; restrictions in labour supply precipitate forms of deskilling that impact what can be cooked and what is procured; and that both of these factors in combination disrupt the organisation and enactment of care by disturbing hierarchies of status and of knowhow. It is concluded that the finite (supply) and the renewable (care) influence how chefs think about the finitude of what they do, and that the way supply and care interact is a vital consideration when imagining a ‘sustainable’ and ‘convivial’ future for dining (Parham, 2017).

Supply

The professional kitchen is located at the end of food supply chains that incorporate growers, carriers, warehouses, wholesalers, and supermarkets, both actor in and patient of the logistical management of produce in motion (Böhm et al., 2020).

In *The Box*, Marc Levinson (2016) argued that logistical motion has been so perfected by containerisation and the technical systems that organise their process that the goods we buy now glide unhindered across the earth’s surface. This common sense of an ease of transmission tends to ignore the violence of supply chains – the threat of piracy and the disproportionate military power that confronts it and establishes neocolonial trade routes by force – and the effortful labour of workers and the injury this exerts on their bodies (Cowen, 2014). It oversimplifies what remains intricate and complex, overlooking the heterogeneity of supply chains (Tsing, 2009), the turbulent circulation (Chua et al., 2018) and the flip-flopping improvisation and haphazardness of logistical routes (Knowles, 2014), and puts in mind omniscient systems of migratory control when the reality can be so chaotic that the trajectories of goods are often unfollowable (Hulme, 2017). Climate change, war, and economic instability further destabilise the impression of effortless conveyance, revealing a fragility at the heart of the entire supply chain.

The obscurity of supply is not without its ideology, not least of all because changes in logistical management sustain material shifts that underpin the supply-side economics prioritised in response to the crisis of accumulation in the 1970s. In *Getting the Goods*, Bonacich and Wilson (2008: 3) observed that logistics once only picked out transport and warehousing but now refers to the management of the whole supply chain – a move they identify with ‘the logistics revolution’. This insurgence brought with it a move from push to pull inventory control, reducing inventory throughout the supply chain, establishing the importance of goods kept in motion, and shifting the balance of power from producers to retailers as the supply chain became the primary factor in competitive advantage. Pay and conditions in warehousing and distribution had been consistent with the security and robustness of the industrial sector; the logistics revolution – part of a broad shift from production to consumption and from industry to service – brought pay and employment conditions in line with the more precarious service sector (Lorey, 2015; Mulholland and Stewart, 2014). This in turn set in motion forms of deskilling – accelerated by the automation and technical systems of control deployed at logistical sites – that further eroded conditions in a sector that has become the value centre of what is imagined as a low-wage, flexible economy.

Questions of labour are central to developments in logistics. Controlling labour, designing a division of labour, minimising skill requirements, or outsourcing labour globally are all part of how management reduces the value of or need for labour power (see Gandini, 2019; Smith, 2006, and Thompson and Smith, 2009). For Marx, the starting point for capitalism is when labour power itself – the capacity to labour for a certain duration for a certain amount of money – becomes a commodity. The use value of labour power represents that capacity to produce further use values of goods and services that generate profit when these commodities are sold (Marx, 1976). With this labour power, the capitalist is impelled to extract as much value as possible by putting labour to work, controlling the labour process, or reducing labour required. The cornerstone study of managerial control, Harry Braverman’s (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, asserted that control and diminishing workers’ knowledge of the labour process were the ultimate purposes of management. Braverman argued that the rationalisation of the labour process was resulting in a societal deskilling that would ultimately blunt the power of the working class. Sociological research following this has largely questioned the idea of societal level deskilling, viewing deskilling as but one management strategy to control work (see Jaros, 2010). Yet this dialectic between control and skill remains an enduring feature of the labour process.

