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Cutting the apron strings: Establishing optimal distinctiveness from mentors in creative industries

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Abstract

Research has established that organizations benefit from "optimal distinctiveness," that is, being sufficiently similar to and different from competitors. However, we know less about producers' strategic positioning choices to establish optimally distinctive identities. We explore this question through a qualitative study of chef-owners who started their own restaurants after training with well-known mentors. We identify two trajectories followed by chefs to establish optimal distinctiveness—legacy and divergent—and their components: interpersonal origins, strategic material and symbolic practices, tensions, and performance outcomes. Our study contributes to research by providing a more complete picture of how creative producers attempt to find an optimal balance between similarity to and difference from mentors, and the constraints they face in their strategic choices, including how these change over time.

KEYWORDS

creative industries, mentor–protégé relationships, optimal distinctiveness, qualitative research, strategic positioning

Nothing grows in the shade of tall trees.

Sculptor Constantin Brancusi, protégé of August Rodin

1 | INTRODUCTION

Creative producers—those who create goods and services broadly associated with cultural or artistic value, such as in the fine dining, design, filmmaking, music, and fashion industries (Caves, 2000; Jones et al., 2015)—face unique pressures from their audiences. On the one hand, audiences expect them to provide original and novel offerings; on the other hand, creative work is uncertain, and audiences require outputs to be familiar enough to be understood (Becker, 1982; Caves, 2000; Lampel et al., 2000). Scholars call this contradictory need for conformity and differentiation the "optimal distinctiveness" tension. Findings show that creative producers who balance these dual demands in their work by crafting optimally distinct offerings that are similar enough, yet distinct from those of their competitors or even former employers, are rewarded by critics and audiences (Alvarez et al., 2005; Askin & Mauskapf, 2017). Sometimes, producers even conform to or differentiate from their own offerings to gain a competitive advantage (Banerjee et al., 2023). Because creative work often spans both individuals and organizations (e.g., a designer's name is the brand) (Becker, 1982; Caves, 2000) optimally distinct identities may refer to both producers *and* their creative ventures.

Yet, scholarship has largely conceptualized optimal distinctiveness theory at either the organizational or individual level. Strategy scholars have argued that organizations need to craft optimally distinct identities that respond to pressures to be both similar to and different from organizational competitors (Deephouse, 1999; Durand & Haans, 2022; Zhao et al., 2017), focusing primarily on quantitative performance outcomes (Durand & Haans, 2022). The origins of optimal distinctiveness theory, however, were rooted not in organizational outcomes but in individual psychological processes. Brewer's (1991) experiments show that all humans have competing needs to be both part of a collective and different from other individuals, and work continuously to balance these two competing demands as they engage with others and develop their identities.

By emphasizing organizational outcomes over process, scholars have lost sight of *how* optimal distinctiveness is achieved—i.e., through individual-level strategic choices. Despite calls to incorporate individual-level processes into organization theory (Zuckerman, 2016), strategic management scholars have not yet extended their theorization of optimal distinctiveness to the individual level. This is important because certain industries, like creative work, operate simultaneously at both the organizational and individual levels. We seek to elaborate optimal distinctiveness theory by incorporating individual processes as emphasized in the foundational psychological literature. To do so, we ask: *How do creative producers pursue optimal distinctiveness from specific individual referents for both their organizations and themselves?*

To answer this question, we study chef-owners who started their own restaurants after training with high-status mentors in one of the most competitive dining landscapes: London. Chef-owners decide how to position their restaurants, which often have their names on the door, creating an ideal setting to study the intersection of individual and organizational strategies. Mintzberg (2023) would classify their organizations as "personal enterprises," meaning that they are solo entrepreneurs serving both as founders and managers making strategic decisions. Although our level of analysis is the individual producer, we also study how their strategies affect their personal brands and organizations (i.e., restaurants). We use longitudinal

qualitative data collected from interviews and archival materials to produce an inductive account of how chefs strategically position themselves relative to their former mentors. Our data reveals two trajectories to pursuing an optimally distinct identity: continuing a mentor's "legacy" or establishing a "divergent" identity. We also identify different components of these trajectories: origins, strategic practices, tensions, and outcomes.

Our findings contribute to optimal distinctiveness research in three ways. First, we provide a complete picture of how producers pursue optimal distinctiveness. Second, our inductive qualitative study captures the tensions creative producers experience as they make strategic positioning choices and how they manage them, revealing the microprocesses involved in balancing the core tension between conformity and differentiation at the heart of optimal distinctiveness. Third, we add a temporal perspective to research, finding that optimal distinctiveness trajectories are largely consistent over time.

