

## Article

# Gastronomy: An Overlooked Arena for the Cultivation of Sustainable Meaning?

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**Abstract:** This article explores sustainable development from a gastronomic perspective. Humanistic perspectives on food offered by gastronomy are explored as an asset in cultivating self-awareness capacities needed for sustainable transformations of society. The purpose is to explore how gastronomes can cultivate understandings and explanations of sustainability to be conveyed to individuals via meals. In semi-annually recurring dialogic interviews, four university-educated gastronomes cultivated their understandings and explanations of sustainability, and modeled how these could be communicated to other individuals. The dialogues gradually brought the ideas of the researcher and the participants toward a common explanation of the potential ways gastronomic competency could advance sustainable development. The results highlight two ways of understanding *gastronomic sustainability*: functionally as practical communication, and formally as a cultural issue. Based on H.G. Gadamer's idea of *bildung as hermeneutic interpretation*, we argue that self-awareness is a process which is rooted in how knowledge is interpreted, understood, and explained by the individual. Practical participation in culturally influenced meals makes gastronomy a bridge between individual and societal issues, whereby gastronomic competencies can cultivate sustainable commitment, judgment, and community. In this way, *gastronomic sustainability* represents an approach to sustainable development that, significantly, also involves the cultivation of sustainable meaning.

**Keywords:** meal; gastronomic competence; sustainability; bildung; inner capacities; self-awareness; dialogue; hermeneutics; practical knowledge; culinary arts and meal science



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## 1. Introduction

Sustainable gastronomy is an established concept that principally means a cuisine which acquires and treats ingredients sustainably [1]. Today, food and meals are often topical issues in relation to sustainable development [2], and the importance of food's ability to cultivate inner capacities needed for sustainable transformations is emphasized by, e.g., the Conscious Food Systems Alliance (CoFSA) [3]. Pereira et al. [4] suggested that a transition to more sustainable food systems would demand both sustainable food production and sustainable meal culture, arguing that chefs are changemakers who can bring these perspectives together and convey sustainability in innovative ways. Sustainable gastronomy is no longer solely about how gastronomy itself can be made more sustainable, as the issue is now expanded to encompass how a sustainable society can be developed via gastronomic means. As a social movement, gastronomy can contribute to sustainable development beyond issues that directly concern food and beverages [5].

The purpose of this study is to explore how gastronomes can cultivate understandings and explanations of sustainability to be conveyed to individuals via meals. In this article, "gastronomes" refers to people who work in gastronomy, and gastronomy is viewed from a humanistic perspective.

### 1.1. The Context of the Study

Gastronomes are a small group of the population, which was selected to be studied in order to highlight their particular manner of communicating inner perspectives on sustainability. This article examines how the alumni of a Swedish bachelor's program related to gastronomy discuss their knowledge for addressing sustainability issues. University-educated gastronomes are used to discussing meals in terms of both theoretical and practical knowledge. For those who do not have an academic background, the concept of such knowledge may appear abstract. Therefore, it was important to sample participants with an academic education.

According to the hospitality researcher Lashley [6], the purpose of academic education is not to adapt to the temporary requirements of a changing industry, but rather to create conditions for the development of future industries. That is, it is not intended to educate only for what we know and need today, but rather to educate a skilled preparedness for what we do not know. Many studies on knowledge development in gastronomy focus either on formal education in academe or on experiential learning in the workplace [7], but few studies explore the interplay between these two perspectives, e.g., [8–10]. *Bildung*, an idea of viewing knowledge in the way individuals experience it when impressions settle and become individual sense-making, is an idea that links these two perspectives. There is a lack of scientific studies applying a *bildung* perspective to how gastronomy alumni continue to develop their knowledge and make sense of their previous academic educations. From this perspective, studies of alumni's ongoing knowledge development and application are a critical part of evaluating academic educations.

### 1.2. Sustainability in Gastronomy

Sustainable development has been identified as a significant part of the practical competency that conscious chefs and waiters communicate in their professional practice [11]. Practical knowledge of gastronomy can be both about performing material crafts and about interpersonal treatment of and communication with guests [12]. A discussion of sustainability in gastronomy can therefore cover a wide range of sustainability competences, in both the craft and the interpersonal.

Meals can be sustainable both functionally, i.e., meals are prepared and served using sustainable ingredients and sustainable techniques, and experientially, i.e., meals are creative and enjoyable experiences of sustainability [13]. The ability to combine knowledge with creativity has been discussed as a central competency in restaurant workers' sustainability work [14], describing how restaurants have the potential to develop successful business ideas based on sustainability. Restaurants can be sustainable in a positive and experiential sense to attract guests while communicating the ideal of sustainability [13]. Westling, Wennström, and Öström [15] discussed, in terms of culinary action, a practical perspective on developing and communicating sustainable meals, which can function as grassroots projects that in the long run create change at the societal level as well. According to Mäkelä and Niva [16], the communication of cultural and practical perspectives on sustainability is significant in gastronomy. Restaurant meals can, for example, convey knowledge of ethical aspects of sustainability by using raw materials from local sustainable food production and communicating their sustainability aspects through innovative cooking [4,16].

### 1.3. Gastronomy as Humanism

In the early literature on gastronomy, e.g., by Brillat-Savarin or Hagdahl, humanistic ideals are often evident in discussions of knowledge [17,18]. The material food and the human individual were often united in the reasonings, with the individual perspective often being given special emphasis. Simmel [19] noted that eating a meal is an individual activity that is part of a social context. He thereby argued that meals can mediate between individuals and communities, because they bring impressions from communities to individuals and, conversely, bring individual meaning to social contexts. L'Orange Fürst [20]

developed Simmel's reasoning by pointing out that food affects people not only as a source of standardized nutrients, but also by means of individual freedom at an emotional level. Overall, meals are rich in individual perspectives on food and beverages, so gastronomic meals are interesting arenas for studying people [21].