We miss all of this if we assume that containerisation simply represents a kind of liberalisation of movement. The ‘container theory’ (Parker, 2013: 369) established by Levinson feeds a ‘surface ideology’ (Martin, 2013: 1052) of smooth transmission that reinforces the dominance of supply-side economics achieved via its logistical revolution (Hill, 2024). And underneath this ideological obscurity we find our food supply neoliberalised. Keeping everything in motion is vital to the expansion of the food sector, given that the produce is perishable, sometimes frozen, and often prized for its freshness, so the innovation of cross-docking in distribution (moving goods from one transport to another without storage) has been key (Wright and Lund, 2006). It is a space that has come to be dominated by the supermarkets, who have managed to control the entire food supply

chain, demanding low prices from growers and producers and setting low wages, weakened conditions, and increasing intensification in warehousing and distribution (Jack, 2023; Newsome, 2010). As the power of the supermarkets has grown, the biggest possess an effective monopsony on the food supply. The entire operation of growers, producers, and suppliers has been reoriented to the interests of those retailers.

Care

In *Kitchens*, Gary Fine (1996: 18) observed the contrast between the serenity of the professional kitchen before any customers enter the dining room and the ‘communal hell’ that then sets in once the customers have been seated and placed their orders. Each individual task the chefs perform is relatively straightforward, but as the kitchen hits a frenetic pace to meet the tight time demands of serving food to order, it is ‘nearly impossible for the inexperienced’ (Fine, 1996: 22). This complexity is compounded by the economic necessity of running kitchens with ‘just enough staff so that the kitchen is on the edge of chaos but not so few that customers are dissatisfied at the service’ (Fine, 1996: 64).

Professional kitchens are sites of strict hierarchy, with an almost military separation of ranks, but hierarchies that are as creative and as collaborative as they are strict (Lortie et al., 2022). We might see in the combination of hierarchy and collaboration the possibility of ‘communitas’, a sort of organisational ethos, identified by Edith Turner (2012), that tolerates ranks and roles so long as this organisation does not become too oppressive. The professional kitchen would then be a site of togetherness, not without differentiation, but held together by the sense that everyone is granted fair recognition (Pöyhönen, 2018). Recognition in any organisational space would have to involve challenging unfair allocation of tasks or status to avoid that space becoming oppressive (Bell, 2008), and at bottom this would entail a recognition of precariousness (Schwabenland, 2015) – particularly in environments like kitchens that are already oppressively hot and incredibly dangerous. Individuals in organisations are not static – rigidly held in ranks and hierarchies – but are instead moving out from themselves and towards others, such that organisational spaces are spaces of ek-stasis (Kenny, 2010). If the strict hierarchy of the kitchen is nonetheless creative, it is because of this interactive quality between individuals, going over to the other, learning, helping, and if we understand this movement as a response to that fundamental precariousness (Hill, 2025), then we could say that this ek-stasis is a mode of care – of being orientated towards the other person.

Professional kitchens should be seen as ‘organisation carescapes’ (Smith and McKie, 2009: 1). They are sites of more than human ethics in action, where human and non-human life – and death – are brought together. The work of the chef in itself can be understood as an act of care, given the affective and symbolic dimensions of providing food for others (Augusto, 2024). Moreover, chefs care about the food they produce, reflected in a ‘whole of the animal’ or similar plant-based approach, where waste is anathema to the sacrifice of the produce. Indeed, as they are for butchers, concern for zero waste and focus on alternative uses of cuts are key sources of creativity and value (Ocejo, 2017). Although they do take shortcuts to manage amid the chaos of service (cooking in quantity and reheating, keeping walk-in fridge doors open to move quickly, re-using pans after a quick wipe), any shortcuts rarely include the use of convenience

foods or kitchen gadgets, since chefs also care about their profession and since these kinds of shortcuts are seen as a form of deskilling (Fine, 1996: 28–29). But care for colleagues is less obviously baked into the organisation of the kitchen, where chefs are socialised into accepting hot, chaotic, dangerous, and sometimes violent working environments (Burrow et al., 2015), and where they feel like they must work despite sickness or injury (Fine, 1996: 40–41).