2 | THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF MENTOR–PROTÉGÉ RELATIONSHIPS

As prior research has shown, a primary reference point for achieving optimal distinctiveness in creative industries is a former mentor (Slavich & Castellucci, 2016). For consumers, well-known mentoring relationships can be important "signals" that help legitimize protégés' novel creative products (Jones, 2002). Highly successful mentors thus serve as "exemplar" reference points that signal their protégés' potential to both consumers and other producers (Younger & Fisher, 2020; Zhao et al., 2018). Beyond the creative industries, mentors also create legitimacy for protégés in a diversity of professions from surgeons (Stephens & Dearani, 2021) to sport coaches (Kilduff et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2025). For example, in law, mentors may provide protégés with critical client introductions and affiliations (Kay et al., 2009).

Despite these advantages, protégés face a dilemma associated with optimal distinctiveness: they must maintain similarity to a mentor to obtain resources and rewards, yet be distinctive enough to be recognized for their own talents (Alvarez et al., 2005). For instance, in the STEM fields, mentors have been associated with an increase in a protégé's likelihood of prizewinning; but this success comes not from following the research topics of their mentors but from protégés demonstrating their own intellectual independence (Ma et al., 2020). For creative protégés, the optimal distinctiveness dilemma is further complicated by unique occupational constraints and interpersonal dynamics in creative work. Because careers in creative work are "boundaryless" (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and center on projects (e.g., writing a song, making a film) (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Faulkner & Anderson, 1987; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005), protégés continually interact with other creators in their networks. Moreover, insiders often police the boundaries of creative fields and judge the appropriateness of behavior within them (Di Stefano et al., 2015). For example, in the music industry, well-known mentors typically vouch for their protégés to help them secure studio jobs, whereas protégés who attempt career moves without such recommendations can incur backlash from insiders, thus limiting future opportunities (Faulkner, [1971]/2017). For comedians too, career progress can depend on critical endorsements from mentors (Reilly, 2017).

Achieving distinction can be challenging for creative protégés because of the deep interpersonal bonds that commonly develop through apprenticeship training, which often requires working in small organizations over long periods of time (Gospel, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sennett, 2008). As a result, many creative protégé mentoring relationships are characterized by

high levels of emotional affect, reciprocity, frequent communication (Granovetter, 1973), and the development of a shared identity (Rouse, 2020), making it psychologically challenging for protégés to disentangle themselves from their famous mentors (Fetzer et al., 2023). Moreover, protégés may co-create ideas with mentors during their training, surfacing questions regarding who should be recognized for what (Farrell, 2001). Given these constraints, we ask: How can creative producers who create their own ventures strategically position themselves to achieve optimal distinctiveness relative to their mentors?

Mentoring theory on how protégés achieve separation provides some potential clues as to how creative producers might navigate these constraints. This research theorizes that how separation unfolds is critical because, if it goes smoothly, it enables a protégé to become a successful independent professional by building confidence and establishing autonomy (Humberd & Rouse, 2016). The separation process is thought to be both psychological and structural (Kram, 1985), involving "internal psychological work," such as crafting personal career narratives that create consistency between past work with a former mentor and desired future trajectories (Fetzer et al., 2023, p. 1917), and structural changes such as physically moving away. In the setting of creative work, for instance, a protégé might selectively collaborate with a mentor to create this structural change. Importantly, quality of the mentoring experience may shape how well equipped a protégé is for separation. Those with high-quality mentoring relationships (defined by stronger positive emotions towards a mentor) may be better able to develop a clearer sense of their own identities, achieve personal growth, and feel better prepared to be an "equal to the mentor" (Humberd & Rouse, 2016, p. 449).

While mentoring theory provides a starting point, it is limited because it focuses solely on the private interpersonal relationship. We still know little about how creative protégés think about the pressures of similarity and differentiation as they establish their own organizations, develop their own products, and become public figures who are distinct from their mentors. In this study, we investigate how this process of achieving optimal distinctiveness unfolds.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS

The aim of this study is to examine the perspectives of protégés as they made strategic-positioning choices for their restaurant(s) in the context of relationships with former mentors. For this reason, we adopted an inductive qualitative research approach loosely based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), constructing theory from the interpretive realities of actors in a particular social setting and analyzing their lived experiences iteratively (Charmaz, 2006).

3.1 | Research setting

To explore our research questions, we studied chef-protégés who worked with mentors. Mentoring is integral to culinary work, as becoming a chef primarily involves acquiring culinary skills by observing a mentor (Lane, 2014). Instead of relying on formalized assignments, mentoring relationships develop when a protégé works in a chef's kitchen, sometimes unpaid as a "stagiaire" (i.e., intern) or paid as a formal employee. Relationships often become close, not only because of the intimate physical experience of working in a small, hot kitchen together (Fine, 2009), but also because a mentor's culinary style frequently informs and shapes that of a

protégé (Leschziner, 2015; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016). Well-known mentors can be highly influential for chefs' careers, conferring reputational benefits and influencing how protégés are judged by external critics (Slavich & Castellucci, 2016). Accordingly, protégés' choices about where and with whom to train play a role in determining whether they become top chefs themselves (Borkenhagen & Martin, 2018; Lane, 2014; Leschziner, 2015; Opazo, 2016).