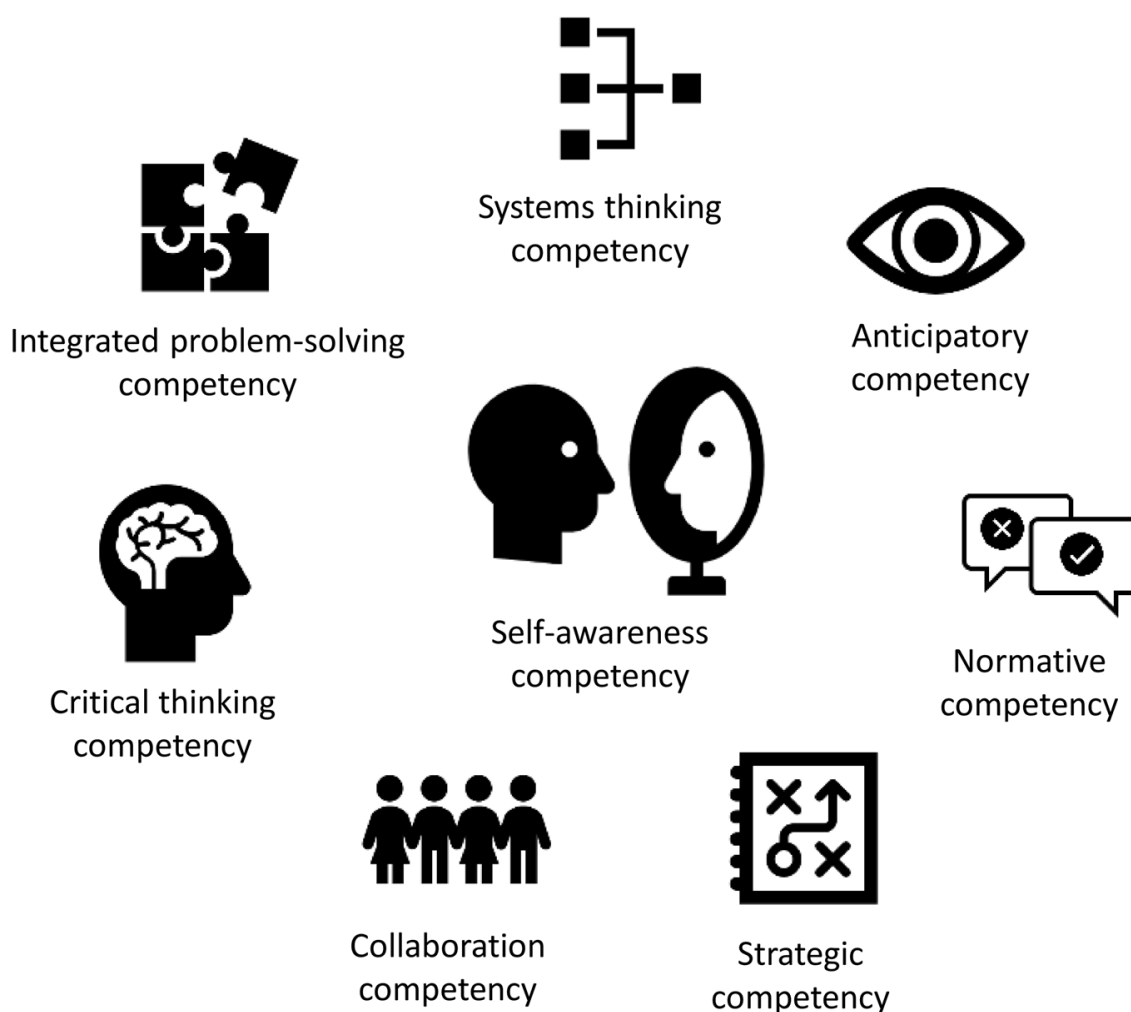
In our time, a humanistic perspective on gastronomy is prominent in the European Parliament's resolution on Europe's gastronomic heritage of 12 March 2014, P7\_TA(2014)0211, which defines gastronomy as "the combination of knowledge, experience, art and craft, which provides a healthy and pleasurable eating experience" [22]. This resolution describes gastronomy as a cultural phenomenon that belongs to people's identity. It highlights how gastronomy can affect the value, quality, and excellence of raw materials involved in, e.g., issues of respect for animals and nature.

#### *1.4. Inner Capacities of Sustainability*

Today, sustainable development is often approached in terms of measures or evaluable goals, e.g., UN Sustainable Development Goals, ESG, carbon footprint, food miles, etc. These perspectives assume that sustainability is primarily based on factual knowledge and presuppose that those facts lead to knowledge-based actions. However, according to Wessbo and Uhrqvist [23], knowledge of sustainability goes beyond the need for humanity to know more, encompassing the need to do more together. Such a perspective on sustainability drives increasing sustainable actions by developing sustainable judgment. In this way, individuals' own abilities become the departure points for adapting their behaviors [24–26]. Pappas, Pappas, and Sweeney [24] argued that global sustainability problems often originate from individual constraints in judgment when important decisions are made. Collective change is therefore largely dependent on inner capacities such as awareness and endeavors cf. [3,27]. For example, it might be easier to create new eating habits if the new food is gastronomically appealing [28], since a kind of understanding is already established between individuals and their food. According to Bruner [29], meaning-making is the process by which humans understand and make sense of their experiences and actions. Barrella et al. [30] believe that a significant part of individuals' ability to act sustainably comes from understanding the relationship between their real abilities and their ideals. Meaningful change is thus dependent on whether individuals adapt their courses of action to conform to their judgment.

When the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined sustainable development in the publication *Education for Sustainable Development Goals* [31], it was described as competencies that humans possess which include both theoretical and practical knowledge (Figure 1). In this article, the discussion of sustainability will be based on the UNESCO perspective.

Understanding how people strive for sustainable habits in their lives is an important part of developing sustainable meals [16]. One of the eight key competences for sustainable development that UNESCO [31] identified is self-awareness (Figure 1). Self-awareness, in this context, is the ability to reflect on one's role in the local community and global society, to continually evaluate and justify one's actions, and to address one's feelings and desires regarding sustainability issues [31]. According to Jaakkola et al. [32], self-awareness should be understood as awareness of oneself in relation to the world rather than of focusing merely on the self. Self-awareness is also an important aspect of critical thinking, for recognizing one's own limitations, gaps in knowledge, prejudices, etc. [27]. Öhman and Sund [33] explored students' commitment to sustainability based on intellectual, emotional, and practical aspects, and found that the intellectual aspect comprises critical thinking, the emotional aspect comprises dedication, and the practical aspect comprises actions for change. Similarly, Ren, O'Dell, and Budeanu [34] reasoned about the need to consider the personal and emotional aspects of sustainability in order to understand sustainable development at a cultural level. The attitude of the individual is thus a factor that can be crucial for sustainability work in many ways.



**Figure 1.** The UNESCO key competencies needed for sustainable development.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this article is based on Gadamer’s idea of *bildung as hermeneutic interpretation* [35], meaning that knowledge is viewed from the perspective of how it is interpreted, understood, and explained by the individual. According to Östergren and Jonsson [12], this theory is compatible with considering gastronomy as humanism, as outlined in Section 1.3. According to Gadamer [35], like nature, *bildung* has no goals outside itself but is an evolving process. In this paper, *bildung* is used as a framework for analysis, in order to facilitate this academic discussion of the inner capacities of sustainability.