The absence of care is at the heart of injustice (The Care Collective, 2020). There has been a resurging interest in questions of care, particularly under the influence of Marxist feminist perspectives. When thinking of labour supply, feminist thinkers have argued that the renewal of labour power is both a fundamental part of the reproduction of capitalism as a whole and yet an under-theorised part of Marxist analysis. The uncompensated labour of women historically, particularly caring, emotional, household, and reproductive labour have been under-accounted for in critical analyses (see Munro, 2019). Capitalism as a system enclosed the means of social reproduction and made caring labour – that which could not be commodified – into a gendered form of work, performed unpaid (Federici, 2004). Care is essential for the reproduction of life yet is something that capitalism relies upon as an unpaid input into the system.

In *Essential Care*, Leonardo Boff (2007: 2) characterised the neglect of care as an ‘indisposition’ towards others, a ‘disregard for the destiny’ of precarious lives, which stands in contrast with care as a mode of being that is oriented towards others – precisely because of the precariousness that is ultimately underwritten by the finitude of existence. Kitchens are not missing this essential care altogether, but they are rarely organised with such care at their heart, reflective of how organisational forms of care can be seen as contradictory (Smith and McKie, 2009). This is compounded by the unevenness of individual investments in care from experienced chefs to the inexperienced. Entry-level cooks are not generally expected or trusted to be creative; they are usually tasked with basic chores like prepping vegetables (Fine, 1996: 192). Creative endeavour – or even just the knowhow of shortcuts or surviving the chaos of service – is something that younger or less experienced cooks learn on the job. But this is in the gift of the experienced chefs, who do not often have the time to bring others along, and who are wary of uplifting others given the precariousness of the sector, where a protégé can too often become your replacement in the next cost-cutting round necessitated by a downturn in the economy or some other shock to the system (Fine, 1996: 53). It is unclear, then, the extent to which this communal hell is properly communal, in the sense of being animated by a sense of *communitas* that is at its core an expression for care amid precariousness. Instead, the professional kitchen may be a site of care – understood in the sense of both a disposition of responsibility for others and a response animated by that responsibility – but at an individual level that introduces a degree of capriciousness that is not scalable.

Method

We conducted in-depth interviews with chefs between August 2022 and February 2023. In total we interviewed 12 participants: 11 chefs and 1 owner. Of the 11 chefs, 10 were head chefs and owners; the sole owner was interviewed alongside their head chef and

co-owner. The participants all worked in professional kitchens ranging from restaurants to bistros and from cafes to pop ups. The majority were trained in or had experience of working in high-end restaurants regardless of the type of professional kitchen they occupied at the time of the interview. All participants were located within the North East of England. Selection criteria for the interviews were those who had primary control over the sourcing of produce, the design of menus, and the preparation of the dishes themselves. Purposive sampling was used. Participants were approached primarily via social media and email. Instagram was found to be the most successful means to produce responses given its dominant role as a public facing platform for restaurants. Reflecting the gender inequality in the sector, 3 of the participants were women, 1 non-binary, and the rest men. Data collection was brought to a close, and the sample size fixed, once it had yielded sufficient 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016). The research first obtained ethical approval from the institutions of both authors.

Interviews lasted on average around 90 minutes and were usually conducted in dining rooms between services or at the end of service. The interviews began with a discussion of the chef's personal history and how they came to be in the professional kitchen. This was then followed by a semi-structured interview where participants discussed how they source and handle produce, how they design dishes and menus, the processes and challenges of cooking in professional kitchens, and how they think about the future sustainability of the sector. Data analysis was undertaken according to a process of reflexive thematic analysis. Reported here are the themes around procuring (including locality, suppliers, logistical imaginary, futures); staffing (including shortages, skills, training, futures); and working (including age, background, difficulty, futures).

Procuring

While many of the chefs we interviewed emphasised the abundance of local produce in the North East of England – especially quality meat, parlour-made cheeses, line-caught fish and seafood – availability was not evenly distributed. Vegetable produce was contrasted with meat, fish, and dairy. Chefs professed a preference for local, independent suppliers, and noted the importance of regional varieties of fruits and vegetables in terms of both taste and heritage, but when it came to vegetables relied on big, centralised wholesalers. Chefs cook with a much wider range of vegetable produce than, say, meat, and, practically, it is not possible to source or pick produce and handle delivery from multiple growers. There is little incentive to source vegetables from local independents when there is so little margin in vegetables that it is impossible to pass on the cost to the customer. So, the wholesaler becomes the big box provider – and not only because it is cheaper.