3.1.1 | Theoretically-driven sampling

Our sampling strategy follows qualitative work that focuses on in-depth, open-ended interviews to build theory rather than to achieve representativeness (Small, 2009). We focused on elite chef-owners for several reasons. First, unlike executive chefs (i.e., individuals running restaurants for others, potentially mentors), chef-owners actively construct public identities based on how they brand themselves and their restaurants and which dishes they include on their menus. Second, we selected elite chefs who had trained at and/or opened high- or upper-middle-status restaurants, many of which had Michelin stars or AA Rosettes.[1] We chose to focus on elite chef-owners because prior research has demonstrated that links between their public gastronomic identities and those of their famous mentors are recognized by both critics and diners (Leschziner, 2015). Given our focus on elite chef-owners, most of our informants were based in London, which is celebrated as one of the top-ranked gastronomic cities in the world, with many award-winning fine dining restaurants and an intense competitive landscape. We also conducted a few interviews with chef-owners in rural townships whose restaurants were categorized as destination eateries catering primarily to non-locals. Elite chefs, like other elite actors, are difficult to access for qualitative research (Cousin et al., 2018); we identified potentially valuable informants through online searches, referrals, and personal networks.

3.2 | Data collection

3.2.1 | Interviews

We interviewed 29[2] chef-owners between 2017 and 2019, and the first author conducted nine follow-up interviews in 2024–2025, for a total of 38 interviews. Informants self-reported the names of their mentors during interviews after describing their career histories.[3] Interview questions focused on themes relating to chefs' experiences with mentors over time, including time spent training in their mentors' kitchens, their motivations for and experiences opening their restaurants, how they identified with their new work roles, and whether or to what extent they had maintained connections with their mentors. We also asked questions about the extent

[1]AA Rosette is an elite UK-based evaluation system for restaurants and hotels measuring from 1 to 5, with each increasing number recognizing greater skill and quality. Only 10% of all restaurants achieve any level of rosette.
[2]Our sample is large for the specific population of interest (i.e., chef-owners in London who warrant consideration for high-status awards). Nevertheless, the otherwise seemingly small sample also reflects the difficulty involved in accessing an elite population.
[3]Our study was approved by our university research ethics committees. Following standard practices for studies involving human participants, all informants signed a consent form prior to their interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the data, all names have been removed and replaced with identifiers to ensure anonymity (e.g., 21). Follow up interviews are denoted by "R2" after the chef identifier number.

to which they actively publicized their relationships with their mentors. Finally, we asked chefs to describe their culinary styles. Given the nature of these questions, some answers were retrospective, while others reflected current feelings toward their mentors. Most first-round interviews were conducted in person, typically at the chefs' restaurants. One interview was conducted with two co-owners (9, 21). During the second round of interviews, we asked chefs more targeted questions about their strategic identities in light of our emerging findings and how they had changed over time (between 6 and 8 years after the original interviews). We also shared our preliminary findings and asked for their reactions. Most interviews lasted 1–1.5 h and were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Although chefs often work in several restaurant kitchens during their careers (the median was four restaurants in our sample) our findings focus largely on the mentoring relationships they explicitly identified. Many described having had two mentors in their careers: a chef who taught them the basic skills of cooking, typically at the start of their training, and a more prominent chef, typically at the restaurant where they had worked most recently prior to opening their own restaurants. We focus on chefs' relationships with their most recent mentors because: (a) informants described working in their kitchens as highly influential; (b) informants typically spent the largest proportions of their careers with their final mentors (from 1 to 12 years with a median of 3 years in our sample); and (c) they have been recognized in the literature as reference points for consumers and critics (Leschziner, 2015; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016). Most chefs worked for their mentors as paid employees; two chefs (15, 27) described family members who worked in the culinary industry as additional mentors. Most chefs told us that they had self-selected into their mentors' kitchens due to their high status and because they wanted to learn more about their culinary styles. We initially chose to oversample women chef-owners ($n = 17$) relative to the sample population because the experiences of fine dining female chefs are largely under-studied (Harris & Giuffre, 2015). Later analyses, however, revealed few gender-specific differences. In addition, experiences of protégés whose mentors were women ($n = 2$) did not differ substantially from those whose mentors were men ($n = 27$).

