



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

---

My Adventures in Sugar

Author(s): rachel adams

Source: *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 71-76

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/gfc.2011.11.1.71>

Accessed: 03/09/2014 16:16

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to  
*Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# My Adventures in Sugar



LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF a postmodern novel, *Moby Dick* cracks into a thousand pieces before Ahab even has a chance to reach him. Without the confrontation between Ahab and the whale, there can be no *Moby-Dick*. That's what we're all thinking as we cluster around Louise Chien, one of four contestants on the popular television show *Food Network Challenge*. Her charge is to complete a sugar sculpture based on Melville's masterpiece. She has designed a scene featuring the climactic meeting of man and whale. And now, some three hours into the eight-hour contest, she's struggling to make *Moby Dick*. Her first try ended in failure when the unwieldy blob of molten sugar

Above: Louise Chien takes a second try at the great white whale for her *Moby-Dick* sculpture.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL ADAMS © 2009

lost its shape as it hardened, caving in on itself and shattering like a lightbulb. As she starts over, the judges, producers, and camera crew watch intently, rooting for her to succeed while knowing that disaster can also lead to good drama.

I'm a part of the group clustered around Louise because I am a guest judge for "Sugar Adventures," the final episode of *Food Network Challenge*, which is now in its ninth season. Shows are filmed before a live audience at the Comcast Studios in Centennial, Colorado, a nondescript

suburb about forty-five minutes from Denver. The diehards arrive well before the competition begins at 8:00 A.M., armed with magazines, knitting, and snacks to help them pass the time. What keeps them there for up to thirteen hours is that these contests can be thrillingly unpredictable. Four professional chefs work under extreme time pressure in an unfamiliar kitchen. They are expected to keep their workstations clean and to interact with the judges and producers wandering around the set. Suspense builds as a clock hanging over the stage marks the passage of hours, minutes, and seconds in bright red digital numbers. Part of the interest is in seeing the pieces take shape. But as time gets short, the pressure mounts and mistakes start to happen, introducing the added excitement of looming catastrophe. As the host Keegan Gerhard puts it, "There is that NASCAR element. You don't want to see them crash, but when they do, you can't not watch."

The opportunity to appear on *Food Network Challenge* had fallen into my lap. I opened my e-mail one morning to find a message from Kim Allen, one of the show's production assistants, inviting me to appear as a guest judge on an episode with a literary twist. Each contestant would create a sugar sculpture based on a classic adventure novel, and she liked the idea of having an English professor to evaluate its thematic merits. I could see from the address line that she had sent the message to at least twenty of my colleagues. But I felt like it was designed for me alone. In addition to my job teaching English and American Studies, I'm passionate about baking. One summer I took a Masters' class in cake decorating, where I learned the difference between pastillage and fondant, boiled icing and royal icing, Italian, Swiss, and American buttercreams. I filled cakes with custard, chocolate mousse, and jam. I covered them in rolled fondant, made gumpaste flowers, and chocolate ruffles. By the end of the course my friends and family had eaten a lot of cake and I had realized how difficult the art of decorative pastry can be, reliant as it is on a combination of skill, time, patience, and unpredictable variables such as temperature and humidity.

I knew far less about sugar sculpture, beyond the kind of small ornaments that might be used to decorate a cake. I associated sugar showpieces with the kind of culinary events that involve carving stations, chocolate fountains, ice sculptures, and mountains of shrimp cocktail. Food transformed into art, these gaudy, inedible statues are the epitome of decadence, the perfect adornment to a table that is all about lavish excess.

After a few hours in the library, I learned that sugar sculpture has a long history. Some of the materials still in

use today can be traced back to antiquity. The first reference to sugar as an artistic medium occurs in the Middle Ages, when cast sugar figures were used to adorn holy feasts at the tables of Middle Eastern royalty. Techniques and ingredients traveled along Venetian trade routes from Byzantium to Western Europe. In the late medieval period sugar sculpture appeared in the English, French, and Italian courts to commemorate weddings, coronations, and religious festivals. The subjects of these pieces tended to be allegorical, religious, or political in nature. During the ensuing decades sculptors continued to refine the art of confectionary tableaux. Engravings from the Renaissance depict spectacular banquet tables decorated with sugar sculptures. Sometimes, smaller pieces were given to the guests to take home as souvenirs.

Sugar sculpture fell out of fashion with the rise of a sparer modernist aesthetic around World War I. It enjoyed a revival beginning in the 1960s, thanks in part to the growing popularity of the British tiered wedding cake. Today, sugar showpieces are most often found on buffet tables at resorts, casinos, and large hotels. However, a new generation of artists, hobbyists, and professional chefs is experimenting with increasingly quirky and inventive approaches to the medium.