Small local suppliers were said to be easier to deal with because there's no intermediary – you are dealing directly with the producer. There was also a sense articulated that they 'take a lot of care with their produce' (William, Head Chef and Owner), even though their specialism was also a practical drawback. Medium-sized suppliers were identified as splitting the difference between the artisans and the wholesalers, providing both range and quality. Chefs described the importance of the relationships they could build with local and medium-sized suppliers; trust in their produce and shared philosophies (around

growing or sustainability) meant there was no need to actively scrutinise practices, and they could ring up and make special requests, get advice on seasonality or even pairings. But the picture at the time we interviewed the chefs was of a collapsing middle, as many of the medium-sized suppliers had closed-down due to COVID-19 lockdowns and economic crisis. Given the impracticalities of sourcing everything from small independents, this led many chefs to rely on the big wholesalers – and some to even turn to supermarkets. Both the wholesalers and the supermarkets provide fruit and vegetables absent the soil and dirt associated with the smaller suppliers, which enables chefs to cut down on prep time. The supermarkets were singled out by two of the chefs as providing a much higher quality of vegetable produce than was available elsewhere; this contrasted with the more general experience of a lucky dip from other suppliers, where deliveries of vegetables might contain stark variation in size and quality and ripeness. Other chefs dismissed the narrow range of varieties at the supermarkets or worried about the ‘mass-produced Monsanto-like shit’ (Jack, Head Chef and Owner) they stocked.

All the chefs had experienced disruption to the supply chains during lockdown and the period after, heightened by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and sustained by the long *durée* of Brexit, where certain produce – from mushrooms to flour to green peppercorns – became hard to procure. Their work was said to be caught between the customer’s desire for the exotic and the material reality of bringing in the goods. Freshness – often more important to these chefs than notions of locality or provenance – was said to be suffering as produce spent more time bottlenecked at ports or stuck in traffic. Shortages of delivery drivers were identified as contributing to both the delay and intensification of deliveries: produce was increasingly turning up late, but the drivers were also in such a rush that there was no time for the chefs to inspect the quality of the produce before the deliverer had driven off. Tracing the origins of produce was said by some to be difficult and others to be impossible, even though it was important to their diners’ consumer identities to know where the things they ate came from. This was compounded by the sense that the closer things are grown, the more expensive they are to procure. One chef told us that he had adopted the just-in-time philosophy of inventory control to cut down on food waste. Another, who had turned to the supermarkets for his fruit and vegetables, hoped that supermarket supply chain practices ‘might be more ethical than we realise’ (Rafid, Chef and Owner).

Many of the chefs had ideas about the future of the food supply chain that were less than optimistic. Between the contraction of food suppliers, the increasing homogeneity of produce in supply chains dominated by supermarkets, and recurring food shortages spurred on by various shocks to the system, the mood was best expressed by the chef who told us that they ‘don’t think hospitality necessarily has a very long-term future’ (Liz, Chef).

Staffing

The North East of England was said to have some good high-end restaurants and a lot of chain restaurants but not a lot in-between. This missing middle was identified as having a knock-on effect on the labour pool, meaning good cooking would command a higher wage – a cost passed on to the customer. This was said to be then compounded by

COVID-19 lockdowns, when many chefs known to our participants, having had time to reflect on their working lives when professional kitchens were forcibly closed, decided they were better off delivering parcels for Amazon or working in a supermarket. The further contraction of the labour pool occasioned by Brexit meant that, at the time of interviewing, chefs were scarce and cost a premium. ‘There’s a [chain restaurant] advertising for head chef; £72,000 a year!’ (Matt, Head Chef and Owner), we are told – with no small amount of incredulity or distaste.

