Rockstars of the protein transition? Understanding how chefs’ craft practice inhibits a shift towards reduced animal-based food consumption

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One of the most effective ways to mitigate climate change is to shift to more plant-based consumption practices. In the context of such a shift, hands-on professionals in the food sector, such as chefs, are an important group of actors. Yet, while chefs are often seen as creative and innovative trendsetters and opinion leaders with high potential to initiate societal change towards sustainability, most restaurants in wealthier countries still predominantly serve meat and fish. In fact, people on average eat more meat and fish in restaurants than at home, which implies that chefs are lagging behind in the protein shift. We aim to understand this impasse. We use theoretical lenses of practice theory and craftsmanship to answer the question if and how chefs’ professional craft practice, including their relationship with animal- and plant-based material and with guests, withholds chefs from cooking with less animal-based foods. Drawing on 23 semi-structured interviews, including photo-elicitation, with a diverse mix of executive head chefs of Dutch restaurants in terms of menu type (animal/plant ratio), sector (fine dining/regular), and geographical location (city/rural), we found, firstly, that inherent qualitative differences between animal- and plant-based material complicate plant-based cooking, as chefs perceive animal products to have unique and distinctive qualities in bringing depth and flavour to dishes. However, we observe that these differences are embedded in a historical relationship with animal-based material, such as dish composition conventions and personal signatures. A second finding concerns the importance of the consumer society (i.e., consumer demand). Even though there is an increased demand for plant-based food, the demand for animal-based food remains high. In a consumer society, craftspeople are also business people, and adhering to guests’ expectations is essential to chefs’ work and the restaurant’s financial health. The results combined explain why chefs almost collectively perceive plant-based cooking as more difficult and challenging. We argue that chefs’ ability to innovate is not necessarily materialized in creating plant-based dishes, because their creative process is bounded by a reciprocal relationship between affordances of material and embodied skill, as well as by a dynamic between them and their guests’ expectations. In order to develop an embodied relationship with plant-based material, we recommend that plant-based education should not only be implemented in culinary schools but should also be targeted to advanced professionals.