**Julieta Flores Jurado***
**Illustration by Elizabeth Flores Jurado****

# Mexican Chefs And Labor Justice In the Seventh Season of *Chef's Table*

Chefs occupy many roles in contemporary culture and today's media landscape. Far from the blue-collar, undervalued workers who for centuries toiled unseen in the kitchens of the powerful, some twenty-first-century chefs have become more akin to auteurs: creators of innovative dishes who tell edible stories and amaze diners with unique techniques and flavor pairings. Chefs might reinvent themselves as memoirists or television presenters, while others channel their resources and influence towards issues such as nutrition, sustainable farming, or the preservation of culinary heritage. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, food journalism and media have supported our collective fascination with cooking, crafting narratives that portray cooks as exceptional individuals and visionary geniuses.

The premiere of *Chef's Table* (created by David Gelb), a Netflix-produced documentary series, in 2015 marked a high point in the journey of chefs toward cultural prominence. Its seven main seasons comprise four to six episodes, each centered on an internationally renowned chef. The audience can follow the chefs amidst their daily creative and practical duties at their restaurants, with glimpses into their childhoods, the communities where they were raised, the food traditions that shaped them, and their formative years. The show does not have a constant narrative voice, but notable critics and food journalists occasionally provide commentary, affirming the chefs' legitimacy and prestige within this cultural field. A typical *Chef's Table* episode narrates the struggles the chef faced, whether due to events in their private lives, public incomprehension, or negative media coverage, but ultimately highlights their refusal to compromise their culinary vision, culminating in success, awards, and extensive acclaim. Stylistically, the most recognizable feature of *Chef's Table* is its lavish cinematography, which depicts food through extreme close-ups, treating plates as a kind of canvas where these artists construct unique sensory experiences, even if the medium only allows for their visual appreciation.

Initially, the documentary series focused heavily on fine dining restaurants and made a clear case for the legitimate place that cooking could occupy among the fine arts, imbuing chefs with symbolic capital and pairing sequences of their dishes with classical music. Fine dining is by design a site of distinction and exclusivity, and represents the smallest, most rarefied fraction of food businesses. The series made it possible for the chefs' signature dishes,

* Julieta is a food scholar working as a researcher at CISAN; you can contact her at julietafloresjurado@unam.mx
** Elizabeth is an illustrator; you can see her work at @eshetetes.

Despite the series striving to feature more female chefs and chefs of color, I began to resist its individualizing paradigm of culinary artistry and, most of all, the justification for workplace violence and abusive behavior that have been normalized in the restaurant industry.

available only seasonally at Michelin-starred restaurants, to be known and appreciated, albeit only visually, by an audience of millions. Many of these viewers are unlikely to dine at such restaurants, not only because of their remote locations, but also due to their exorbitant prices. In her article *"Chef's Table and a Collective Past: Netflix, Food Media, and Cultural Memories"*, Diana Willis observed that the show "offers wide and diverse audiences the chance to vicariously dine at the world's best restaurants without concern for cost or accessibility—and affirms the legitimacy and appropriateness of this desire." The absence of recipes, as Rafi Grosglik and David Kyle have pointed out, sets the show apart from other more practically minded cooking programs, as the dishes are so time-consuming and technically advanced that they are not meant to be replicated in ordinary kitchens.

While I eagerly watched the early seasons of *Chef's Table*, in more recent years I have become skeptical of the idea of chefs as individual *auteurs*. Despite the series striving to feature more female chefs and chefs of color, I began to resist its individualizing paradigm of culinary artistry and, most of all, the justification for workplace violence and abusive behavior that have been normalized in the restaurant industry for far too long. Rewatching these episodes, I disagreed profoundly with chefs who spoke of "paying their dues" as young cooks or insisted that enduring abuse was ultimately necessary to hone their craft and become proficient chefs. Unfortunately, abuse is nothing new in professional kitchens. The roots of this rigidly hierarchical work environment can be traced to the influential organizational model developed by Auguste Escoffier in the late nineteenth century: the kitchen brigade, inspired by military discipline and rigid order. As sociologists Deborah Harris and Patti Giuffre have extensively researched, for cooking to become a prestigious and respected profession, it had to reject the feminine connotations of cooking as an instinctive act of care. Male professional chefs responded to this "threat of feminization" by creating celebrity personas adorned with knives, fire, and bloody cuts of meat, known for their toughness, their constant swearing and fits of rage, and for instilling fear in their kitchens.