This has created a situation where restaurants that previously might have expected new hires to come with qualifications or training and some kitchen experience, were happy simply to hire anyone who had any kind of experience in a professional kitchen at all. This has sped up the career course for chefs, where ‘everyone’s moved up a level – but they haven’t’ (Jack, Head Chef and Owner). The market no longer offers commis chefs and so everyone now begins at chef de partie, which would previously have taken years of work to move up to, despite the lack of skill. Wages are now so high in the sector, the chefs say, that it has become difficult to differentiate ability by salary demand. In turn, kitchen teams become less differentiated as it is more difficult to build teams of specialists that complement one another. One chef tells us that the long-tail of this will not be felt for 5 years, as the chefs who have been over-promoted move up again and take on a responsibility to train entry-level cooks despite never having learned the ropes in the first place – the implication being that it may not be possible to get a decent meal out in the future if this carries on. With lessened skill requirements and subversion of the traditional hierarchy, and with the quality of food called into question, there was a sense that the change occasioned by labour shortage ‘kind of dilutes cheffing to some extent’ (William, Head Chef and Owner).

Training staff on the job is already made difficult by the competing demands on head chefs and even by simple things like the material layout of the kitchen. Some chefs professed an enthusiasm for showing junior colleagues how to perfect techniques or learn new skills, but the heavy workloads and time constraints faced by all meant there was often little time for this, and learning moments tended to be at the mercy of happenstance. Kitchen space makes a difference, as chefs working in smaller kitchens found it easier to pull colleagues over for a quick tutorial or for entry-level cooks to simply observe tasks being carried out by more experienced chefs, whereas the larger kitchens or kitchens separated rigidly into sections made this less easy to accomplish. And some chefs confessed to finding inexperienced cooks a drain, requiring constant vigilance to ensure that they are working safe and conforming to food hygiene standards.

Many of the chefs we interviewed were reimagining how they organise their kitchens. Kitchen porters have been the first to go, with some kitchens requiring chefs to wash their own dishes, the porter’s salaries being recouped to service the higher salaries now commanded by the chefs. The rise in salaries has meant that if before you could hire three chefs, now it was two. Small- and medium-sized restaurants usually employed a partial brigade system, for instance, a head chef, a sous chef, and chefs de partie. Now sections are being consolidated so that fewer chefs de partie are required, increasing workload – and furthering the lack of differentiation by specialism. The lack of experience and skill drives demand for the generic wholesalers, who provide produce in a fashion easier to prep, and whose standardised offering does not challenge the ability of the entry-level

cooks to improvise with the random produce that can arrive from local farms. One head chef, facing spiralling staff costs, sacked all his chefs and replaced them with entry-level cooks, meaning that he had to take on all the prep work – usually the preserve of the most junior – because his new hires did not possess the requisite knife skills. The reasoning? ‘You don’t need chefs. You just need people who care’ (Matt, Head Chef and Owner). The extension of this is that trained and experienced – professional – chefs are more expensive than people who simply care about food. A more positive future was imagined by another head chef, who hoped that kitchens would have to become less hostile and more caring if they wanted skilled and experienced chefs to stay in the sector.

Working

There was a widespread feeling that the work of a chef is a young person’s game, and that once out of their twenties a chef had become old, without middle age separating the two. The status of fine dining, moving your way up the hierarchy of the brigade system, is said to be the ambition of the young, spurred on by the over-sized impression of classically-trained celebrity chefs, and one that dims as a chef finds who they really want to be in cooking – or else slows down enough to be unable to keep up with the pace. For some chefs, this meant discovering their own food identity, moving away from feeding the wealthy in rigid and sometimes stifling ways, branching out into more creative fare accessible to a broader demographic. For others, it meant adapting to limitation, slowing down, and simplifying as the body rebelled against the relentlessness of the professional kitchen. This affects not only what is cooked but also the produce used. ‘I’m tired, man. I’m tired. And it takes so much energy to find that local stuff and bring it here’ (Matt, Head Chef and Owner). Slowing down is helped by the big wholesalers and the super-markets, who make this all a little easier.