Table 1 presents characteristics of mentoring relationships for the 29 chef informants as well as demographic information, including the age of the protégé at the time of the interview (median = 39 years), the number of years spent with the mentor,[4] and the number of years since the protégé had opened their first restaurant.[5] Most chefs had been running their own restaurants for less than 10 years ($n = 18$), with some exceptions (i.e., four had been running their own restaurants for less than a year and six had been running their own restaurants for more than 10 years). Chefs self-identified largely as British or European. Most had earned bachelor's degrees or higher ($n = 19$). Others had acquired associate's degrees from catering or hospitality colleges prior to training in professional kitchens.

3.2.2 | Archival data

We collected five types of archival data: (a) snapshots of "About Us" pages on restaurant websites, (b) cookbooks, (c) press related materials, (d) menus developed by each mentor and

[4]For one chef in our sample (15), we could not discern how much time was spent in a mentoring relationship because the mentor was a family member and it was unclear at what age the protégé had begun working under them.

[5]The number of years since opening a restaurant is the total time elapsed between the year the chef-owner opened their first restaurant and the year the first round interview was conducted.

TABLE 1 Demographics and trajectory characteristics.

Demographics/mentor relationship					Discursive practices			Material practices	Outcomes		
Chef #	Age	Gender	No. years w/mentor	No. years since opening first restaurant	Mentor on website	Mentor in cookbook(s)	Mentor in media	Cuisine similarity	Awards	No. of restaurants (as of 2024)	TV
Legacy trajectory											
1	52	M	3	20	yes	yes		Medium	yes	4	yes
2	46	M	2	7		*	*	High		8	*
3	38	M	3	12	yes		yes	High	*	2	*
4	36	M	3	6			*	Medium	*	1	*
5	47	M	2	9			*	High	*	0	
6	44	M	5.5	18		*	*	High	*	4	*
7	30	M	6	<1			*	High	*	1	*
8	38	M	2	4		*	*	Medium	*	4	
11	31	F	5	3	*	*	*	Medium		1	*
12	48	F	11	10	*	*	*	High	*	0	
13	39	F	12	1		*	*	High	*	2	*
15	34	F	N/A	N/A	*		*	High		2	*
20	36	M	4	6			*	Medium	*	1	*
24	40	F	4	6	*		*	High		1	
27	28	F	2	<1			*	Medium		1	
Divergent trajectory											
9	31	M	2	4				Low		1	*
10	42	M	8	10	*			Low	*	2	
28	37	F	2.5	4				N/A		1	
29	71	M	4.5	36	*			N/A	*	1	*

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Demographics/mentor relationship					Discursive practices			Material practices	Outcomes		
Chef #	Age	Gender	No. years w/mentor	No. years since opening first restaurant	Mentor on website	Mentor in cookbook(s)	Mentor in media	Cuisine similarity	Awards	No. of restaurants (as of 2024)	TV
17	42	F	3	3				Low	*	1	
16	40	F	3	11				Low	*	0	*
19	41	M	1	6				Low		1	
21	29	M	1	4				Low		1	
23	32	F	5	3			*	Low		0	
25	29	F	2.5	<1			*	Low		1	*
26	43	F	4	5				N/A		0	*
Outliers											
14	37	F	9	<1	*		*	Low		0	*
18	51	M	1	26	*	*	*	Low	*	1	
22	41	M	3	2				High		2	

The asterix signifies the presence of the variable. E.g., asterix = Yes, mentor is on website, or Yes, mentor is in cookbooks.

protégé, and (e) evaluations from critics (e.g., Michelin stars, AA Rosettes) and diners (e.g., Yelp, OpenTable, TripAdvisor, Google). We detail our data collection strategies for each of these sources and their purpose for our study in Table 2. Table 1 also summarizes the findings from some of these data, including cuisine similarity, awards, and TV appearances.

3.3 | Data analysis

Coding unfolded in three stages, which we briefly summarize here. Further details can be found in Appendix A. First, we engaged in "open coding" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the interview transcripts and archival data to produce first-order codes that matched informants' language. Second, we grouped these first-order codes into second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021) whereby we identified the material and discursive practices chefs took towards their mentors. We then analyzed differences in these practices across chefs, resulting in two groups within the data (which we call in the Findings, below, "legacy" and "divergent"). Third, we focused on theorizing and further merging and refining codes and themes while iteratively engaging with literature on mentoring, creative work, and optimal distinctiveness. From this we abstracted our findings to the theoretical level of "optimal distinctive trajectories," which we explore in greater detail below along with illustrative quotes.

4 | FINDINGS

Drawing on our analysis, we explore how creative producers pursue optimally distinct identities from their mentors as they establish their own businesses. Our findings suggest that chefs follow two potential trajectories to pursue such identities: claiming oneself as a "legacy" or as "divergent" from a mentor. We call these trajectories to emphasize the long time horizons of each path and how choices early in one's career can influence later opportunities and constraints. Below, we present each trajectory and reveal microprocesses associated with relational origins, material and discursive strategies, tensions, and outcomes of pursuing optimal distinctiveness. We also briefly discuss outliers. Additional data examples for each section are available in Appendix B (see Table B1 for the legacy trajectory and Table B2 for the divergent trajectory).