What would such an art have to say about literature? And, more importantly, what would I, as a literary critic, have to say about how these pastry chefs transformed the novel into sugar? Although I was in the middle of teaching an intensive summer-school class, I thought the opportunity to learn more about sugar was just too intriguing to pass up. I was curious to see how a pastry chef would make meaning out of a nineteenth-century novel, and how I would make sense of the pieces they created.

*Food Network Challenge* descends from a long tradition of professional cooking competitions. The earliest may have taken place in the seventh century B.C., when the Assyrian king Sardanapalus, who was known for his love of feasting, organized a contest that rewarded chefs with money and honor. In 1882 the first *concours culinaire* was held in Paris. These cooking competitions quickly became an annual event, replicated over the next decades in Vienna, London, Brussels, and New York. The Internationale Kochkunst Ausstellung, or Culinary Olympics, is the oldest international competition, its title picking up on an enduring kinship between cooking and spectator sports. Four nations participated in the original IKA, which took place in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1896 with the goal of promoting tourism via the exchange of culinary techniques and ideas. Today, the Culinary Olympics features more than 750

professional chefs from thirty-one countries. In the United States cooking competitions were popular at fairs, local festivals, cook-offs, and baking contests, where they provided an opportunity for amateurs to showcase their talents. The first of these was the brainchild of Elkanah Watson, who sought to draw women to his 1813 agricultural fair in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, by holding contests for domestic products, needlework, and jams. The concept soon caught on with newspapers, which used recipe contests to attract readers and glean materials for cookbooks. Food producers such as Knox Gelatin, Perfect Baking Powder, and Pillsbury seized on the cooking competition as a way to gain name recognition and promote their products.

Televised culinary competitions are a relatively recent phenomenon, although cooking shows have been a part of television programming since James Beard's *I Love to Eat* premiered in 1946. The most famous early TV chef was Julia Child, who delighted viewers with her ebullient personality and charming approach to the occasional on-air culinary disaster. Child would pave the way for such celebrity chefs as Jacques Pépin, Rocco DiSpirito, Joyce Chen, and Emeril Lagasse. But competitive cooking wouldn't become a part of the U.S. television repertoire until the unexpected success of the campy Japanese import, *Iron Chef*, in 1999. An American spin-off first aired in 2005 and has now completed seven seasons. These shows made competitive cooking exciting to watch by adding spectacular audio-visual effects, the suspenseful unveiling of the ingredient of the day, and fast-paced play-by-play commentary.

In 2005 the Food Network also introduced the Challenge series, hosted by the burly, energetic chef Keegan Gerhard. During its first season competitions featured such standard American fare as pizza, ribs, chili, hamburgers, bread, and cakes of all kinds. More specialized episodes included the Army cook-off and Spam cook-off, and themed cake contests inspired by *The Simpsons Movie*, *Sesame Street*, and Elvis. When not based around populist American cuisine, competitions lean heavily toward visually spectacular items like cake, pastry, and chocolate. Winning entries are often chosen for qualities that can be appreciated by television viewers, such as artistry, technical merit, and interpretation of a given theme, rather than taste. Despite being called "Sugar Adventures," the pieces created on my episode weren't edible. They were made primarily of isomalt, a sugar substitute prized for its clarity and durability that, when consumed in large quantities, can cause cramps and diarrhea.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of narrative to the creation of a successfully televised food competition. Without a story, there can be no show. One of the primary

jobs of the producers is to infuse the contest with drama. Much like the Olympic games, an unfamiliar group of competitors are set up as characters with personalities, histories, and a list of past triumphs and failures. Narrative tension is created through interviews with the host, judges, and the competitors themselves, which serve as commentary as the Challenge unfolds. During the competition itself chefs have to work quickly and calmly while being trailed by producers, judges, and a camera crew. Often there are other twists. Cakes, pastries, and edible sculptures must reach a specified height, which makes them prone to collapse under their own weight. Before the pieces are judged, they have to be moved from the cooking station to a display table, providing another opportunity for disaster. Guest judges contribute added pressure. In past episodes brides-to-be have chosen their own wedding cakes, and triplets commissioned a cake for their eighteenth birthday party.

Featuring an English professor as a guest judge created its own kind of drama. For professional chefs whose training is largely vocational, a professor in the kitchen can seem at once intimidating and ridiculous. The edited version of the show plays on this tension by including numerous shots where I'm peering intently, and sometimes severely, at the pieces emerging in each of the four stations. Unlike the other two judges—Norman Love and Patrick Costen, both professional *chocolatiers*—my criteria strike the competitors as mysterious and unpredictable, and my comments about the pieces are intercut with their anxious efforts to interpret how I'm reacting to their work.

