Becoming top global chef: What does it take to become a highly successful entrepreneurial careerist?

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<th>Journal:</th>
<th>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</th>
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<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>IJCHM-07-2021-0940.R3</td>
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<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Original Article</td>
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<td>Careers, Restaurant industry</td>
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Abstract

Purpose – To understand the career path to the pinnacle of professional life. What does it take for an entrepreneur to become a global celebrity in one’s profession? We explore the career motivation, trajectory, and outcomes of a niche population who made it to the top of their careers.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative method using publicly-available, pre-recorded interviews of a documentary series on a unique sample of 30 top global chefs who gain Michelin-stars or equivalent. We used a qualitative approach to analyses the data alternating data and theory.

Findings – We identify a unique pattern which we label as the ‘two-steps’ trajectory, where these successful chefs went through a dual-hurdle process, first, delving into formal training and establishing themselves, then moving to a top chef status through innovation inspired by their history, chance events, and treating their work as an artistic oeuvre and an experience.

Practical implications – The authors provide an observed pattern for what is required to be a top global chef.

Originality/value – The study advances career theory and entrepreneurship studies via integrating the two perspectives. We offer a theoretical contribution by identifying the relevance and importance of ‘new careers’ for entrepreneurs, recognizing critical success factors and reinstating the balance between the agency of the entrepreneur and their context.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship careers, chefs’ careers, New Careers
1. Introduction

The restaurant business, a highly competitive sector of the hospitality industry, is characterized by significant entrepreneurship activities, where more business failures occur than in other sectors (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2018; Watson, 2007). To attain success in this business, the entrepreneur needs to combine entrepreneurship, creativity and artistic competence (Fernández-Pérez et al., 2020; Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2018; Svejenova, 2005), in addition to factors that are relevant to any entrepreneur. These can be dealing with challenges (Jumelet et al., 2020) or having professional knowledge of and strong passion for the business (Cardon et al., 2009).

Within the hospitality industry, the restaurant sector is large and expanding: revenue for the USA restaurant industry was estimated at $799 billion at the end of 2017 and growing (Griffith, 2018) as long as the COVID-19 impact is restricted to the time of the pandemic (Gössling, Scott, and Hall, 2020; Yang and Koh, 2022). In France it’s 14.4 million employees in some 87,000 restaurants, with estimated sales at $106.10 billion. In the UK, 614,100 employees in around 72,500 enterprises.

We focus on chefs’ career as restaurant entrepreneurs where their career journey is of entrepreneurs in small business, which is understudied (for exception see Andringa et al., 2016), answering recent calls to better understand the sector and how success can be achieved in it (Thirumalesh Madanaguli et al., 2021). Startups of small businesses have a low rate of success (Eisenmann, 2021), but lessons should be learnt from those successes. Indeed, being considered top in this field, via gaining reputation and attaining the status of a celebrity, is a worthy accolade to aspire to (Ng and Feldman, 2014; Spurk et al., 2019). There is considerable literature regarding how people ascend to the top echelons of large enterprises, such as professionals or academics (Beigi et al., 2018), but the cover of entrepreneurs’ is scant (Quinn et al. 2020). Little is known about industry-specific business awards (Harrison and
Jepsen, 2015) and investigation of vocational accolades like those won by chefs are rare in the literature (for rare exceptions see Gill and Burrow (2018), Giousmpasoglou et al., (2018), and Traynor et al., (2021)).

Similar to other sectors, founders of successful businesses in this sector have higher entrepreneurial self-efficacy, independence, and motives-related innovation which characterize entrepreneurs (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2007; Zellweger et al., 2011). Yet, more is required to become a global celebrity. An important test for success is decided by ranking and critics here, such as the Michelin categorization, as the very few who make it on the list typically remains an understudied cases of vocational and entrepreneurial career success. What factors enable entrepreneurs to reach this level remains unknown. Is it the role of qualification system? Of chance event? Of career orientation and motivation?

Our aims are to study the intersection between entrepreneurship and careers, exploring the career trajectories of the most successful global chefs, their motivation, and the challenges they have experienced, thereby answering earlier calls to integrate entrepreneurship and careers studies (Burton et al., 2016; Decker et al., 2012). We explore factors that enabled a unique and very selective list of individuals who have attained the status of global celebrity in their field – those who have Michelin-star restaurant or similar level of recognition.

We offer a unique contribution to the study of careers and entrepreneurship, by extending the current knowledge of the so-called ‘new careers’ into this specific niche. Entrepreneurship literature has largely failed to build on careers studies, and we believe this to be a significant omission, as much of the success of any small business is interwoven with the career aspiration and fulfilment of the entrepreneur. Further, these successful individuals serve as role models for others. Through exploring the role of career orientation, career as a calling, chance event, and the business environment as part of the wider labor market ecosystem (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019), we challenge contemporary career theory.
We also show that entrepreneurship is context- and actor-dependent (Welter, 2011). The context-dependent aspect includes in particular the vital role that chance events have on entrepreneurs’ success, and the importance of institutional elements in achieving the highest of status. These chefs/entrepreneurs, and their success, are therefore considered within the ever-changing context with all its complexity and uncertainty.