Gadamer [35] likened *bildung* to how a person makes sense of the impressions of a journey after returning home, when the experiences settle and are made individually shaped. “*Bildung* thus means to start with oneself, then depart and go beyond oneself, and thereafter return to oneself, in a constant movement between the familiar and the foreign” [36] (p. 89). Based on how knowledge development has been discussed in the Swedish *bildung* tradition [36–41], this article explores how sustainable development can be made more accessible to the individual when it is conveyed by meals.

According to the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) [42], *bildung* offers opportunities to develop learning and teaching in line with UNESCO’s Education for Sustainable Development Goals [31]. Wessbo and Uhrqvist [23] studied how stories that convey a *bildung* experience of sustainability can strengthen learning regarding sustainable development. Stories are seen as carriers of *bildung*, as they create context and answer questions in communication with their audience [43]. *Bildung* makes it possible to

handle broad cross-disciplinary perspectives, by creating openness, meaning-making, and commitment to sustainability issues at a human level [23,42].

Gadamer [35] defines *bildung* as a human task, essentially practical, which is about handling knowledge in contexts that are broader than the particular knowledge in itself. Similarly, Sörlin [41] as well as Östergren and Jonsson [12] have discussed how *bildung* can combine general theoretical knowledge with the specific knowledge and judgment gained from individual practical experiences, the latter being required for people to be able to “know together” and face societal problems together. According to Boström, Lundahl, and Öhman [44], theoretical and practical abilities are brought together within the *bildung* perspective, enabling a unified view of both the general and the specific, the individual and the shared. This is in line with how Gadamer [35] discusses the theoretical as interests that prompt a journey, but that these are dependent on the practical experiences from the journey itself before they become truly meaningful for people.

Phronesis, a similar concept of practical judgment manifested in action, was already discussed by Aristotle [45], who distinguished it from the practical execution of actions, which was called *techné*. Nussbaum [46] further developed how Aristotelian practical judgment could be cultivated by means of people’s understanding of one another, using the concept of narrative imagination as the ability to understand other people empathetically and interestedly. Such an imagination involves self-awareness in a form that is not solely individual, as Nussbaum [46] noted, as this awareness is instead a tool for engaging people to work for the common good. Individual perspectives are seen as enriching and developing the collective, so diverse perspectives are needed to cultivate a good society [46]. Cultivation, according to Nussbaum, is a constructive approach to knowledge that is based on all human abilities such as feeling, thinking, and acting. Nussbaum believes that humans, through narrative imagination, can cultivate an understanding of other cultures that goes hand in hand with a critical understanding of their own. By cultivating people’s citizenship in terms of understanding their own role in relation to the foreign, they are made aware of how other people’s views and experiences can enrich their own [46].

Later, Nussbaum developed these ideas about cultivating human abilities with a stronger societal application [47]. The latter Nussbaum [47] considers inner capacities as linked to professional capabilities, and reasons about how these can be used in social governance. This differs from Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach [35], which is more general and deals ontologically with what it is to live as a knowledgeable human being. We do not intend to limit the idea of gastronomy as humanism to applied capabilities, but in this article, we are also interested in including how gastronomy cultivates the self, which brings us closer to Gadamer’s idea of *bildung as hermeneutic interpretation* [35].

When *bildung* is discussed in terms of using oneself for contextualizing knowledge, it is called cultivation-of-the-self [37,38,48]. Its significance is about creating a personal belief in one’s own ability to change one’s life situation. B. Gustavsson [39] describes cultivation-of-the-self as a practical process but emphasizes that individuals can achieve such *bildung* not only through practical labor but also through practical communication in the form of dialogue and conversation. On the other hand, *bildung* considered as comprising social development activities is called civic *bildung* [40,41,46]. It is about individuals’ joint unfolding of knowledge and judgment, which evokes change based on the common good in, for example, democratic decisions. Cultivation-of-the-self and civic *bildung* are mutually dependent. For example, when humans must respond to societal issues without obvious solutions, they may develop a cultivated attitude toward addressing the issues. However, if too much emphasis is placed on civic *bildung*, the practical aspects are lost in favor of an overly abstract and instrumentalized evaluation of the purposes and targets of *bildung* [49]. Conversely, a one-sided emphasis on the cultivation-of-the-self may cause a kind of specialization that fails to serve the common good. A unity between cultivation-of-the-self and civic *bildung* can be formed when individuals and society cooperate by exploring societal challenges in open conversations [36,49,50]. Such a dialogical approach will bridge the gap between the individual’s experience-based knowhow and scientific



knowledge, creating opportunities to develop both perspectives in open dialogue with each other.

### 3. Materials and Methods

This article is based on individual perspectives that unfolded in dialogues between university-educated gastronomes and the first author in recurring interviews over a period of two years. In successive dialogues, each participant further developed his or her individual story, gradually. Stories are treated as cultural tools that people use to understand and explain themselves, one another, and the world around them [23,51]. In this paper, a hermeneutic method inspired by Ricoeur's approach to study individuals' narratives [43] is applied. In this way, we have chosen to focus on the diverse ways in which people share their varying understandings of reality with one another [52].

#### 3.1. Materials and Sample Group

In this study, participants were selected by voluntary sampling. Thirty-five students in a mandatory course in the third academic year of a bachelor's program were informed of this study and invited to participate. Four of those agreed, three women and one man aged 23–25 years. These participants received further information about the purpose and arrangement of this study and gave written consent to participate. The four participants each completed four interviews during the two-year study. In total, 16 interviews were conducted.

All participants had experience of professional work in restaurant kitchens or dining rooms, and all had undergone at least three years of university studies related to gastronomy. Members of the sample group had additional work experience in services and trades as well as additional higher education.