However, over the last six years, a cultural shift concerning chefs and their public image has gained increasing relevance. The #MeToo movement shone a light on the ubiquity of sexual harassment and misconduct in professional kitchens, and prominent American chefs were called out for years of harming their staff or tolerating sexist and racist violence in their restaurants without accountability. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic brought a necessary reckoning with the vulnerability of restaurant workers, who often lack basic protections and were seriously affected by lockdowns, uncertain reopenings, and the health risks of working in close quarters while serving customers who sometimes rejected sanitary protocols. By August 2020, in an article titled "Twilight of the Imperial Chef", journalist Tejal Rao expressed exhaustion with the individual celebration of rockstar chefs, claiming that "the power of the chef-auteur as an idea is fading, and as restaurant workers organize and speak up about abusive workplaces, toxic bosses and inequities in pay and benefits, it's clear that the restaurant industry has to change."[1] Popular culture took note of these issues: the "furious chef" archetype I described earlier began to feel out of place and unsuitable for leading restaurants into a post-pandemic world. The incredibly successful television series *The Bear* (2022–2024) focused on themes such as abuse at the hands of powerful chefs, the economic struggles of restaurants after Covid, and the toll that the ever-stressful restaurant industry takes on workers' mental health.

In 2023, the closure of Noma—the Danish restaurant widely considered the best in the world—marked another sign of the crisis in fine dining and the declining popularity of this type of chef. Rao, responding to Noma's closure in another *New York Times* article, described a "seismic cultural shift in our tolerance for the idea of auteur-chefs who make cooks suffer for their art."[2] Worker-led organizations have emerged across North and Latin America, such as The CHAAD Project (Chicago), Studio ATAO (New York), and Mapa de Barmaids (Argentina, Chile, and Mexico). These collectives work to protect the rights of food industry workers, challenge practices like wage theft and unpaid internships (stages), raise minimum wages, and

dismantle the chef-centered culture that has allowed such unfair conditions to persist. *Chef's Table* could be counted among the media that, through the mythologization and glamorization of fine dining establishments where unpaid work and abusive bosses are commonplace, enabled the unchecked power of despotic chefs to endure for so long.

When a new seventh season premiered in November 2024 (more than five years after season six), I was intrigued to see whether the show had registered these cultural changes and the current rejection of the cult of the genius-chef, especially considering that the documentary series played no small part in amplifying this cult. In 2022, food writer Helen Rosner wrote in *The New Yorker*: "the 'rock-star chef' archetype, so ubiquitous at the start of the twenty-first century, feels painfully dated now . . . The harsh realities of the restaurant business—issues of labor rights, physical strain, and mental health—have intruded on the glossy fantasy of professional cooking as pure creative expression."[3] How would this fantasy, that was so integral to *Chef's Table*'s narrative core, remain relevant? Still, I was looking forward to the fourth episode of the season, which would feature Mexican chef Norma Listman and her life and business partner Saqib Keval, who grew up in the United States and has Indian and West African heritage. All of these cultural influences come together in the two restaurants they operate in Mexico City, Masala and Maíz and Marigold. Listman and Keval are not the first Mexican cooks to be featured in *Chef's Table*. Enrique Olvera appeared in season 2 (2016) and Rosalía Chay Chuc, a master of Yucatecan cuisine, was featured in the spin-off *Chef's Table: BBQ* in 2020. The new season of *Chef's Table* also arrived at the end of a year in which restaurants in Mexico became recipients of Michelin stars for the first time. As we will see later, Listman and Keval have been quite critical of "best restaurants" lists.

The new season features a majority of chefs of color whose professional paths do not adhere to the conventional narrative of starting to cook professionally at a young age and training as an intern or *stagiaire* at prestigious restaurants. The first episode focuses on Nok Suntaranon, a former Thai flight attendant who opened her restaurant in Philadelphia in her fifties. The central narrative thread of the episode concerns Suntaranon's relationship with her mother, who is honored in the name of the restaurant, Kalaya. Suntaranon does not wear a chef's jacket but instead wears bright lipstick and dresses in stylish, colorful clothes. Her confidence in the brilliance of her dishes is captivating; however, critic Francis Lam's description of Suntaranon's spectacular Tom Yum (a hot and sour seafood soup) as "giant river prawns hanging out of the side like they're in a hot tub on a billionaire's yacht, and you want to go to that party" suggests an uncritical stance toward the opulence and exclusivity of fine dining.

Male professional chefs responded to this "threat of feminization" by creating celebrity personas adorned with knives, fire, and bloody cuts of meat, known for their toughness, their constant swearing and fits of rage, and for instilling fear in their kitchens.