2. Theoretical background

The career literature tends to focus on managers and professionals (e.g. accountants and consultants) and less on vocational individuals. Theories that can help explain the success for ‘conventional’ managerial and professional roles are Social Capital theory (Seibert et al., 2001) or Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2011), for example, stop short in their explanatory power when it comes to the very top few. Indeed, rarely can scholar study the careers of the few top individuals in their field (cf. Davidsson and Honig, 2003).

3. Entrepreneurial careers in the restaurant business

Entrepreneurship can be defined as the scholarly examination of how enterprise ideas are institutionalized by entrepreneurial actors through relational process in order to generate social and economic value (Karataş-Özkan and Chell, 2010). The role of actors, in particular the entrepreneurs, is critical in leading change and generate enterprise (Battilana et al., 2009), but contemporary entrepreneurship literature emphasizes the centrality of contingencies that condition entrepreneurial success (Davidsson, 2020; Ramoglou et al., 2021), representing a shift from the traditional focus on entrepreneurship’s agents (e.g., Alvarez and Barney, 2007; Sarasvathy, 2001).

Earlier studies of contextual factors necessary for entrepreneurial success (Johns, 2016; Ramoglou and Tsang, 2016) explored individual factors that can predict the success of small
enterprises in general (Murnieks et al., 2014) and of restaurants’ entrepreneurship more specifically (Ramos-Rodríguez et al., 2012). Factors that distinguish the most successful from the rest remains underexplored with one recent exception on the importance of charismatic leadership on the success of top chefs (Gui et al., 2020; Montargot et al., 2022). Being top in the restaurant business is about uniqueness professionalism and recognition. Traversing symbolic and social boundaries can enhance the likelihood of gaining professional eminence or, if the outcome is negative, sliding into relative obscurity (Jones, 2010), and at least at the first stage, much is due to word-of-mouth (Line et al., 2020).

Another factor is the aspiration to be self-employed, taking risks like questionable job security, and gaining autonomy, which account for successful entrepreneurship (Kolvereid and Isaksen, 2006). A strong passion is another critical ingredient for being successful in business (Cardon et al., 2009). Conversely, overconfidence and emotional unfitness of individual owners were the main predictors of restaurants’ failures (Camillo et al., 2008). To date, though, it is unclear what career paths enable successful entrepreneurship, and how individuals embark on such paths.

4. Careers and new careers

4.1 Boundaryless and protean careers

Contemporary careers are depicted as dynamic, volatile, and fast paced (De Vos et al., 2020; Hart and Baruch, 2021). The boundaryless careers theory does not suggest a total lack of boundaries (Inkson et al., 2012; Rodrigues et al., 2016), but where individuals choose and follow their career path according to their own values and desires, such as following the protean career (Hall, 2004) crossing physical, psychological, and other boundaries (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). Those studying careers that led to the top organizational echelons usually focus on CEOs or top executives – less so on entrepreneurs of small businesses that reach the
pinnacle of their profession. We are thus ill-informed whether entrepreneurial careers follow boundaryless and protean careers (Marshall and Gigliotti, 2020).

4.2 Career success at the top

There are many ways to define and to attain career success (Ng and Feldman, 2014), but more factors intervene when moving to the ‘top of the top’ like being authentic (Tolson, 2001). Contemporary societies glorify the status of celebrity as a reflection of the uppermost level of success (Driessens, 2013). Haute cuisine is recognized as a highly institutionalized field (Gill and Borrow, 2018), where rankings conducted by experts (e.g. critics, being awarded Michelin-star, James Beard awards, or the World’s Top 50 list) have a determinate effect on business success.

4.3 Career ecosystem

The nature of the current business world leads to a career system that can be considered as the career eco-system (Baruch, 2015). An eco-system is defined as ‘a system that contains a large number of loosely coupled (interconnected) actors who depend on each other to ensure the overall effectiveness of the system’ (Iansiti and Levien 2004, p. 5). The eco-system view offers an innovative way to explore business phenomena (Gribling and Duberley, 2020). The use of ecosystem can also correspond with viewing entrepreneurial activity as an ecosystem on its own (Wurth et al., 2021). Within career eco-systems, multiple actors communicate, act, react, negotiate, engage, and develop, evaluating and re-evaluating multiple psychological and legal contracts (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). The restaurant sector is highly competitive, and to survive in it one needs to realize the ‘landscape’ of career at the personal level, and the needs and demands of the clientele as well as the media, when aspiring to the top echelons of the profession (Lee and Tao, 2021). A career ecosystem operates under the 'survival of the
fittest’ law, and only few can reach and maintain certain top positions, and sub-systems co-exist and a number of stakeholders can influence career trajectory of individuals. Thus, the career ecosystem perspective may help to better understand entrepreneurial careers of chefs in a global context.