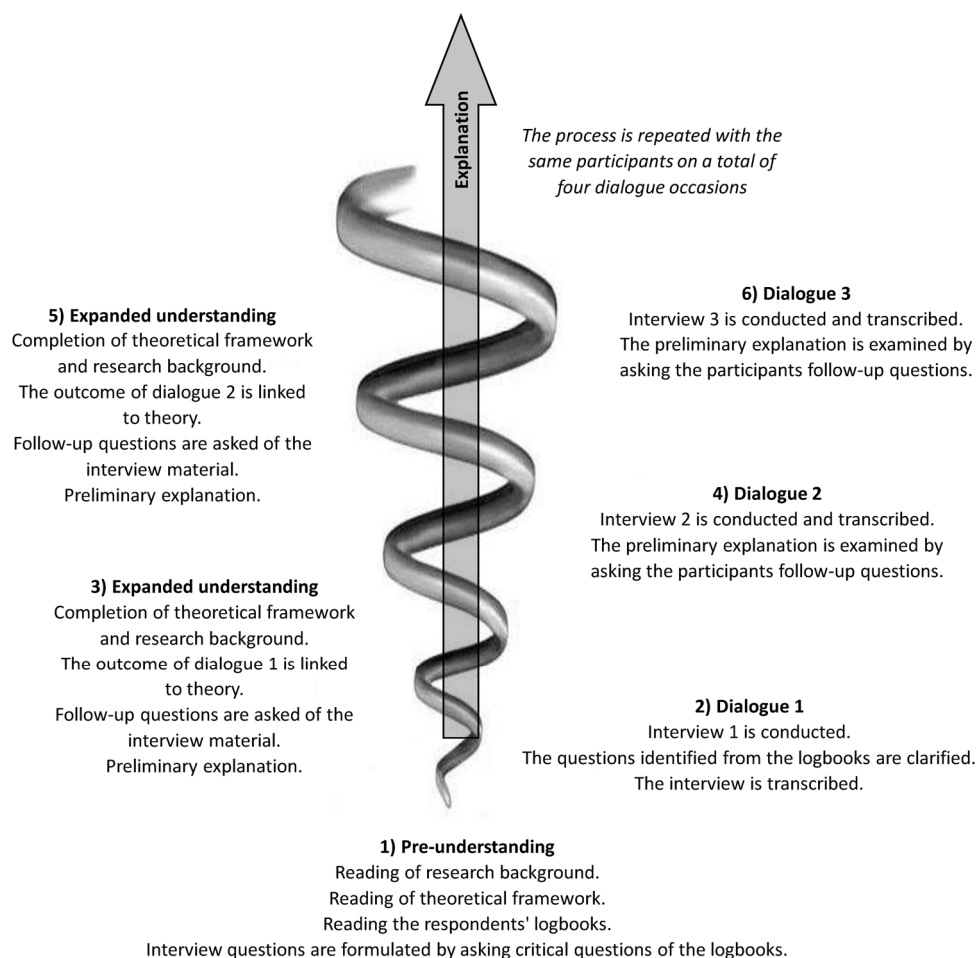
Data collection began in autumn 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, continued during the pandemic, and finished in 2021, at a time when social restrictions were temporarily eased. Over the two years, participants worked exclusively in occupations connected to gastronomy, but all of them changed jobs several times, working, for example, as chefs or servers at fine-dining and middle-class restaurants, in food and beverage retail, and in education. They also experienced short periods of redundancy and unemployment.

#### 3.2. Research Process for the Hermeneutic Study

The principal steps of this hermeneutic study were pre-understanding (i.e., background), dialogue (i.e., data collection), interpretation (i.e., analysis), and explanation (i.e., results and discussion); in practice, these four steps did not take place in order but rather iteratively. The research process was inspired by the process of Delphi studies [53–56].

Initially, the participants presented their views on the set topic separately; the first author then compiled a preliminary explanation guided by his pre-understanding; the first author returned to the same people separately to present his explanation together with supplementary questions; the explanation was validated, and the story was further developed by the participants; the first author then compiled an expanded explanation. This process was carried out repeatedly semi-annually to achieve a gradual in-depth understanding. Thus, this research had an exploratory approach, i.e., it was intended to explore the issue rather than to achieve consensus [54].

Figure 2 illustrates this study's research process. The spiral progression of interpretation moves continuously between understanding and dialogue, enriched with impressions from each side, whereby the explanation gradually expands and evolves.



**Figure 2.** The research process for this study.

### 3.3. The Researcher's Pre-Understanding and Gradually Expanding Understanding

Pre-understanding is the researcher's ability to apply theoretical and practical understanding in a study. In this study, recalling Traud [9], the first author's pre-understanding contributed to his awareness of both the participants' ways of reasoning theoretically about gastronomy and their ways of experiencing gastronomy in practice. Walter [57] described pre-understanding as an important dimension of conducting research on meals in terms of both background knowledge and research skill. This includes the researcher's familiarity with the academic field as well as with the subject's situation, for example, from similar work experience or life situation [9].

The introductory and theoretical background sections of this article can be perceived as summarizing the academic part of the researchers' pre-understanding in this study. These sections were continuously expanded during this study, in accordance with Figure 2. By processing the literature in parallel with data collection, the researchers enabled these two elements to critically interrogate each other [58,59]. Critical reading also gave rise to questions and hypothetical explanations regarding the material.

Alongside theoretical pre-understanding, the first author had a practical pre-understanding arising from his experience of situations similar to the participants'. The first author completed his undergraduate academic education in the same subject at the same university. He also had many years of practical experience of both working with and savoring meals similar to those with which the participants work. Mutual cultural experiences, such as the researchers and participants living in the same country at the same time, also contributed to this pre-understanding.

To establish each participant's current and individual pre-understanding, the first author initially examined logbooks the participants kept for a university course they

were taking when this study started. The logbooks contained individual reflections on the significance of the various elements of the course. The course dealt with the design, implementation, evaluation, and sale of ethical and sustainable meal experiences. This study's first interview was based on the students' reflections recorded in these logbooks (see step 1 in Figure 2).

#### 3.4. Data Collection: Dialogue with the Participants

Within the framework of the exploratory research process illustrated above (Figure 2), data were collected in dialogic interviews, conducted semi-annually during a period of two years. Dialogic interviewing is a method in which researchers and participants are co-creators of a result that incorporates both the researcher's and participants' perspectives [60–62]. An open-ended question was asked to all participants by e-mail a week before the interview, as a trigger to start reflection. To establish an individual starting point of the conversation, the participants were also asked to bring two pictures representing what the question meant to them to each interview. At each interview, the first author started from his interpretation of the previous interview, asking the participant exploratory questions about it. In the following dialogue, the first author's preliminary explanations of the material could thus be both validated and formatively developed. Each interview was adapted to its participant, putting the focus on meaning-making and individual reasoning, in accordance with Mishler [60].

Each interview lasted about one hour and was recorded, and additional notes were kept during the conversation. The first interview took place on site, while the follow-ups were online video meetings on Zoom. After each interview, the audio recording was transcribed, and during transcription, the researcher's reflections on the material were noted. The video recordings were discarded after transcription, but the audio files were kept and stored on Örebro University's file servers in accordance with current guidelines.

#### 3.5. Analysis: Hermeneutic Interpretation

Data were analyzed by using hermeneutic interpretation, based on Ricoeur's principle of analyzing narratives hermeneutically [43] and Lindseth and Norberg's principle of continuous reading of the literature alongside empirical data collection [58]. Ricoeur [43] described the researcher's work as the explanation of data, meaning that assurance regarding the explanation of the given material arises when the material is linked to an interpretation. The hermeneutic method involves making the pre-understanding and dialogue communicate with each other, to gradually intertwine into an explanation (see Figure 2). Communication is a principle of Ricoeur's hermeneutics and refers to the transfer of meaning that develops mutually between the participants and the interpretive researcher [43,59,63]. Simplified, Ricoeur's hermeneutics [43] is based on the thesis that people understand better by explaining and explain better by understanding, and that these two are therefore interdependent throughout the research process.