4.1 | Legacy trajectory

Chefs in our sample who followed a legacy trajectory typically described positive interpersonal relationships with their mentors during their training. Establishing a legacy identity involves both material and discursive practices that emphasize similarity. Chefs who pursue optimal distinctiveness by following the legacy trajectory experience tensions between pressure to maintain connections with their mentors and a desire to establish a distinctive identity. Chefs negotiate these tensions by employing discrete strategies early in their careers, which surface different tensions later in their careers. Despite these tensions and trade-offs, our data reveal the legacy strategic positioning to be largely durable.

TABLE 2 Description of archival data collection.

Type of archival data	Purpose of data	How data was collected
"About Us" page of informants' restaurant(s) website	To see if the protégé references their mentor's name and how over time. Websites are a central way firms make identity claims and publicly indicate their positioning in their markets (Haans, 2019).	Analyzed archival snapshots of each protégé's "About Us" page for each year their restaurant had been open (using the "Way Back Machine" online archive).
Informants Cookbooks (n=17)** * Four informants had published more than one cookbook.	To see if the protégé referenced their mentor and how they described being shaped by them. If and how their work relates to their mentors' culinary styles.	Analyzed each cookbook's autobiographical introduction (this is where a chef may cite influential mentors) and recipes to see whether they were described as influenced by their mentors.
Press-related pieces in the form of interviews with informants (e.g., media articles, YouTube videos, podcasts) (n = 354)	To see if they mentioned their mentors or not and if so, how they described these relationships. Provided insight into how chefs publicly portrayed their relationships (i.e., to journalists and critics), which informed our findings regarding the practices they enacted.	Analyzed press data longitudinally, paying particular attention to the period before each chef's restaurant opened as well as the first year, the first through the third years, and more than 3 years after opening. Monitored whether chefs mentioned their mentors and whether these mentions were unprompted or prompted by journalists.
Menus from informants' and their mentors' restaurants across time	To measure cuisine similarity between a protégé and their mentor. Provided insight into how chefs materially emulated (or diverged from) their mentor's culinary style, which informed our findings regarding the practices they enacted.	Broadly followed the methodology outlined by Slavich and Castellucci (2016) and Rao et al. (2005), the first author and two research assistants independently coded the dish names, ingredients used, and descriptions of cooking techniques. Cuisine similarity was measured as either low (no overlaps), medium (overlaps along one dimension), or high (overlaps along two or more dimensions). Any disagreements in coding were discussed and resolved collectively. We were unable to find menu data for the mentors of two chefs.
Awards of informants' restaurant(s)	To see if the protégé was critically recognized for their cuisine. Awards serve as an indicator of success.	Tracked any notable awards chefs received, paying particular attention to Michelin stars and AA Rosette, the two top awards in the culinary field for UK restaurants.
TV appearances of informant	To see if the chef had achieved public recognition as an indicator of success.	Collected by web searches and references to TV in informant interviews.
Audience evaluations of chef restaurants	To see if consumers were aware of protégé's mentoring relationships and how they perceived them.	Analyzed diners' reviews from TripAdvisor, Yelp, OpenTable, and Google (common restaurant review sites in the UK) across the entire time a chef's restaurant had been open.

4.1.1 | Origins of a legacy trajectory

Chefs who pursued a legacy trajectory spoke of the importance of mentorship in the culinary industry, describing it as "a hugely important thing, which leaves a kind of lasting legacy" (5). Moreover, they emphasized their highly positive interpersonal relationships with mentors, describing high-quality mentoring as fueling their desire to pursue legacy identities.

> His influence was incredible because I respected him so much as a person and as a chef. I looked at the way he conducted himself and the respect people had for him and the way he cooked, the way he thought about food, and everything for me about that was what I aspired to ... I found that inspirational and something I wanted to replicate. (6)

While these chefs often worked in other restaurants in their careers, they described the time spent with their mentors as having the biggest impact, for example, "The most important and influential place I've worked is with [my mentor] ... I just liked the way that he operated, I loved his food" (7). Although these chefs self-selected into their mentors' kitchens, it was not because their mentors were known as nurturing. Instead, they described wanting to work for a mentor because of their cooking style and, most importantly, their fame and high-status, for example, "In my training, I want to work for the best" (4).