It isn't surprising that the chefs are confused, because the Food Network itself is rather unclear about the place of literature in the competition. For one thing, not all of the works on the list provided to the competitors were novels, although they are repeatedly described as such. Of course, I've learned from my students how common it is to call works like Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno* "novels," but in this case the generic slippage bespeaks a more general fuzziness about the literary angle of the contest. In the official rules competitors are instructed to "create a sugar showpiece based around one classic adventure novel." Twenty percent of the final score would rest on "representation of your assigned novel." From my assessment of their initial sketches I could see that the chefs had widely varying interpretations of what "representation of your assigned novel" might mean. In this sense they were grappling with a dilemma faced by sculptors throughout the ages as they sought to turn narrative—a medium in which plot and character unfold over time—into a static piece. Chien had opted for a single, emblematic scene; others sought



Above: Sal and Biago Settepani put the finishing touches on their Journey to the Center of the Earth sculpture.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL ADAMS © 2009

to compress a work's entire content into one design; and still others took a general impression of the work as inspiration for their own creation. All of these could loosely be considered a "representation," but I could sense from the beginning that there would be considerable room to debate the criteria of success in this category.

As expected, much of the day's drama centered on Chien's struggle to reproduce *Moby-Dick* in sugar. She had appeared on the show twice before. During a contest called "Candy Carnival" she dissolved into tears after her sculpture fell apart and couldn't be fixed. This incident came up so often in my conversations with the producers and my fellow judges that I couldn't help but hear an undercurrent of wishful thinking. Chien was the best kind of contestant, a loose cannon who might excel but might also break under pressure. The most nail-biting moment came when the upper layer of her sculpture started to come loose from

the base, tilting at a precarious angle. She caught it just in time to prevent the entire piece from collapsing. She also had trouble with the components of her design. The other competitors cast their larger sculptural pieces from custom-designed silicone molds that can cost as much as five hundred dollars. Given the price of the materials and tools required to participate, these chefs can't be in the competition for the money. Aside from the ten-thousand-dollar prize, there is invaluable publicity to be gained from a TV appearance. Nonetheless, I admired Chien for deciding to forgo the expensive silicone, instead making her own mold out of clear plastic held together with tape. After filling it with molten blue isomalt, she set it down on the stainless-steel counter to harden. Suspense mounted when

she found that some of the sugar had leaked out, gluing the piece firmly to the work surface as it dried. The cameras hovered expectantly as she maneuvered the unwieldy mold until finally she was able to pull it free. Then, of course, there was the problem with the whale. And no sooner had she affixed it to her tableau than Ahab's boat broke off and shattered on the counter, sending her assistant scurrying to construct a new one.

But drama came from other stations as well. As the sculptures approached their completed height in the last hour of the competition, they started to break. Problems emerged for the initial front-runner, the cool and experienced Susan Notter, whose piece was inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. She had designed a base intended to feature the black spot—the ominous sign that sets the novel's story in motion—floating in the center of a white sphere. All did not go as planned. Distracted by the cameras, she had poured her colors in the wrong order so that the center of the piece was white instead of black. Worse yet, in order to speed up the hardening process she was forced to put her mold in the freezer, where the rapid change in temperature caused the sphere to crack. And that wasn't her only problem. Notter had spent a lot of her time on intricate busts of the novel's main characters—Jim, Dr. Livesey, and Long John Silver—which she mounted in a cluster beneath a pirate flag on her ship's mast. As she went to attach an additional decorative element, the heads came loose and smashed on the counter below. The momentum of their fall destabilized several other parts of the sculpture, which also came crashing down. We all held our breath, waiting to see how she would react. Notter had burst into tears when faced with a similar calamity on a past episode called "Rock N' Roll Pastry." This time she maintained her composure while struggling to repair what she could. Minutes later, similar crashing sounds came from the last kitchen in the line, where the father-and-son team made up of Sal and Biago Settepani were completing a sculpture based on *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. A delicately formed raft had broken off, leaving the team, which had been gliding to a comfortable finish, with barely enough time to build another.

When the last seconds ticked away, one final hurdle remained. The chefs had to move their pieces to the judging stands. As each team carried its sculpture the short distance from the kitchen to a table draped in black cloth, the studio went dead silent. More than once, the moment of transfer has ended in disaster. This time, all four competitors were successful, and the studio let out a collective sigh of relief.