In this study, the starting point of the researcher's interpretation was the impression gained from reading and processing both the literature and logbooks (see Figure 2). The first author then further and iteratively processed the theory and interviews throughout the research project. The impressions, questions, and hypothetical explanations of the material that arose during the interviews, transcription process, literature studies, and transcript reading were noted in the first author's own words [58]. The explanations could, for example, contain parallels or contrasts between the pre-understanding and the dialogue, useful examples, apt wording, and open-ended questions.

Answers to questions and the unfolding of explanations were sought partly in the literature and partly by asking the participants questions at the next interviews; in each interview round, the understanding of the theoretical background and interview material gained focus and was deepened in this way (see Figure 2). Initially, the interpretation had an unmanageable number of dimensions, but with the guidance of the theoretical background, it was eventually reduced to the two overall dimensions reported here.



The participants were active collaborators in the interpretation. Because the interviews constituted a gradual in-depth study of the material which the participants shared, the participants validated, developed, and clarified the material themselves. Not least, they were able to look at their stories from other perspectives in retrospect, re-evaluate them, and further develop them dialogically. Participants experienced things in their lives over time that affected how their gastronomic competencies evolved. Considering knowledge as evolving was central to Ricoeur [43] and is consistent with the evolving nature of this study's explanation as a result of the dialogic process (see Figure 2).

Participants were allowed to influence, give feedback on, and correct the information gathered, which plays an important role in ensuring that the interpretations and explanations are credible [64]. In addition, method-critical discussions were continuously conducted to maintain transparency in the data collection process, both within the group of co-writers and with external researchers during research seminars, workshops, and conferences. The dialogical structure of the data collection meant that the participants' progress was both documented and influenced [59,65]. This method requires the researcher to be open-minded toward the participants' progress during the study, and not to expect any pre-determined change in their attitudes or that they should arrive at any particular way of thinking. Way, Zwier, and Tracy [61] recommended that researchers should instead start from the opposite perspective, and consistently use dialogues to question and challenge their research assumptions instead of seeking their confirmation. As Ricoeur [66] (p. 94) noted, "to understand is not to project oneself into the text but to expose oneself to it".

Both the stories that are this study's primary material and the interpretation that is this study's analysis are contextual. This means that reproducibility can be ensured in principle, but not objectively [65]; if this study is reproduced, the results are expected to indicate a similar evolution of sustainability concepts but could consist of other examples and different types of reasoning. Ricoeur [43] stated that truth in a hermeneutic study is not only about understanding things better, but also about explaining them better. This means that the credibility of research is ensured by the credibility of the researcher's explanation. The present results are therefore not the compilation of a common story, but instead of a common explanation. Mishler [65] believed that story-based research results were not meant to be understood literally, but should rather engage in dialogue with the reader, with the reader taking part in creating the results by reading between the lines. The researchers' ambition is therefore to initiate dialogue with the reader of this paper that the reader is free to continue.

Due to the sample and the method of analysis, generalizations of results must also be considered cautiously. However, this type of result allows for naturalistic generalizations [67] in terms of readers in other settings being able to relate their own contexts to this study and develop understanding and explanation by comparing and reflecting on similarities and differences between this and other cases. Flyvbjerg [68] emphasizes the significance of generalizations based on specific and distinctive cases, since they can contribute to scientific innovations.

### 3.6. Ethical Considerations

In this study, the research material consists of personal stories. Stories are a cultural tool that people use to understand and explain themselves, one another, and the world around them [51]. This means that the researchers were encountering the participants' personal experiences, thoughts, and ideas; this demanded the careful handling of proximity and distance to the material by the researchers, as proximity is justified only when it is relevant to the results of the study. However, by being conducted as dialogues, the present interviews differed from conventional interviews in that the researcher's power over the interview situation was more clearly shared with the participants [69]. Proximity and distance to the material, through the dialogical form of the interviews, were continuously negotiated in an open process with each participant and adapted at the individual level.

Personal stories consist of such detailed and individually specific information that complete anonymity may be impossible to guarantee, which means that anonymity must instead emphasize that no information that could harm the participants is identifiable [70]. Personal data has therefore been handled with care: the interviews were anonymized at the time of transcription and no sensitive personal data are evident in the material. Written informed consent was obtained from the authors of all logbooks before they were read, and from all interview participants before the first interview. In addition, to identify whether the participants changed their attitudes over time, in accordance with Smythe and Murray [70], each participant's consent was confirmed orally before each interview. It is especially important for the quality of research material consisting of stories that participation in the interviews should be based on voluntariness and trust, both of which stimulate the desire to tell [64].

This study was conducted contemporaneously with the COVID-19 pandemic, which both affected the consciousness of the participants, because it was an ongoing global crisis, and caused restrictions to be established in society, which affected routines at the participants' workplaces [71,72]. The material of this study thus reflects two major societal changes: the transition from a normal state to a pandemic state, and the transition from a pandemic state to a new normal state.

#### 4. Results

The dialogues in this study gradually brought the positions of the first author and the participants toward a common explanation of potential ways gastronomic competencies could contribute to sustainable development. This explanation is the researcher's representation of the participants' reasoning, in accordance with Ricoeur [43], who described the results of a hermeneutic study as a kind of reconciliation of meanings.

In the following section, the results are presented in the form of retellings of the participants' stories, inspired by how Miller and Deutsch [64] described thematic narrative data reporting in food studies. The results have thematically focused on sustainability issues, meaning that sustainability perspectives have been identified, highlighted, and interpreted in the results. Each retelling also includes interview excerpts particularly important for the interpretation.

The results are grouped in two overall dimensions identified in the material: gastronomic sustainability as practical communication and gastronomic sustainability as a cultural issue.

##### 4.1. *Gastronomic Sustainability as Practical Communication*

Sustainability in gastronomy was described as a multifaceted concept and difficult to describe fairly using established sustainability definitions. The reasoning that the participants wanted to express was often too abstract to be formulated in words alone. Instead, many examples were given of how they practiced sustainability, or how they experienced others practicing sustainability. These examples were about apt ways to communicate sustainability through practical actions. There were examples of choosing sustainable raw materials and of practicing sustainable working methods. These were not only about operating sustainability at the business level, but also involved the practical communication of sustainability from person to person with guests. The following quotation illustrates how a meal was prepared at a common level, but was dedicated to people at an individual level:

I still feel that it is part of my role as a chef that I should do the best I can with the ingredients available. If I am to be able to work sustainably with them [i.e., the ingredients], then I must always think of new ways to take care of what is left over, or whether something needs to be remade, or whether someone cannot eat it but needs something else. So that things should be sustainable. One must still think in such a way that everyone should have the same experience, even though they do not have the same conditions. And then I must be able to work toward those goals in a sustainable way.