4.1.2 | Establishing a legacy identity

These chefs established their legacy identities by employing several material and discursive strategic practices throughout their careers. Materially, chefs on the legacy trajectory comfortably emulated aspects of their mentors' culinary styles. Our comparative analysis of menus reveals high or medium similarity between the cuisines of legacy chefs and their mentors. For example, both Chef 5 and his mentor emphasized the use of offal meat cuts, British influences, and simplistic descriptions of dishes. Chefs confirmed that emulation was intentional: "I basically sort of went the best way I could to sort of emulate that [mentor's cuisine]" (6). Indeed, food was understood by all chefs in our sample as the primary way in which protégé-mentor relationships were embodied: "There's a very good chef ... If you work with people that worked with [him], they'll say things almost in [his] voice about food. You can really hear the voice coming through" (5). Additional longitudinal analyses of menus revealed that this culinary emulation was consistent, likely because mentors were described as constant figures of culinary inspiration: "You always respect the old boys, like [mentor's name]" (20).

Although mentors were often described as the central source of inspiration and comparison for a chef's culinary choices, they were not the only reference points. Because mentors often represented (and established) well-known culinary styles, and mentored disciples to carry on these styles, some chefs also referenced the positioning of their cuisine in relation to peers, for example, "My cooking is very similar to kind of other British restaurants in London and certainly quite similar to [mentor's]" (5). Research has shown that chefs often monitor their peers and derive inspiration from other restaurants (Leschziner, 2015), which likely affects their positioning choices. However, in our sample, legacy chefs publicly referenced their mentors most frequently.

Chefs in the legacy trajectory made strategic public connections between themselves and their mentors in the press, on their websites, and in their cookbooks. In interviews, chefs

explained that it was important to advertise who they had worked for, for example, "I always make a point of saying where I worked" (11). These chefs intentionally celebrated mentor relationships:

> If you named eight chefs that we would probably both know I could tell you exactly who they worked for and who was their closest mentor. It's a very publicized thing. It's like a badge of honor ... People want to celebrate that, and they want to use it for personal communication. They want to use it for PR. They want to use it. They're proud of it. (6, R2)

These positive mentoring relationships were evident in the public media, for example: "[He] never needed to tell you to do anything, because you just do it, because of that respect ... because of that love, you wanna do well for them" (Media Excerpt, 7). In a similar tone, another chef gushed: "[He] has been a huge influence and support for me. The purity of flavor of his cooking, and the lust for life of the man himself are both inspirational" (Media Excerpt, 20). Such examples saturated the archival data for legacy chefs, hinting that they were performing the positivity of their relationships, playing up the high-quality mentoring they received and emphasizing their positive interpersonal relationships with mentors.

Chefs also focused on playing up their culinary emulation, for example, "I've very much modeled myself on him. His ethos, the way he works, the way he cooks" (11, Media Excerpt). For example, in cookbooks, recipes were described as "inspired" by dishes protégés had made at their mentors' restaurants: "This recipe was inspired by the now legendary [description of dish] that I made every day during my time working at [mentor's restaurant]" (Cookbook, 8). As these quotes imply, chefs took comfort and pride in their status as culinary legacies.

Our analysis of archival data revealed that this public presentation of mentoring relationships was largely durable over time (see Appendix B, Table B1). Follow-up interviews confirmed this. Even chefs with well-established careers continued to believe in the value of mentioning their mentors in the press, for example, "I still talk fondly of my time at [mentor's restaurant] ... I still hold that [mentor] as some sort of important reference point for people to understand" (8, R2). As we elaborate below, legacy status is rewarded, potentially creating a self-reinforcing pattern where chefs continue to derive value from emphasizing their mentor connections.

4.1.3 | Tensions throughout a legacy chef's career

What is the lived everyday experience of pursuing a legacy trajectory? At the start of their careers, these chefs recognized that claiming a legacy identity was of strategic value: "I think that's currency when you're younger ... to give me more credibility and kudos" (6, R2). But this also created a tension, as legacy chefs often had conflicting desires to go out on their own and create something truly distinctive. They described pressure to remain connected to their mentors, but also a desire to establish their own identities. For instance, when asked if he ever felt pressured to talk about his mentor early in this career, Chef 8 replied:

> Definitely in the earlier days. Definitely. When I was beginning, that was a point of interest. We have a PR team. They've built a bio that would go out to the press; that bio would almost always reference [mentor's restaurant] ... His [mentor] profile

> started to get noticed. That would attract interest. There was always a pressure, but then I always felt this—I don't know—internal pressure at some point to sort of separate myself out. You know, differentiate myself. (8, R2)

The intensity of such pressures is evidenced by two chefs (12, 18) who, despite "a massive falling out" (12) with their mentors, continued to publicly emphasize their legacy status. The strategic choice to position oneself as close to a former mentor even though the personal relationship had ended points to chefs' knowledge of the performance implications of being a legacy.