Most of the chefs we interviewed had started out doing stages in hotel kitchens and in restaurants overseas – generally in France or in Australia – or else at an early age gaining experience in the restaurants or pubs owned by their families. Most had experience in fine dining restaurants overseas or in Britain, meaning most had a background in classical French and modern British cooking, possessing an immense range of skills and knowledge. Although few had formal cooking qualifications, most had learned the trade in high-end restaurants, some alongside very high-status chefs.

The chefs all worked long days, often more than 12 hours, necessitated by the times of procurement and of service; you have to be up early to catch the boats coming back in if you want to serve fish, and you have to be cooking late, generally until 10 pm, to complete the evening service. The work is not only long (parts of which unpaid) but also intensive, especially away from the fine dining restaurants, which generally have a limited time lunch seating and dinner seating; the smaller establishments tend to have a turnover of dishes that is both higher and runs longer. The work was described as physical, with chefs on their feet all day in hot conditions; one chef tells us – half-joking, half-forlorn – that he will stay in this line of work ‘until my back goes’ (Jeff, Head Chef and Owner). This hard work happens in an environment marked by criticism of their food by customers, with open kitchens adding a level of *sousveillance* to the mix and creating a space where it was hard to feel comfortable enough to rest or re-collect or take

a snack. The environment was also identified as angry, aggressive, sexist, and racist, with the chefs we interviewed all having experienced nasty or bullying chefs when they were coming up. The more hostile kitchens were identified as being more wasteful, since chefs skilled with knives would tend not to use those skills for bad bosses, throwing excessive amounts of produce away by not cutting as finely as they might. One chef tells us that, given the environment they operate in, a good employee is someone who only has one of three addictions: drinking, drugs, or gambling.

Given their experience of negativity, many of the chefs had ideas about how to change for the future. Some thought that the example of care they offered would trickle down and stop the cycle that produces bad bosses. Others thought the changes to the sector brought about by lockdown and Brexit would necessitate that kindness and establish new norms around hours worked and sickness leave. A few had an eye on their exit strategy, whether because they felt old in their thirties or because the instability of the economy had shocked any sense of future security out of them. It was generally felt more important than ever to pass on skills and knowhow to the younger generation, not only because of the contraction of the labour pool but also because each new economic shock takes out the head chefs via staff cost savings – and someone still needed to know how to cook if restaurants were to continue to exist. One chef even said that he had begun to tell his charges not to dream of becoming a head chef but instead an owner, as a failsafe against the cyclical culling, and to get there as quick as possible – so they can make their money and leave the sector before it chews them up or collapses.

Discussion

Our findings reveal that the kitchen's situatedness, amid the flows of supply chains and the agri-food system (Böhm et al., 2020), allows the chef to develop a complicated logistical imaginary that resists the simplicity of 'container theory' (Parker, 2013: 369) but that can still be re-routed back to the interests of logistical power.

The chefs revealed an imaginary much closer to the heterogeneity of supply chains identified by Tsing (2009), with variation not only between regions but within regions – in this case the North East of England. Supply was seen to be turbulent and haphazard (Chua et al., 2018; Knowles, 2014) as a result of lockdowns, economic crisis, and through the conflict in Ukraine. While locality was important for meat and dairy produce, ensuring chefs did their best to unravel the supply chains to trace provenance, a blind spot in the imaginary was identified with vegetable produce, which was relegated to the ranks of the unfollowable (Hulme, 2017). A relationship can be identified between the unfollowable quality of this vegetable produce and the way that the logistics revolution, described by Bonacich and Wilson (2008), has consolidated power in an increasingly centralised fashion – and ultimately in the hands of supermarkets (Newsome, 2010; Newsome et al., 2013). That is, given that the supply chain has become a value centre in a supply-side economy, and given that little margin can be added to vegetables by the labour of the chef, this unfollowable quality takes on the air of an inevitability when it is in reality a result of turning to big centralised suppliers or even supermarkets, who can use their near monopsony to 'discount' prices (Jack, 2023) and that source their produce so widely that provenance is quickly lost amid the complexity of origin.