4.4 Career as a calling and passion for entrepreneurship

Many people follow or wish to follow their career in response to an inner ‘calling’ (Hall and Chandler, 2005), which can be influenced by a number of factors (Duffy et al., 2018). For entrepreneurs, having entrepreneurial passion is a critical ingredient of the calling (Marshall and Gigliotti, 2020). When following a sense of calling, one would typically be more determined and efficient, and thus more successful in making and following career decisions (Ahn et al., 2017), because ‘calling’ is instrumental in overcoming difficulties and developing resilience in making it to the top. It has been suggested that the role of ‘Calling’ is important in fulfilling career aims, and requires passion to the cause (Cardon et al., 2009). Most people consider work as one of three options: basically a ‘Job’ to perform, more broadly as a ‘Career’, or at the higher level of aspiration, a ‘Calling’ (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). By career, Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997) refer to a focus on advancement, and by calling, to a focus on enjoyment of fulfilment, and on socially useful work. Passion is associated with entrepreneurial identity centrality (Murnieks et al., 2014) where the role and identity of the entrepreneur are important but need further investigation (Karataş-Özkan et al., 2014). Yet, such studies were not conducted in the hospitality industry, where restaurants are businesses that require multiple skills and competencies and are measured externally by the media and public ranking systems.

When a career follows a ‘calling’, there is a higher chance of attaining psychological success (Hall and Chandler, 2005). But if the calling is not fulfilled, the consequences for
well-being are very negative. Calling is typically considered to be a strong motivator, to reach
the top or to enter certain professions (e.g., medicine, architecture). It could be expected that
people reaching the top of their profession would tend to be directed by such an inner calling.
Yet, this proposition was not tested empirically, and it is unclear what factors play a role –
internals – like ‘calling’ and passion, or external, like existing structures on one hand, and
luck (e.g., chance events), on the other hand.

4.5 Chance event
Chance events can influence career trajectory in various ways, and might culminate in un-
anticipated, unintended outcomes (Pryor and Bright, 2011). To date, the role of chance event
in careers has not attracted in-depth investigation in the literature (for an exception see Bright
et al., 2009). Nevertheless, chance events can alter one’s career for the better or for the worse.
The perception that the chance event is deterministic was challenged recently, suggesting that
chance events can be managed, or at least utilized by individuals for their benefit (Kindsiko
and Baruch, 2019). This idea has not yet been tested in the business environment.

The above discussion has generated the following research questions:
1. What was the motivation and trajectory for this choice of career and business? Was it
a planned endeavor? Are there a clear pattern or patterns of ‘becoming top chef’?
2. Were those careers directed externally or managed by the individual and, if so, did
they follow an inner calling or were they influenced by chance events? If the latter,
can serendipity be managed?
3. Do the careers of these highly successful entrepreneur chefs match with the nature of
the ‘New Careers’ theory?
5. The context – profession and business

While it is critical to acquire certain technical and managerial skills in order to become a head-chef (Allen and Mac Con Iomaire, 2017), the profession/vocation of a global-renowned top chef depends on innovation and ability to be creative (Lee et al., 2020; Madeira et al., 2021), to identify and to shape the taste that people will want to have – these cannot be replaced by machines and robots (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2007).

To be a top chef is a career aspiration for current and future generations. An attempt to understand the journey of an elite chef was recently portrayed by Traynor et al. (2021). They interviewed a (single) Michelin-star chef, concluding importance of dedication, passion, and competitiveness, among other, as important factors of success. Earlier, Gergaud et al., (2011) analyzed quantitatively a large sample of successful French chefs revealing that the quality of the restaurants where these chefs initially start their career has a significant impact on becoming a successful chef. Similarly, and trying to understand the connections between top chefs and top restaurants in Germany, Aubke (2014) used social network analysis to conclude that the observed high degree of centrality in the German haute cuisine could constrain the creativity of individual actors. Stierand and Lynch’s (2008) conceptual work used secondary data and looked at sources and models of culinary innovation. They related innovation to artistic aspiration, perceived newness, continuous and discontinuous conditions, learning and network, and adaptation. Finally, the gender barriers in becoming a top chef are documented, but Albors-Garrigos et al., (2020) empirical study found “feminine values” to be important factors in the success of six female top chefs. oOur study answers these studies call for further research in a larger sample adopting a qualitative design (Haddaji et al., 2020; Traynor et al., 2021) on the processes of becoming a top chef (Gergaud et al., 2011, Stierand and Lynch, 2008).
Restaurants are most typically small to medium size – apart from the major franchised businesses. Out of the 15 million restaurants globally, only 55 (less than a very small fraction of a per cent - 0.00037%) gain the top grade of 3 Michelin-star status. Michelin-stars are given to the restaurant, but chefs of these restaurants tend to gain a ‘celebrity’ status in the media. This means that the entrepreneurship activity and the individual career are interwoven in many ways. Similar prestigious rankings are the World’s Top 50 and the James Beard awards in the USA. These awards have a very important symbolic value in this highly institutionalized field. Restaurants and chefs in these lists are idolized, and recognized for their artistic and innovative contribution to the international haute cuisine. The vast majority of these top chefs are the owners of their restaurant, or sometimes multiple restaurants, emphasizing the importance of the entrepreneurial work in this sector.