Meals include a general basis in the form of ingredients, menus, restaurant environments, etc., but meals also offer, to a significant extent, individual explanations adapted to each participating guest:

There is nothing that suits everyone, but often there is a basic idea and a basic concept that appeals to most people. And then you can always adapt it at an individual level.

Gastronomic meals thus offer something more than concrete products and general standard communication. Meals also provide a form of practical explanation: perceived sensuous impressions. Based on gastronomic meals, people can make themselves aware, reflect on things, discover new perspectives, and develop their attitudes. One participant highlighted how food easily invites people to reflect on what they subjectively like, and therefore believed that food could also lead people to discover new ideas. Gastronomy affects people at an individual emotional level, and that was highlighted as important for implementing change work:

We understand through many ways of learning. And I think that, somehow, learning through sensory science and stories might affect [us] more emotionally . . . Of course, it will be important, as you say, to go through with change projects.

The participants described gastronomy as a competency that offers people explanations of complex issues such as sustainability in an accessible and apt way. In gastronomic meals, it is convenient to try novelties, which can be eye-opening experiences that initiate changed behavior. This practical experience perspective is presented as an important complement to the cognitively conscious mode of discussion perceived as dominant in the sustainability discourse.

A restaurant worker described how individual perspectives such as memories, experiences, and imagination can be used as practical tools in developing, thinking anew, and thinking ahead:

It's a lot about understanding what we humans need—how much, when, why, in what way . . . But it is very much based on people's own needs. And there, occasionally, we have stopped and somehow closed our eyes and tried to think of a scent that evokes something positive. Tried to start from memories and pictures to be able to think anew and try to think ahead. And I absolutely believe that gastronomy contributes. I think that being trained in analyzing, and also just enjoying, can contribute to the fact that you may also be used to fantasizing.

In the above quotation, imagination is described as something that unites reason and feeling, so analysis and enjoyment are co-creators of gastronomic knowledge. Gastronomy was often also likened to art in the interviews, and there was reasoning about how gastronomic meals differ from meals in general in that artistic expression is particularly prominent. Gastronomy was thereby described as equivalent to other art forms:

I think gastronomy is a kind of art, although perhaps not all meals are an expression of art. But in that, it will have the same meaning as music and film and literature and visual arts and stuff. Players trying to explain everything—that is difficult, or painful, or very delicious too.

The gastronomic meal is mind-opening, not just eye-opening, because as one participant put it, it speaks to the person by engaging all the senses: "Your whole being is part of what you perceive". Gastronomy was described as based on emotionally charged practical experiences, and as a broader way of understanding the world than the analytical way. This is related to how gastronomic meals give people opportunities to practically participate in cultural experiences in a stimulating way that makes them a positive way of assimilating new perspectives:

Partly for the joy, which we have talked about. For an ordinary person, or for all people I would say, it gives joy to eat, or cook, or go out to eat, or whatever it may

be. And understanding of other cultures, or whatever it may be. Different ideas of the relationship to food and the meal, of what others do. An understanding cooked for people. And I think most people want to have a good time. So, then it is good for us to understand how to create a meal experience that is pleasant.

The participants repeatedly described how gastronomic competency gives people the opportunity to think about how they themselves pay attention to challenges and opportunities regarding the sustainability of what they eat, and that this provides opportunities to challenge people's minds. Participating in a gastronomic meal can be likened to being in a kind of sanctuary, where reflection is combined with sensory stimulation, which can free people from their pre-conceived notions and be eye-opening:

Yes, I believe that in a world that is as polarized as ours is, and where there are such big differences, food can be a very central communicator.

#### 4.2. *Gastronomic Sustainability as a Cultural Issue*

The issues addressed by gastronomic meals were often presented from a cultural perspective in the dialogues. A recurring topic was how the atmosphere at the location and among the guests and staff shapes what the restaurant is, sometimes more than the products served do. Examples were cited of restaurants that serve the same type of food but still convey completely different atmospheres. The participants described the gastronomic manner as a very good way to foster understanding of other cultures. Culture becomes more tangible when served as a meal than when one reads about it or watches or listens to documentaries about it. The participants frequently expressed a cultural gastronomic sustainability idea in which the inherent stories of food, beverages, people, and places can be used for meaning-making:

It's about telling it—for me that has become recurrent. And then it's also more fun to tell this to the people who come and eat. I think it is when you do it yourself, then you have more understanding and respect for what it means. So it will not just be a flat "these are tomatoes from here and there", but an enrichment of perhaps experiencing a little more.

The participants described their idea of cultural sustainability in terms of how people should accept that they cannot control everything, but rather be open-minded because there are innumerable factors outside their usual habits that influence what people can eat and drink. The participants reasoned about how meals teach people to listen to one another and to the world around them:

Yes, basically, gastronomy is needed because it gives people opportunities to socialize. It gives people the opportunity to talk. It gives people the opportunity to think about how they see things themselves. What they like. And it gives people new opportunities to challenge themselves.

By learning to use such impressions more constructively, a special kind of problem-solving ability can be developed, according to the participants: a gastronomic mindset that can be applied to various everyday problems and challenges. One participant referred to how a new culture of making homemade non-alcoholic beverages has been developing in Sweden since restaurants started working more with such drinks. It was noted that the gastronomic mindset of composing flavors probably plays an important role in attracting people's interest. In this way, the gastronomic mindset can become integrated in guests' problem-solving abilities even in their everyday lives after a restaurant visit. Gastronomy can therefore be a cultural hotbed where people engage in societal development. The participants often discussed how gastronomy can stimulate people to engage in such issues with excitement:

I think gastronomy is needed as something that unites us in society. Something that contributes both knowledge and joy. And that can make people have an outlook on other problems as well. Or on other things that exist in society that

may be difficult to approach. Where gastronomy can function as a kind of bridge, between the individual and whatever it is that is difficult.

However, this gastronomic problem-solving ability was often described in words suggesting that it is an overlooked potential that deserves to be noticed and used more. The participants expressed a hope that, in the future, gastronomic competency will be more actively seen as a societal asset based on the meaning-making it can contribute at a societal level. They also expressed a strong desire to share their knowledge of sustainability. They emphasized that restaurant staff often share their knowledge very generously, as it is part of presenting the food being served. Knowledge is shared with employees, as well as with competitors and with restaurant guests, but the interviewees claimed that the value of this knowledge exchange was seldom recognized by broader society. In the dialogues, gastronomy was described as a bridge between the individual and major societal challenges, with the meal working through small developmental steps that create lasting impressions:

If you just manage to evoke one new interesting thought for a guest per night . . .  
One little thought is enough—then you have succeeded!