The chefs we interviewed were aware of how quickly their delivery drivers had to move from stop to stop but speed itself seems to exacerbate the moral invisibility of delivery work (Hill, 2020), even to those who receive the goods. Drivers work at a relentless and delirious pace but are gone so quickly that they barely leave an impression, to the extent that joining their ranks could seem preferable to a chef tired of the heat and hostility of the professional kitchen. In addition, where previously care for all produce and a minimisation of waste was a key element of how chefs see work, some of this care work is relocated to the unseen labour of the supermarket. The lack of time to care means chefs turn to an entity – the supermarket – that dominates supply-chains, drives the smaller suppliers out of business, and locks the chef into a dependency on big box suppliers that lacks the co-operation, relationality, and variety that would otherwise underpin the skilled work of the chef. While some of our interviewees have embraced this, even adopting just-in-time inventory control despite its vulnerability to shocks to the system, others feared for the future of cheffing if convenience and homogeneity won out over skilled engagement with a diverse range of produce. This led to divergent imaginaries of the future of the professional kitchen, from a stark realisation of its finitude (that the whole system is too haphazard and morally deleterious to continue much longer) to the hope that the supply chains are not quite as bad (functionally, morally) as we might think.

Our findings also highlight a tight interconnection between supply, labour, and the dimension of care in the kitchen. While the chefs we interviewed thought good chefs were already scarce, they were clear that Brexit and its restriction of labour supply had decreased the pool further and led to a surge in wage demands. In the hospitality sector, this meant the accelerated progression of junior cooks up the traditional hierarchy of the kitchen (Lortie et al., 2022), which is then met in turn by spontaneous and organisational uses of deskilling to bring that power back under control (Braverman, 1974). Acceleration, as Hartmut Rosa (2015) observed, ultimately destabilises the position of workers. Participants observed deskilling in the form of the dismantling of specialised sections, causing roles in the professional kitchen to blur.

This continues with the withholding of acts of organisational care (as in Smith and McKie, 2009), such as demonstration and training, and in extreme form is cemented by the recruitment of ‘people who care’ rather than ‘people who cook’. So, while the presence of junior cooks higher in the kitchen hierarchy appears to mark a boon in the ability of labour to command a high wage, this disturbance in the hierarchy precipitates those measures that would then turn that power back down; if those chefs lack the knife skills to work on more elaborate fare, then the food is simplified and the labour required is ultimately less skilled. Care plays a crucial role here, since the upset in the normal hierarchy means that something already largely uncompensated and unrecognised for its part in the reproduction of labour, is then withheld – either because the experienced chefs are busy doing the work that those accelerated up the ranks cannot or because they withhold it out of distaste for unearned status. Care then returns – uncompensated and unrecognised still – in the form of ‘people who care’, who then lack the skills of even the inexperienced cooks and, in a continuation of the association of care with gendered labour, are seen to dilute what it means to be a chef – which is to say, who then exemplify its deskilling and the downward correction to its labour power.

This resonates with Braverman’s (1974) concern for societal deskilling, especially the fear expressed by the participants that, when the skill of the chef is lost, the experience of

dining will be diminished for all. The chefs we talked to worried that delivery driving or warehouse work had become more attractive than cheffing, and that trained chefs would be replaced by less skilled cooks – people who care but cannot perhaps clarify a consommé or laminate a croissant. The cultural repertoire of the chef communicates to diners what food can be and what it can mean (Ocejo, 2017; Slavich et al., 2020). If the sector cannot keep skilled chefs, then there is a risk that this production of aesthetic knowledge – initiated by the chef and communicated socially as a process of taste-making – is lost.