6. Method and data collection
To explore the career trajectories of top global chefs, we employed a qualitative research approach. Collecting primary data from these individuals is a difficult task due to their geographical locations and their busy schedules. However, modern communication technologies enabled us to collect an abundant amount of secondary data, as did other scholars when trying to study this elite group (e.g., Aubke, 2014, Gergaud et al., 2011, Stierand and Lynch, 2008). Our main dataset was collected from 30 pre-recorded video interviews with top global chefs who featured in an award-winning documentary series episodes of about 50 minutes each, Chef’s Table. This main dataset was triangulated with further secondary data consisting of publicly available documents, such as records of chefs’ schooling, articles in newspapers, podcasts, other interviews, and the social media.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The 30 video episodes had a similar structure following a semi-structured interview protocol that covered the following themes:
• The distinctive characteristics of the chef’s culinary approach, and how it was developed over the years. What makes the chef’s creation unique? Where do they find their inspiration? How do they select and source their ingredients? What philosophy drives their creations?

• Each chef tells a narrative of how they reached this high level of success, both for their career progress and for their entrepreneurship development (the restaurant being the enterprise). If and when did they start to study at culinary school? What motivated their career choices? What were the highs and lows in their careers? What have been the main events in their career development? What fueled their entrepreneurial spirit?

• Further interviews with other persons such as food critics, other chefs, family members, collaborators, partners and employees added to the richness of the data regarding the chefs’ career trajectories and the questions raised in the previous two themes.

This way, the program enabled the participants to deviate when a certain issue was of relevance, but then return to the main theme. The narratives reflect rich and thick descriptions of each chef’s journey to success from multiple perspectives: the chef themselves, experts in the field and often times family members. These narratives produced a high-quality dataset to analyze – many examples are provided in the findings section. The data gathered from the interviews were subjected to strong scrutiny, enabling us to compare and contrast the various views expressed by the participants. Further, we employed data triangulation to clarify and validate the emerging themes and outcomes (see later) to ensure trustworthiness. Doing so offers a major advantage, as our method curbs biases that can be an influence, consciously or unconsciously, when scholars approach a subject with their own agenda.

It is worth pointing out that others have used either a smaller sample to interview (e.g., one chef in Traynor et al. (2021), and six in Albors-Garrigos et al., (2020)) or a larger
regional sample to study quantitatively (e.g., Aubke, 2014; Gergaud et al., 2011). Through this innovative methodology, our study is able to look at larger samples qualitatively, and provides new insights on this elite group.

We reached the theoretical saturation point of data around the 25th interview, then continued to verify that. Saturation is required for qualitative studies (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), as reaching category saturation is a critical means of verification when conducting qualitative research (Suddaby, 2006). Our sample size also matches well with what is considered a ‘good size sample’ (Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

7. Analysis

The interviews and the complementary data provided ample evidence, both in terms of depth and breadth, to answer our three research questions. We employed the widely used qualitative data analysis NVivo software, where the interviews were transcribed and imported, to manage the large dataset, as it is considered a robust tool for qualitative analysis (Edhlund and McDougall, 2016). The data analysis followed Gioia et al.’s (2013) recommendations. We started by coding the whole episodes inductively, where first-order concepts emerged from the data as the researchers tried to remain faithful to the data: “through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Coding was conducted by the first author, and the second author played the devil’s advocate and checked the logic and consistency of the coding process. When deemed necessary, the codes were modified to reach agreement. Next, we included all concepts related to our theoretical lens and set aside any codes that did not have a clear relation to the chef’s careers (e.g. having a tattoo, being polygamous).

In the second phase, all the interview transcripts were read again, and triangulated, in order to trace second-order categories and aggregate the codes under thematic clusters.
The thematic analysis revealed the nature of the process of becoming a successful entrepreneur within the top restaurants sector. Triangulation was carried out in this second phase of comparing and contrasting data from multiple sources, aiming to enhance the trustworthiness (credibility and dependability) of the research, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). For example, in one interview, Dan Barber presented the argument for a direct relation between the restaurants and the farmers (farm to table). In addition to the interviews, our main source, we found confirmation of a long-term commitment to this philosophy across Dan’s career through articles and podcasts. Similarly, Ben Shewry’s discourse during the interview about hitting rock bottom at a certain stage in his career, which then was confirmed via a newspaper article three years previous before the documentary.

During this process, we identified themes that reflect well-established theoretical constructs (e.g., chance events, protean careers). In the third and final stage of coding, and following Corbin and Strauss (2014), we used such theoretical constructs to structure our empirical observations. This process allowed us to trace each chef’s career trajectory in relation to the codes. The overall data structure is presented in Figure 1, designed following Gioia et al. (2013).