## 5. Discussion

The results document how the inner capacities of *gastronomic sustainability* were developed and acted on by this study's participants over time. Based on their diverse experiences, these university-educated gastronomes had their own opportunities to develop an individual perspective on their academic knowledge, further develop it, and realize and integrate it in their lives. This focus on the propagation of knowledge after education adds an important perspective to the idea of Education for Sustainable Development [31,42].

In the results, gastronomy functioned as a kind of breeding ground for inner perspectives on sustainability. Early in this study, the participants had a universal and predominantly theoretical understanding of sustainable development gained from their education. As alumni, during the research process, they gradually developed an increasingly individually adapted knowledge of *gastronomic sustainability* and evoked an interest in how this theoretical knowledge could be applied in practice. When the universal academic knowledge gained from their education was cultivated in a particular individual context in their practical working life, *bildung* took place [27,35,36]. This is consistent with how Gadamer [35] described practical *bildung* as a reconciliation with oneself that happens by opening oneself to new perspectives, in the individual process of expanding one's knowledge of the world. In our study, this means that decisions were driven by increasingly individual understandings and explanations of sustainability rather than by knowledge considered factual or measurable. Thereby, these results illustrate how *bildung*, in contrast to formal education, played a proportionally increasing role for the interviewees the more time elapsed since their academic education. This justifies further studies of how the growing human continues to refine gastronomic knowledge throughout their life.

The sample size and analysis make the results most appropriate to consider with a naturalistic approach to generalizations [67]. The greatest significance of these results is not if they are understood literally, but rather if they engage in dialogue with the reader as they can then bring scientific innovation [68]. This is not a study focused on presenting measurable or factual results. Instead, it is about launching, in terms of *bildung*, a way of thinking that can help people understand how, with the help of gastronomy, they can respond to sustainability problems in an innovative way. Thereby, the outcome of this study is individuals' mode of sense-making.

Critically examined, this study can be considered an in-depth study of a very narrow area of sustainability. The focus is primarily on how gastronomy can contribute to one of UNESCO's [31] eight key competences, i.e., self-awareness of sustainability, whereas sustainable development is much more complex. This hermeneutic study strove to interpret, understand, and explain a prominent perspective on the issue; it does not claim to provide a general scientific solution to any problem. Questions of how gastronomy can contribute to other perspectives on sustainability need to be addressed by further studies.



In this study, sustainability is considered in terms of practical competencies [31]; this study is thus not concerned with what is sustainable, instead focusing on how individuals themselves can learn to distinguish what is sustainable from what is not. The importance of cultivating such an attitude to knowledge was considered a too-often-overlooked humanistic perspective that deserves a place on the agenda concerning issues of food, meals, and sustainable development. The present results highlight two such ways for individuals to understand sustainability through gastronomy: in the form of a cultural issue and functionally as practical communication. These results were interpreted as the participants' inner capacities corresponding to a cultivation-of-the-self [37,38], expressed in the practical communication of the meal. This practical communication includes sensory experiences that stimulate the study participants' empathy regarding the issues that meals raise. This entails developing a form of narrative imagination [46] that the interviewees communicate to the employees and guests they encounter in their work. Thereby, this cultivation-of-the-self gives rise to joint civic commitment and ends up in the establishment of civic bildung [40,41,46]. In this study, civic bildung was often about shedding light on sustainability from a cultural perspective. When the present results are interpreted in these terms, it becomes apparent that gastronomic competencies can offer interesting opportunities to develop sustainable commitment to food and beverages in a way that addresses the guests as both individuals and citizens [3,32].

Both the cultivation-of-the-self and civic bildung are therefore important elements in the discussion of how gastronomic competency can foster commitment, judgment, and community concerning sustainability issues, and contributes new ideas on Education for Sustainable Development [31,42]. The former corresponds to inner capacities and the latter to civic commitment. This can be related to how Simmel [19], in the early 20th century, already reasoned about the meal as a bridge between individual and societal issues. In this way, gastronomy can be an integrative approach that brings together inner and outer dimensions of sustainability [3]. In humanistic terms, this arguably broadens the idea of sustainable development to significantly involve the cultivation of sustainable meaning. The balance between cultivation-of-the-self and civic bildung is not proportional in the results. Participants more often spoke in ways that could be linked to cultivation-of-the-self, which might indicate that the strongest impact of gastronomy is based on its inner capacities.

### 5.1. Cultivation-of-the-Self by Gastronomy

The results present examples of how gastronomic meals can provide practical guidance in opening individuals' minds for reflection and in broadening their perspectives. Viewed from a bildung perspective, cultivation-of-the-self [37,38] appears to be an important aspect of gastronomy. It is often highlighted in the reasoning that sensory experiences are individual. Individuality in meals, as Simmel [19] emphasized, means that people eat as individuals with individual sensory experiences linked to their own experiences and memories, at the same time as they are parts of social and cultural contexts that shape the interpersonal conditions of their meals. The present results imply that the individual treatment of guests in matters concerning their food and beverages can successfully be used to communicate and raise commitment to sustainability.

Sustainability is a complex issue for individuals to relate to, so pluralistic ways of dealing with sustainability are topical [73,74]. This complexity was recognized in the dialogues in that the participants' reasoning was often too abstract to be formulated in defining words, but instead had to be conveyed through appropriate examples. Participants often returned to how, for example, sustainable restaurant environments are designed, dishes are composed, and hospitality is practiced in situations they have been involved in. Thereby, this study's dialogues provide many examples of how *gastronomic sustainability* is communicated through practical actions. The participants cited examples of how gastronomic competency offers people explanations of difficult questions in an accessible and eye-opening way, and the participants described how they had developed their own

practical skills in using the meal as a means of communication. This practical perspective was interpreted as a mode of action driven by practical judgment, i.e., phronesis according to Aristotle [26,45]. Communication about food and beverages is a central aspect of sustainable meals, creating concrete experiences of sustainability for the meal's guests [13,23]. The study participants presented such practically communicated sustainability as an important complement to the cognitively conscious mode of discussion that they consider is dominant in many other contexts in society. The practical perspective does not replace the cognitive, but is seen as a significant complement. A similar result was found by Sporre, Jonsson, and Pipping Ekström [11], who, however, regarded the cognitive conscious mode as the most central aspect of their analysis.