The chefs we interviewed had stories of adventure in kitchens and in identity, often across continents; the cooks who were seen to be overpromoted or those brought in on the basis of the capacity to care, figured in chef's accounts of the kitchen as cyphers – people without story or background and so without dreams or ambitions. The possession of these stories determines whether someone's place in the hierarchy is merited or not; this seems to have a negative impact on the functioning of *communitas*. Those who have not earned their place in the kitchen remain stuck on entry-level tasks, while the experienced chefs, who recognise the need to pass on their skills but are now taking on the work of those who cannot master it, lack the time to train them beyond this level. If *communitas* is meant to tolerate hierarchy but pose a challenge to the precariousness of its most vulnerable members (Schwabenland, 2015), then the disturbance of this hierarchy acts against this challenge. It does this most notably by derailing the organisation of *ekstasis* (Kenny, 2010), of going over to the other, as when the chef cannot go over to where the junior cook is working to give them the care and attention necessary to upbuild them in their role. Even the forlorn hope of passing on cheffing to the next generation bakes in precarity when done in recognition of your own disposability (Fine, 1996) – and that disposability is made more acute if kitchens become deskilled.

Those who had grafted in kitchens for years could attest to the hostility of the environment, its physical and emotional injuriousness and the toll it took (Burrow et al., 2015; Fine, 1996). Some of the chefs we interviewed reflected on both these experiences and on the effect of recent changes in labour supply. They concluded that kitchens ought to become more caring environments for new entrants, yet this sits uneasily with the sense that the incomers themselves were a threat to the viability of the kitchen. *Communitas* is meant to pose a challenge to unfairness (Bell, 2008) – Turner (2012) described it as a flame always flickering and that lights up when an organisation becomes unjust – but the perceived unfairness of the disruption to the kitchen hierarchy seems to cause it to attack those already vulnerable. If someone's place in the kitchen is deemed unmerited then this injustice in turn legitimates not only the withholding of training – but also the full realisation of that individual's kitchen story.

Ultimately, chefs can tolerate shortcuts – but not deskilling (Fine, 1996). If injustice is the absence of care (The Care Collective, 2020), then the perceived injustice of acceleration through the kitchen hierarchy begets more injustice, as head chefs switch off their regard for the destiny of the other (Boff, 2007) – the sense that they should share the same narrative projection into the future – in response to the absence of a shared narrative origin. Without *communitas* the kitchen cannot even be a communal hell (Fine, 1996); if it is a hell, then it is parallel – the hell of the chef and the hell of the interloper – and so the prospects of overcoming these conditions, of care overflowing the greater injustice, become dim.

Conclusion

If they cannot get the goods in the first place, then chefs will struggle to show their less experienced colleagues how to work with them and menus become simplified; if they cannot hire skilled chefs for the money, then menus will become simplified, less experienced colleagues will not learn to work on more complex dishes, and the kinds of produce bought from the suppliers will narrow to reflect this state of affairs. This double-bind plays to the logistical power of the centralised suppliers and the supermarkets, risking further diminishment of the local and medium-size suppliers already squeezed out by the bigger players; and it means, in turn, that the dimension of care in the kitchen is diminished, as not only the lack of skill but the lack of a chef's story is locked in for newcomers, as acts of care are withdrawn, and the environment remains inhospitable for all.

The research presented here was collected at a time of acute stress for the sector arising from multiple crises; these extreme conditions suggest that further research will be necessary to tease out more quotidian interrelations of supply and care. That said, the sector continues to struggle with the long tail of COVID-19, Brexit, and the invasion of Ukraine, compounded by National Insurance rises that make it more expensive to hire staff in the UK. Crisis may just be the new everyday. Future research into how these permacrises impact the supply-care dynamic of plant-based restaurants in particular – in light of closures and the introduction of meat to menus (Lewis, 2025) – would be welcome, as the sector is ultimately forced to confront the apex crisis presented to the agri-food system by climate change.

In the end, the future of dining will be decided by the interrelation of that which is finite – the supply of produce and the supply of labour – and the degree to which a renewable but fragile resource of care is restricted or not in its realisation by the organisation of the professional kitchen and its situatedness amid supply chains.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the conditions of the institutional ethics approval. Participants consented to the use of anonymised data in the write up of this research.

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Ethical approval and informed consent

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