In contrast, Kwame Onwuachi, the New York chef featured in episode two, takes inspiration from the city's Halal carts and aims to elevate the food that feeds "the blue-collar workers, the immigrants, all the people that are the pulse of the city" by serving it at his Lincoln Center restaurant, among esteemed institutions like the Metropolitan Opera, the Juilliard School, and the New York Philharmonic. Onwuachi does not expect his culinary style—a blend of West African, African American, and Caribbean flavors—to speak for itself. He makes explicitly political remarks on imprisonment rates for working-class Black men and recalls coworkers who bluntly told him that no Black chef had ever made a significant contribution—ignoring, of course, the undeniable influence of figures like Hercules and James Hemings. Onwuachi's choice to wear a durag in many scenes supports his aim of ending fine dining's Eurocentrism. In the third episode, Andalusian chef Ángel León describes his strategies for making seafood consumption more sustainable and cultivating eelgrass as a cereal for human consumption with the potential to end world hunger. Still, the root causes of food insecurity—war, inequality, exploitative trade patterns, and climate change—are not explicitly mentioned. This episode adheres to an archetype that food scholars Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato have referred to as "the chef as hero": an individual, altruistic figure who can have a positive impact on the food system but ultimately stops short of unsettling the social structures that disempower vast numbers of people. León also recalls working 16-hour shifts during his training at Michelin-starred restaurants,

but does not clarify whether this illegal practice is something he seeks to abolish in his own business.

The season concludes with the episode featuring Norma Listman and Saqib Keval. Early in the episode, Keval makes the following statement: "The way restaurants are traditionally run requires a lot of unpaid labor, exploitation. They believe that you should hustle and struggle to prove that you are worthy of working at their lauded restaurant. At Masala y Maíz, any decision we make has first to do right by the workers, and then it can do right by the restaurant." He proceeds to list other ways in which injustice and violence are deeply ingrained in the industry, such as unpaid overtime, stolen tips, sexual harassment, and racist aggressions. Keval is one of the activist co-founders of People's Kitchen Collective, an organization that, according to its website, follows the legacy of the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program and Indigenous resistance movements to use cooking and commensality to resist racism, sexism, imperialism, and classism. It is logical that, after spending so much time critiquing the exploitative foundations of the restaurant industry, Keval would be unsure about opening a restaurant when this opportunity arose for his partner, Norma Listman. The episode details how they conceived their new restaurant as a platform for change, where they could ultimately take a step back and let workers and their needs be the priority, proving that this model of restaurant has a chance of succeeding. When nominated to the 2021 Macallan Icon Award for Latin America (an award presented by The World's 50 Best Restaurants, the main competitor to the Michelin Guide), Keval and Listman declined the nomination,[4] stating that awards have been complicit with the culture of abuse and exploitation that they wish to end. This critique echoes statements made by organizations like The CHAAD Project and Mapa de Barmaids, that point out the error of awards that treat culinary excellence as separate from working conditions.

"Signature dishes" are not presented here as the product of individual artistry, but as part of a wider effort to decolonize ingredients like vanilla, which Listman employs in savoury dishes to contest the dominance of European pastry and its appropriation of this Mexican ingredient. While many food documentaries highlight the chef in the forefront, and the rest of the staff is only blurry in the background, this episode ends with close-up shots of the focused faces of the cooks and servers at Masala and Maíz and Marigold, and all of their names appear in the ending credits.

Consumers now face the opportunity to express solidarity with workers instead of glamorizing cooking as the product of a single mind whose creative vision must be realized at whatever cost necessary.

Overall, I find that the inclusion of these ideas in a show like *Chef's Table*, which potentially unsettles the show's core narrative and conveys a sense of self-reflection, is a welcome shift in response to the fatigue with the genius-chef archetype that I described earlier. Scholars who integrate food studies with cultural economics have noted that authenticity is one of the elements consumers value when choosing to support a restaurant, and authenticity includes the integrity of the chefs—that is, their cooking should reflect and support the values they stand for (for instance, sourcing sustainable ingredients or minimizing waste). However, working conditions have received less attention when a restaurant's values are scrutinized. Labor justice should be at the forefront of how a restaurant's integrity is assessed. Consumers now face the opportunity to express solidarity with workers instead of glamorizing cooking as the product of a single mind whose creative vision must be realized at whatever cost necessary. While media representation is no substitute for tangible actions that empower workers, improve wages, and provide access to vital resources, *Chef's Table* has taken a step forward in changing the culture by presenting restaurants in Mexico City where workers are treated fairly as a viable possibility. VM

## Notes

**1** Tejal Rao, "Twilight of the Imperial Chef", *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/dining/chef-restaurant-culture.html, August 4, 2020, accessed January 6, 2025.
**2** Tejal Rao, "Fine Dining and the Ethics of Noma's Meticulously Crafted Fruit Beetle", *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/24/dining/noma-fruit-beetle-fine-dining.html, January 24, 2023, accessed January 6, 2025.
**3** Helen Rosner, "'The Bear' Is a Gritty Fairy Tale of Cooking and Grief" *The New Yorker*, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-gastronomy/the-bear-is-a-gritty-fairy-tale-of-cooking-and-grief, July 22, 2022, accessed January 6, 2025.
**4** https://www.instagram.com/p/CVfYu1rL7oT/?img_index=2.