The function of cultivation-of-the-self appeared to be to stimulate the participants, as individuals, to develop their attention and commitment to sustainability. The practical and artistic aspects of gastronomic competency were frequently highlighted in the interviews, which focused on how sensuous experiences create emotional support for the meal's communication. Similarly, Pereira et al. [4], Batat [13], and Carrillo Ocampo et al. [14] have discussed how gastronomic meals give people opportunities to practically participate in cultural phenomena in a positive way. Gastronomy can therefore be described as the knowledge-based designing of emotionally charged meal experiences. The gastronomic meal is mind-opening, not just eye-opening, for it speaks to people by engaging all the senses. Because all the senses are involved in the meal, as the participants noted, a complex theory of knowledge is created that includes the theoretical knowledge of thought, the practical-crafty knowledge of action, and the practical-artistic knowledge of sensuousness. This reasoning has obvious similarities to early humanistic reasoning about gastronomy as both art and science [17–20].

### 5.2. Civic Bildung as a Cultural Perspective on Meals

In the dialogues, the gastronomes reasoned about how meals cultivate people's understanding of one another and of the world around them, which can be likened to developing a cultural sustainability perspective [16,75,76]. When people try new foods and broaden their views of what a meal can be, they can be said to be developing their narrative imagination [46], which is used to cultivate an understanding of other cultures and highlight how other people's views and experiences can enrich their own.

As a result, participation in gastronomic meals was likened to a stay in a sanctuary, where reflection is combined with sensuous stimulation that can free people from their preconceptions and open their minds to other cultures. Similarly, Simmel [19] noted that meals can mediate between individuals and communities by making community impressions meaningful to the individual while bringing individual meaning to the social context.

The challenge of such a civic sustainability perspective lies in integrating this global issue into the lives of individuals. To integrate sustainability perspectives into society, they must be simplified to the extent that individuals can grasp them, because it is only when many simultaneously digest these perspectives that they become effective [5]. Gastronomy was described in the dialogues as a bridge between the individual and major societal challenges, which corresponds to how the meal, in small steps, can create a lasting impression. That is a kind of impression that has significant similarities with the eye-opening events [77] that create openness to new perspectives [35], forming the basis of *bildung*. The participants often discussed how gastronomic competency can stimulate people to take on societal challenges in a stimulating way, concretely exemplifying Wessbo and Uhrqvist's [23] and Sörlin's [41] reasoning about how sustainable development depends on a civic *bildung* in which practical actions at the societal level are shaped by how individuals undertake actions together. Sustainable gastronomy conveys a practical judgment of sustainability, in turn enabling individuals to adapt their behavior [3,24,26].

Another aspect of civic *bildung* is the ambition the participants repeatedly expressed to share their knowledge and experiences with, for example, restaurant guests and colleagues. This openness to share knowledge, in connection with the already mentioned ability to

stimulate learning, was discussed in the interviews as an underutilized resource that could be used more actively by society to drive sustainable change work. The reasoning in this study often highlighted the importance of what participants bring from the meal to propagate in their broader lives in terms of meaning-making, which is about what the meal contributes to people at a cultural level, as desires take root and live on in their lives, developing into sustainability cultures [16,34].

## 6. Conclusions

This study shows that the humanistic approach in gastronomy possesses forms, as well as capacities and a wealth of initiatives, by which to address sustainability issues by cultivating awareness. The study participants expressed the belief that individuals could contribute to sustainability based on their own endeavors. We argue that the dissemination of knowledge in gastronomy is a form of *bildung*, where the self-awareness aspect is a crucial part in nourishing the knowledge processes. The idea of hermeneutic *bildung*, where knowledge is viewed from the perspective of how it is interpreted, understood, and explained by the individual, has distinctly explained the gastronomes' statements about imparting knowledge. The participants emphasized the practical and artistic capacities of gastronomy to communicate sustainability to other individuals, and they believed that gastronomic competency had an important societal function by adding such a practical individual perspective to sustainability issues. Such gastronomic *bildung* has a potential to stimulate people's inner cultivation of knowledge and is a resource that could be utilized more actively by society as a source of civic commitment. Therefore, as a further development of the established concept sustainable gastronomy, we propose an expanded focus on *gastronomic sustainability*, where also the aspects of inner capacities are more clearly emphasized. In this study, *gastronomic sustainability* was interpreted as the knowledge-based designing of emotionally charged practical and sustainable meal experiences.

This article is limited to how self-awareness of sustainability is cultivated by gastronomy. Therefore, no factual conclusions are drawn on a global level about sustainability in general, but the conclusions are focused on a gastronomic perspective on the self-awareness dimension of the issue. This study was conducted from a humanistic perspective, which means that the conclusions are to be understood primarily on a humanistic level rather than a societal one. However, this research relates to, e.g., UNESCO and the EAEA, which claim that humanistic perspectives on sustainability are relevant to society. In a humanistic way, the conclusions of this study are not definitive, but rather the conclusions are highlighting gastronomy as a fruitful area for cultivating sustainable ideas that can have an impact even beyond gastronomy. Further research would be needed to clarify the principles of such wider implications.

The research process, where dialogic interviews were conducted semi-annually with intermediate interpretation, enabled researchers and participants to be co-creators of a result that incorporates both the researcher's and participants' perspectives. This research process made it possible to handle knowledge as something emerging and constantly developing rather than as an isolated idea from a temporary section of the participants' lives. The participants contributed with practical anchoring based on their experiences between the interview occasions, while the researcher contributed with theoretical anchoring based on his reading between the same occasions. Pre-understanding was the researcher's tool for navigating the conversations, and differed significantly from bias in that it was continuously expanded in dialogue with the participants.

Interestingly, participants brought up few mainstream sustainability measures in the results, while sustainability issues were rather approached from a human inner perspective. Such a focus on meaning instead of on measures is an important result because thereby, gastronomy offers a novel way of approaching issues sustainably, which can appeal to people more personally and encourage them to engage in sustainability based on their own conditions. In gastronomy, we find that knowledge of sustainability is not primarily

communicated in general terms but is largely adapted based on how that knowledge can be realized for individual meal participants, recalling a *bildung* process.

In summary, *gastronomic sustainability* takes the form of practical participation in culturally influenced meals. With the help of gastronomic competency, people can become more open to seeing things in new ways, and in gastronomy this is achieved through a combination of cultivation-of-the-self and civic *bildung*. Based on the interview results we suggest that the cultivation-of-the-self in sensuous meal experiences can stimulate people to get involved in sustainability issues, raising self-awareness about sustainability which can bring about civic *bildung* at the societal level. The gastronomic meal was regarded as a discrete sustainable event, which is sufficiently delimited in time and space to be experienced as a whole. This is important, because many sustainability issues in society are so complex that the individual cannot fully grasp them. *Gastronomic sustainability* represents a promising inner approach to sustainable development, as it involves a tasteful cultivation of sustainable meaning. The impressions of a meal can drive change.

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