8. Findings

In this section, we present our findings in line with our data structure. We use the second-order categories as headings before moving to the discussion section.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

8.1 Motivation and intentionality of becoming a top chef

Surprisingly, only 1/3 of the chefs had a career based on early ‘calling’. By early calling we mean that they got into the restauration business early in their life with an intention to carve
out a career in this field. The majority of these top chefs had gone into working in the kitchen
at a later stage of life or via serendipitous accidents.

For those who wanted to be a chef early, falling in love with this career seems to be related to
an early family connection and context. For example, the early stage for Ben Shewry, Grant
Achatz, Vladimir Mukhin and Corrado Assenza was working in their family restaurants. This
early exposure to the restaurant environment induced fascination with and a love of it,
translating later on to a ‘call’ to become a chef. All these 10 chefs either opened a restaurant
or attended a cooking school early in their lives.

More surprisingly perhaps, the majority of the other top chefs did not initially see themselves
in this industry. For instance, Mashama Bailey studied psychology but did not do well in her
first job before turning to cooking. Both Nancy Silverton and Enrique Olvera cooked to
impress their potential partners (both later married later the person they were trying to
impress). Cristina Martinez was forced into cooking by her husband’s family. Alexa Atala
signed up to cooking school in order to extend his visa:

“I had two problems. First one, make money. So I start to work painting walls. And
the second, get a visa. One of the guys who was painting walls was doing chef school.
I said, "Nice way to have a visa." So I went to chef school. To be clear... I didn't
decide to be a chef. [laughing] My visa pushed me to be a chef.”

Our data, then, illustrate that becoming a top global chef does not necessarily start through
an early childhood calling. Most of the studied chefs started in the culinary environment
due to various contextual elements.
8.2 The importance of exposure and diversity

Once they started their career in cooking, these top chefs acknowledged the importance of mobility in order to work with different mentors, different types of dishes, and exposure to different ingredients. This was sometime self-managed, as in the case of Niki Nakayama who decided to spend time in Japan and Dominique Crenn traveled to various places and worked in numerous hotels before deciding to open her own. On other occasions, a mentor would arrange for the person a visit to another restaurant, like Grant Achatz’s mentor who arranged for him to visit one of the most iconic restaurants at the time – El Bulli, or Bo Songvisava who went to London to learn about Thai food as her mentor recalls arranging this for her:

“When she was cooking in my Mediterranean restaurant, Bo was quite keen to learn more about her own cuisine. And that wasn’t gonna happen in Bangkok. And I was like, why don't you just get out and go and work for David Thompson in London?”

Finally, another source of exposure is when a chef examines the different regional cuisines. Magnus Nilsson traveled in the Baltic countries to discover different preparations and document them in a book. Similarly, Virgilio Martinez traveled to different places in Peru to discover the diverse cuisine:

“I decided to travel for one year to do some research about Peru. I was looking for inspiration. When I went to the Amazonia and the Andes, there were all these beautiful landscapes. I started to feel some connection. I realized that Peru is so much more than Lima.”

This last type appears at an advanced stage in chefs’ careers, rather than in the early stages.

8.3 The role of chance events

The data illustrate the vital role of chance events on the career achievements of these chefs.
Maissmo Bottura recalls that his work became recognized after a visit from the most important food critic in Italy, who had to stop in Modena (where Massimo’s restaurant is) to avoid heavy traffic caused by a road accident:

“One night in April 2001, the most important food critic in Italy was driving from Milan to Florence, and there was an accident in Bologna, so there was a very long line. He decided to stop in Modena. He detoured and he had dinner in Osteria. Two days later, the most important magazine, Espresso, came out with this article.”

Grant Achatz had tongue cancer and lost his sense of taste after radio therapy. This loss forced him to collaborate and be creative. When the taste sense came back gradually, he re-discovered flavors in a unique way, just like babies discover them. Dan Barber bought an excessive quantity of asparagus by mistake, so decided to do a whole menu based on this vegetable in order to avoid loss. This excessive use of one seasonal ingredient impressed a food critic who wrote an important and influential review. Vladimir Mukhin’s passion about Russian cuisine drawn very little attention initially, but the Russian embargo on imported European ingredients (after the annexation of Ukraine triggered a series of event) suddenly put him in the spotlight as a national hero.

These findings illustrate the importance of chance and coincidental events on the life and professional achievement of these entrepreneurs.

8.4 Strongly structured and institutionalized field

Achieving a top chef status is bounded by strong institutional rules. First, mastering the French cuisine appears to be an important requisite in the trajectory. The vast majority went to France to learn from the best chefs there, as did Vladimir Mukhin, Dan Barber, and Francis Mallaman among others. Magnus Nilsson explains:
“You go to France to be trained, and there's a tradition of it, and it's brutal, and it's brilliant. It presupposes a knowledge of your ingredients and what to do with them that nobody else has. It doesn't mean that you're gonna be creative, it doesn't mean you're gonna know... That you're gonna come up with new recipes. It doesn't mean you're gonna be a success, but you have the tools. And you can't get 'em anywhere else.”