My fellow judges and I didn't need long to survey the results, since we had been watching the pieces evolve all afternoon. We took our notes to a back room to discuss. Chien's *Moby-Dick* was my favorite. The scene rested on an amber-colored base, where an open book disclosed the novel's famous opening sentence, "Call me Ishmael." I appreciated the visual metaphor created by the book, which was both the inspiration for and the literal foundation of the sculpture that grew out of it. Rising from its pages was a surging wave. Ahab stood in his boat, his harpoon poised to strike at the whale, which had survived its troubled beginnings to emerge large and well formed with a tiny, malevolent eye and a mouthful of menacingly crooked teeth. The spume of deep blue water that had caused such concern when it stuck to the table now curled upward behind the pair. Chien had chosen her novel well. For all its complexity, *Moby-Dick* could be boiled down to this easily recognizable tableau.

Notter's *Treasure Island* and a sculpture by Chad Pagano based on *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* suffered by comparison. Their pieces, which exploited the colorful and airy properties of sugar, failed to capture the darker elements of their chosen novels. Notter's featured a parrot, a treasure chest, and a jaunty pirate ship with a large bow atop the mast. To me it looked a lot like a corporate gift basket, neatly displaying the plot elements of *Treasure Island* while losing the narrative tension that makes them meaningful. In particular, it lost the current of disillusionment surrounding revelations of the pirates' greed, violence, and disloyalty. "I don't know what she wanted," Notter said with exasperation in her post-competition interview. "Pirates with blood coming out of them?" It's a fair question. Although I had read about a seventeenth-century Italian sugar sculpture featuring the flagellation of Christ, it is hard to imagine such a theme appealing to today's sugar artists. There is little room for the uglier aspects of a narrative to make their way into a piece that is supposed to be aesthetically appealing, as well as thematically appropriate.

Pagano struggled with a similar dilemma. His design featured the submarine *Nautilus* under attack by a gigantic sea creature. Knowledge of ocean life was limited during the period when the novel was written. Reflecting the uncertainties of his time, Verne depicted his beast as a jumbled hybrid of squid and octopus. Modern representations of the novel have typically gone with the more menacing figure of the squid. Pagano explained that he had chosen to make an octopus instead, believing that it was more faithful to Verne's original intentions. The problem was that the finished creature lacked the ferocity of

the monster described by Verne. With its big eyes and waving tentacles, his octopus looked like a cartoon character. As Judge Patrick Costen remarked wryly during the judging, Pagano's sculpture seemed more appropriate to a buffet table in Cancun than to the murky depths of the ocean depicted in the novel.

I faced my biggest challenge in judging Sal and Biago Settepani's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Little about their piece suggested that either chef had read the novel. The most memorable element of this Jules Verne story is the volcano whose eruption sends the party of explorers shooting up to the earth's surface. But it was nowhere to be seen in their design sketch. When I asked them about it early in the competition, they seemed concerned. After a quick conference, they added some pieces of orange sugar which, Sal explained, represented fire. Here we reached our impasse. I was looking for a sculpture that translated the novel's plot and themes into visual terms. The Settepanis gave me one that took the idea of the novel as a starting point for their own vision. Their piece, they explained, sought to capture the elements of air, earth, fire, and water. Fair enough, but this seemed to stretch the concept of "representation" to its limits. If they were my students, I would say they had failed to do the assignment. But here, I was only one of three judges.

Costen and Love argued that the piece was clearly superior in its artistry and technical merit. I could see their point. Its colors were luminous, the detailing finely executed and delicate. My fellow judges pointed out that Chien's sculpture was clumsy and crude by comparison. They noted the thickness of her pieces and the rough texture created by the homemade mold. According to their criteria, the winners were clearly the Settepanis. The beauty of their sculpture was all the more apparent when the show

aired on TV, where it was illuminated against a black background as the camera circled slowly around it. For dramatic purposes it helped that father and son were the dark-horse team going into the competition and that they leapt tearfully into each other's arms when they heard the good news.

By the end of the day I had learned that a chef's skill as a reader of literature mattered far less than his or her artistry and technique. The literary theme provides an occasion, but ultimately the Challenge requires spectacle, rewarding competitors for the size, sensation, and technical sophistication of the pieces. Like the contestants, I was there to serve as a character in an unfolding drama. When the show ran on TV, shots of the chefs at work often cut away to shots where I am examining the pieces with my brow furrowed, the incarnation of the scary professor who makes the competitors squirm with anxiety. And who wouldn't? The stern, bookish academic evokes a world of rarified knowledge, insiders' jargon, and mysterious standards of judgment. My character provided a point of sympathetic identification between the chefs and the show's imagined audience.

Ultimately, the winner would be decided not by an outsider but by members of the chefs' own professional milieu. A professor was as unlikely to pick the winner based on her own criteria as a chef would be allowed to decide a tenure case. This seemed right to me, given the premise of the show and the profession to which the competitors and judges all belong. And so I accepted their decision without argument and, when the winner had been announced, went back to my hotel room to eat chocolates sweetened with real sugar and to grade a stack of student papers that I needed to return when I got back to New York. ☉