Pressures to maintain connections also came directly from mentors. While few chefs openly admitted to this pressure, the theme of deference emerged when Chef 6 described his reaction to his own protégé potentially not pursuing a legacy trajectory:

> We're doing the PR for [my protégé's restaurant] ... PR sends out the press release, and there's no mention of me on the whole thing. I'm like "Okay, how do I tackle this?" ... I ended up going to a PR meeting and just saying, "Look, it's very important how you position this." ... I said, "I do think there is a really great opportunity for the business pages to talk about the *legacy* [his emphasis] piece here where [protégé] worked for me for 11 years. I then helped him facilitate his own restaurant, and I'm gonna mentor him through it. I think that's a really upbeat, joyous story that the business in the FT, some of our industry stuff would like to read. And you should lean into that ... Because otherwise, people don't really know who he is." (6, R2)

This quote implies that pressures to maintain connections sometimes come from mentors who push their protégés onto a legacy trajectory out of fear that either their mentoring is not being recognized or their protégés might fail without legacy status (as the end of the quote suggests), or due to their own concerns about expectations in the industry (i.e., "industry stuff"). These pressures could intensify if a mentor invested financially in a protégé's restaurant (not uncommon among legacy chefs). For instance, when asked if he felt it was important early in his career to be closely aligned with his mentor, another chef bluntly responded "Yeah, because he was a main shareholder" (3). It appears that some mentors can keep legacy chefs on a tight leash.

To manage these early career tensions, chefs implemented several strategies at the micro/individual level. First, some chefs described negotiating their separation and clarifying mentors' roles in their careers, for example:

> We had a good few discussions about that [him overshadowing me]. He got a bit upset about it saying, "Why is it a bad thing?" I was like ... "In 10 years' time, I'll still be labeled as [your protégé] and I've got to make a clear break." It happened, but I think it's also important for people to know that the relationships don't have to just break down because you decide to go your own way. It's worked quite well ... we've maintained a good relationship, which is great. (13)

This excerpt hints at the importance of these strategies, as relationships could deteriorate when protégés leave. It also indicates how relationships with mentors must be delicately managed (i.e., a mentor getting upset that a protégé might feel overshadowed). Formal discussions

of independence like this could be one way to preserve the mentoring relationship while also achieving separation.

Second, some of these chefs engaged in small acts of distancing work to create space between themselves and their mentors early in their careers. They disregarded or limited their mentors' advice on their new ventures to try to gain independence:

> There's more than one way of doing everything. And not that his is wrong, or that mine was very right, but I just wanted to kind of—I knew he was there for guidance whenever I needed him, but I wanted to very much go at it alone as well in that sense, and sort of have a clean break from there. (11)

Opening their own restaurants gave these chefs the space to start drawing boundaries of where their mentors' influence started and ended. This also extended to food. For instance, a chef noted that it was important not to recreate her mentor's famous dish:

> There were certain things that I would never have put on the menu. For instance, there's a dish called [x], which [my mentor] had on [his menu] that started every single meal. So, I never did that dish, because to me it's [my mentor's] ... I felt very respectful to [him], and I really care about what he thinks. (24, R2)

The third and most common strategy was adopting an attitude that independence would develop on its own over time. For example, when asked if it was important to create his own identity, a chef who had just opened his own restaurant responded:

> Not in a way that I would actively seek. I feel like if in 10 years, or in 5 years, I haven't had enough personality about what I'm doing to be identified as my own prospect, then it's a little bit of a worry isn't it? (7).

As this quote suggests, independence was regarded as desirable and inevitable. While this anxiety over maintaining connection motivated all three tension-reducing strategies, it appeared to be especially acute for those chef protégés <10 years removed from their mentors. For some, like the participant above, anxiety over independence was something they saw as justified only long after separation from a mentor.

Chefs interviewed later in their careers spoke of largely resolving these early career tensions but experiencing new ones. The pressures of connection resolved with the passage of time, as accolades accumulated and mentoring relationships evolved, for example, "I'm not looking to him for mentorship guidance so much anymore; [it's] more friendship" (6, R2). Although sometimes this pressure could reappear, it was described as less intense for chefs later in their careers: "occasionally people talk about where you worked still a little bit too much in the media" (20, R2). But as chefs became more established and comfortable with their independence, a new tension emerged between being pigeonholed into a market position and having the freedom to create. This was particularly acute for chefs who sought to start new restaurant projects, for example, "I have other restaurant ideas that I'm not even thinking about as related to [mentor's restaurant]. You do kind of get pigeonholed, you do kind of get like branded" (8, R2). Later in their careers, chefs had to manage the unexpected consequences of their legacy status: the challenge of diverging from the cuisine that they (and their mentors) were known for.

4.2 | Divergent trajectory

Chefs who followed the divergent trajectory materially and discursively distanced their food and public brands from their mentors. Although these chefs pursued similar strategies to establish optimal distinctiveness, their motivations differed. Divergent chefs also experienced tensions between overstepping the bounds of their mentor relationships and crafting truly novel cuisine. Our data reveal divergent positioning as largely durable throughout chefs' careers.