Once this French-experience is completed, the chef-in-the-making then explores other possibilities and techniques. Oftentimes, this meant being inspired by a mentor. Moreover, career success is achieved only when receiving peer-recognition, symbolized by invitation to exhibit at international conferences, attracting food-critic reviews, and featuring on lists of top restaurants. Ana Ros’s restaurant in Slovenia received no attention until a review appeared in an Italian publication, and Alex Atala’s serving of Brazilian food only became known after he was invited to an international conference and received compliments on stage from a top chef. This reflects the institutional power concentration in food critics, international conferences, and established classifications – all institutional elements.

8.5 Readiness to break norms, do things differently, to innovate

Reaching the pinnacle of the chefs’ pyramid requires courage and not being afraid to challenge norms in an innovative way. Massimo Bottura’s early work was detested by the local Modenese as a food critic, Massimo himself and his wife told. However, Massimo aspired to run the best restaurant in the world and he was sometimes inspired by unusual events:

“One day, me and Taka, my sous-chef, were serving the last two lemon tarts. Taka, suddenly, he dropped one of the two tarts, and we were ready to serve. And that tart was on the counter, in the middle, between the plate and the counter. Half was there
on the counter and half was there in the plate [...] I said, "Taka, stop, stop. Look through my fingers. [making a photo frame] That is beautiful. Let's re-build as it's a broken stuff." [...] So, we get the lemon sabayon and we spread it on the plate. We ... rebuilt on the other plate with all this single precision to make them feel we did that on purpose. That was the moment in which we created ‘Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart’.”

This innovation seems thus important to the success of these top chefs. It is underpinned by a desire to be different and to stand out from the crowd.

8.6 The process of becoming a top global chef

As these top chefs told the stories of their careers, it became evident that achieving a start status was broken into two main stages. First, the chef achieves recognition after long years of hard work and dedication. However, achieving a world-class peer recognition appears to be a consequence of cooking dishes inspired by their own roots. Alex Atala cooked for years and was recognized as a good chef by reproducing the French cuisine. However, he became known internationally only when he stopped cooking French food and started cooking Brazilian workers’ food as two food critics point out:

“When I talk to Brazilians about Alex Atala, they're just proud that he's done it. That he's risen to this level, and he's done it with dignity, and he's done it in an uncompromising way.” and “At this point, in Brazilian cuisine, chef Alex Atala started to play an important role internationally. All of this helped Brazilians feel pride in their own culture.”

Virgilio Marinez even went a step further, when he achieved a world-leading position only after utilizing local and little-known ingredients from each altitude-classified ecosystem in Peru, and serving a tasting menu based on these different ecosystems:
“From the bottom of the sea to the top of the mountains, in Peru, we have many, many, many different levels and altitudes. So, at Central, we want to show you Peru in a vertical way. You are here in the restaurant, and you’re eating a dish that comes from 4,000 meters above sea level and you’re experiencing the Andes. And then you’re gonna go down to the sea... going up to the valleys... and then you’re gonna cross to the Amazonia. You are going to 17 ecosystems in one experience.... we have to see the whole thing.”

We summarize the process of becoming a top chef in our data in Figure 2, representing a dual-step process. Whereas the first steps are dealing with the professional journey of learning and becoming a chef, the second stage is closely linked to becoming entrepreneur, setting and building own business, reputation and unique signature to reach success.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

9.1 Conclusions

Our overall conclusions are that reaching the level of global top chef, requires certain career orientation, tenacity, and perseverance. However, chance events have a significant role, and to a certain extent can be managed. The typical progress that has led to becoming a global celebrity followed a two-stage path. Finally, success is not exclusive to those who considered the aim of becoming a global celebrity as a ‘calling’.

9.2 Theoretical Implications

We have focused on world top chefs’ career as restaurant entrepreneurs, studying their career journey – the why and how they have managed to gain an exceptional career success as entrepreneurs. In the case of restaurants, the nature of the business and the entrepreneurship
activity are strongly associated with the individual and his or her career. We thus contribute to both career and hospitality entrepreneurship literature and theory (Burton et al., 2016; Dyer, 1995; Thirumalesh Madanaguli et al., 2021).

Going back to our research questions, we identify a unique pattern which we label as the ‘two-steps’ trajectory, where these successful chefs went through a dual-hurdle process, first delving into having their own restaurant and establishing themselves, then moving up in terms of both quality and reputation (brand name – see Erkmen and Hancer, 2019) to reach a top level. This contributes to the concept of the boundaryless career that is not linear (Arthur, 2014), and this applies in particular to the creative industry (Bennett and Hennekam, 2018).

9.2.1 Contribution to Careers theory

Looking at the motivation and trajectory for this career choice, only a third of the chefs suggested that their path to the top was an early planned endeavor. In many cases the impetus started with family or via apprenticeship, which is a long and essential phase of a chef's career (Inversini et al., 2014). When entering the second phase, having a role model was instrumental for many of the successful chefs (see Scherer et al., 1989).

We also checked whether the careers were motivated by following an inner calling (Hall and Chandler, 2005). The majority of the cases in our sample were clearly influenced by chance events. Some of the chefs were actively looking for opportunities, and when a chance came, they positively exploited it. We thus exposed the role of chance events in careers (Pryor and Bright, 2011), and how they can be positively exploited (Kindsiko and Baruch, 2019).

Regarding ‘New Careers’ theory, we have mixed evidence. Some chefs have charted the traditional career path in restaurant business, such as following a family business. Others reached their position by managing their own career and taking the responsibility for their future, like the protean career theory suggests (Hall, 2004). We expand the protean career
theory and the role of being proactive to the under-covered area of the hospitality industry.

Equally, our findings suggest that vocational barriers and silos still persist, contrary to the premises of the theory of the boundaryless career, and the progression system are highly institutionalized.

We further developed career theory: whilst framed by values, norms of behavior, and customs, as well as by law and regulations, a career ecosystem nevertheless submits to the Darwinian principle of ‘the survival of the fittest,’ and where, for entrepreneurs, the psychological contract may be with the self, not with the organization (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). The chefs need to navigate their careers through a combination of professionalism and business acumen with multiple actors. The success rate in the restaurant business is low (Watson, 2007), and much of it is due to the chef in charge, as conventional wisdom backed by anecdotal cases suggests (Svejenova et al., 2005). The urge for innovation, and the need for recognition and independence characterized our sample, in line with Carter et al., (2003).

To the above we would add the need to be proactive (Seibert et al., 2001) and acquire an entrepreneurial mind-set (Haynie et al., 2010).

9.2.2 Contribution to Entrepreneurship theory

We found that successful entrepreneurship is both actor- and context-dependent (Welter, 2011). Thus our study helps reinstate the conceptual balance between "the agent" and the agency of the entrepreneur (Alvarez and Barney, 2007; Sarasvathy, 2001) and "the environment" by underscoring the contingencies (Davidsson, 2020; Ramoglou et al., 2021) necessary for the realization of entrepreneurial aspirations (Johns, 2016; Ramoglou and Tsang, 2016; Welter, 2011). Our empirical insights add nuance to the recent turn toward the complex interplay of the environmental conditions facilitating the actualization of desirable futures (Davidsson et al., 2020; Dimov, 2020). For example, how opportunity and luck may
play for success (Kirzner, 1979; 2002) and how individuals can exploit an imaginable turn of
(Feduzi et al., 2021; Ramoglou, 2021). This should be seen in balance with the entrepreneurs’
active agency to manage their careers, for example, by exposing themselves to diversity,
following discipline and rigor, being creative and innovative (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2018;
Ottenbacher and Harrington (2007). Being proactive is critical factor not merely for career
studies, but also for entrepreneurship activities (Glaub et al., 2014). Our study offers further
contribution to understand individual factors that may contribute to entrepreneurship success,
adding to earlier work which identify the role of psychological factors (Baluku et al., 2016)
like leadership (Montargot et al., 2022) and creativity of the chefs (Lee et al., 2020; Ouyang et
al., 2021).

Entrepreneurship literature does not offer a significant cover of entrepreneurs-chefs
and their development. Serial entrepreneurship literature does not characterize our population.
Only a few of the sample followed a career trajectory through a sequence of opening
restaurants, in contrast to the ‘Corridor Principle’ (Ronstadt, 1988) and the positive effect
identified for entrepreneurship experience (Uy et al., 2013).

Our participants developed significant entrepreneurship capital, a form of social
capacity that drives economic development (Urbano and Aparicio, 2016) and leads to
economic growth (Audretsch and Keilbach, 2004). Part of it may be due to the ability to make
a positive impression via the media, a feature which characterized our population (Baron and
Markman, 2003).

9.3 Implications to practice

Trying to lean from failures, Eisenmann (2021) focused on reasons for start-ups failures.
Lessons, though, can also be learnt from successful venture. Chefs feature on top-restaurant
lists and aspiring chefs/entrepreneurs could benefit from our two stage model when
developing their career plans. When preparing future entrepreneurs, in particular in the
restaurant field, for example in training, schools may expand their training programmes to wider knowledge on how to identify and exploit chance events.

9.4 Limitations and Future Research.

Our sample size is limited, though it is sufficient, in line with earlier studies, and covers a strong representative sample (Saunders and Townsend, 2016). Relying on secondary data set as the main set of data is a limitation, as we could not formulate our own specific questions. Yet, consistent structure and quality of the TV documentary enable us to gain insights and learn from it, as a resourceful option (Hill, 2007). Lastly, we only targeted successful populations, thus could not compare with non-successful chefs. Future studies may look at those who failed, as reasons for failure of entrepreneurial activities vary, and there is new call for studying the reasons why they tend to fail (Eisenmann, 2021).
References


Baruch, Y. (2015), Organizational and labor markets as career ecosystem. In A. de Vos and B. I. J. M. Van der Heijden (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sustainable careers* (pp. 365-380), Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.


Figure 1: Data structure

First-order concepts                      Second-order themes                      Aggregate
Education
Starting out in the restaurant industry  Motivation and intention
Early family memories                    of becoming a chef
Critical coincidental event              The role of chance
Realizing success via peer recognitions
Going back to roots and national
Food critics as gatekeepers
The importance of rankings
Rite of passage: experience in France

Process of innovation
Artistic qualities and inspirations
Early difficulties to challenge
conventional models
Importance of career advancement
Self-managing one’s career
Help and inspiration from mentors
Curiosity about other cuisines

Calling vs. chance event
World-class achievement process
New Careers and professionalism
Strongly institutionalized field
Breaking with established norms
Professionalism and boundaryless
The importance of exposure and diversity of experiences
Figure 2: Becoming a top global chef: A dual-step process
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chef</th>
<th>Restaurant</th>
<th>Why considered a top chef?</th>
<th>Gendre</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Massimo Bottura</td>
<td>Osteria Francescana</td>
<td>World's 50 Best Restaurants (1st place) 3 M Stars</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Barber</td>
<td>Blue Hill restaurant at Stone Barns</td>
<td>Top chef in the US, in the Time's 100 most influential, chefs' choice award</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis Mallmann</td>
<td>Patagonia Sur</td>
<td>World-pioneer in outdoor cooking. In 2015 resigned from the top 50 judge duty in protest over 'awards' system</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niki Nakayama</td>
<td>n/naka</td>
<td>The only female Kaiseki chef, rising stars J BEAD award</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Shewry</td>
<td>Attica</td>
<td>World's 50 Best Restaurants</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnus Nilsson</td>
<td>Fäviken</td>
<td>2 Michelin-stars, top 100 in the world</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Achatz</td>
<td>Alinea</td>
<td>3 stars, World's 50 Best Restaurants (6th)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Atala</td>
<td>D. O. M.</td>
<td>World's 50 best (18th)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique Crenn</td>
<td>Atelier Crenn</td>
<td>First female USA to get 2 starts Michelin, world's best female chef</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrique Olvera</td>
<td>Pujol</td>
<td>James Beard rising star, third on Latin America's 50 top</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana Roš</td>
<td>Hiša Franko</td>
<td>World's best female by the world's 50 best</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaggan Anand</td>
<td>Gaggan</td>
<td>Asia's best, and 7th in world's best 50</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeong Kwan</td>
<td>The Baegyangsa Temple</td>
<td>Rare case: identified and recommended by other Michelin-star Chef, she is a monk, invited regularly in top events/restaurants</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladimir Mukhin</td>
<td>White Rabbit</td>
<td>15th in the 50 world's top</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Silverton</td>
<td>Mozza</td>
<td>Outstanding chef James beard, international star diamond, TV chef of the year</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan Orkin</td>
<td>Ivan Ramen</td>
<td>Rare case: US chef who excels in Japan, cooking Ramen</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Raue</td>
<td>Restaurant Tim Raue</td>
<td>World's top 50, 2 Michelin-stars</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgilio Martínez</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>World's top 50 (6th)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Tosi</td>
<td>Milk Bar</td>
<td>James Beard Rising Star Chef + outstanding pastry chef</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrado Assenza</td>
<td>Caffè Sicilia</td>
<td>One of the best ice cream chefs in Italy, dating back to multiple generations</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordi Roca</td>
<td>El Celler de Can Roca</td>
<td>3 Michelin-stars, best restaurant top 50 world, world pastry chef</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Achievements</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will Goldfarb</td>
<td>Room 4 Dessert</td>
<td>10 Best Pastry Chefs in America, Star chef “Rising Star” award, a James Beard nomination for Best Pastry Chef in America</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristina Martinez</td>
<td>South Philly Barbacoa</td>
<td>Top 10 new restaurants in the USA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musa Dağdeviren</td>
<td>Çiya</td>
<td>Gourmand World Cookbook Awards, famous local chef, food anthropologist, writer and researcher, André Simon Award</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bo Songvisava</td>
<td>Bo.Lan</td>
<td>Best female chef in Asia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Adrià</td>
<td>Tickets</td>
<td>World's 50 best, 1 Michelin-star</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashama Bailey</td>
<td>Grey</td>
<td>James Beard Foundation’s Best Chef, Eater restaurant of the year 2017</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dario Cecchini</td>
<td>Antica Macellera Cecchini</td>
<td>World's most famous butcher</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asma Khan</td>
<td>Darjeeling Express</td>
<td>UK’s Asian Restaurant Awards, Asian Women of the Year Awards &amp; Best Casual Dining Restaurant</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean Brock</td>
<td>Husk</td>
<td>James Beard best chef, best new restaurant in America, Culinary Preservation Award</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 M & 10 F  Av. 49