4.2.1 | Origins of a divergent trajectory

Compared with legacy chefs, divergent chefs had greater variation in their interpersonal experiences with their mentors and motivations for pursuing this trajectory. These chefs sought divergence not only from their mentors, but also from the occupational expectations of a legacy trajectory, for example, "it was all about becoming a clone to the master" (19). They expressed a distaste for the elite accolades (e.g., Michelin stars) pursued by legacy chefs, whom they described as "dull and flat people" (19) and "very narcissistic" (25). Most, but not all chefs in this group described negative interpersonal experiences training with their mentors (see Appendix B, Table B2 for examples) and a lack of emotional commitment to them.

> If I had worked for someone, maybe for five to 10 years or more in my career, then potentially I'd have a stronger relationship with them [mentor] on a personal level and therefore feel like I would be responsible for kind of maintaining that publicly, as well as privately. But I think that comes with time and loyalty. (21, R2)

Although these chefs, on average, spent the same amount of time training with their mentors as their legacy peers, and had similar motivations to work in high-status kitchens, they did not make the same emotional connections as legacy chefs. Instead, these chefs desired to do something different, unlike other chefs, for example, "I really want to, sort of, stand out a bit more ... I think it's important, because everyone knows what work you did last, but I want them to know what work I'm doing now" (25).

4.2.2 | Establishing a divergent identity

Divergent chefs employed different strategic material practices from legacy chefs, creating novel dishes with few overlaps with their mentors. For example, Chef 19's mentor cooked traditional multicourse French cuisine, but he focused on small plates of Eastern Mediterranean food; Chef 23's mentor specialized in Michelin-starred Italian fine dining, whereas she had opened a casual steakhouse. Instead of mentors being the primary influence, chefs referred to non-traditional and cumulative experiences that influenced their culinary styles, for example, "a winemaker has influenced the way I cook more than the restaurant" (10, R2). Accordingly, divergent chefs drew from a multitude of references for their positioning, seeing their food as a "composition of experience" (19), rather than referencing a single exemplar (i.e., their mentors). They also spoke of desiring to be non-traditional in their cuisine, cooking something different, for example, "It [cooking similar food as mentor] doesn't really show much creativity of your own personality. It feels like ... they're like a parent of your own creativity. That's a shame, isn't it? I feel like

doing something completely different" (25, R2). As this quote suggests, these chefs rejected the legacy path, implying that legacy chefs are just copycats of their mentors.

Divergent chefs also strategically employed different discursive practices, only acknowledging their mentors in the press when asked and/or downplaying associations.

> I distinguished—definitely. ... I made sure if I was asked about it [mentor], I mentioned, "Yes, I used to work with her," but then that was it ... I only did a few interviews from papers and things like that in the early days when we were about to open. (23, R2)

As this quote suggests, if a mentor was mentioned, it was typically only at the very outset of the restaurant opening and very minimally, rather than an ongoing discursive practice like the legacy chefs. Divergent chefs did not perceive the same strategic value in publicly disclosing connections to a former mentor, for example, "As much as I love the sort of wanting to have a [mentor] story, I think it holds us back ... I don't push to have a story as much" (21, R2). In public media, divergent chefs rarely mentioned mentors or subtly downplayed their connections (see Appendix B, Table B2). For example, Chef 23 notably created distance between herself and her mentor in an interview: "It was a great honor to work for [mentor] ... I don't intend to try and emulate the Michelin star, as that's not really my style, but I'm really glad I had the opportunity to work with the chefs there." Divergent chefs also rarely mentioned their mentors on their websites and in their cookbooks (see Table 1). Moreover, we did not observe instances of these chefs changing their divergent discursive practices to legacy discursive practices later in their careers.

4.2.3 | Tensions throughout a divergent chef's career

Divergent chefs also experienced tensions related to their strategic positioning choices. They felt uncomfortable publicizing their mentor connections, as doing so seemed risky. Three risks emerged from interviews. First, some divergent chefs perceived the risk of overstepping their mentoring relationships. When asked why they did not leverage their famous mentors' symbolic or financial resources, a chef explained the micro-level, interpersonal pressures:

> She's quite a high-profile person ... I only did a few interviews from papers and things like that in the early days when we were about to open. I wouldn't have wanted to completely bang on about the fact that I worked with [her] ... I feel like there was the pressure to not make too much of the mentorship or relationship. I think probably quite a lot ... If you mentioned it too much and then it's not a success, or someone says something bad, then it's going to come from her, in a way. (23, R2)

As this quote suggests, there was a fear that too much public connection with a mentor could have reputational costs for both them and their well-known mentors. Another chef explained why she did not ask for funding from her mentor: "I didn't want to overstep that relationship ... I feel like there's a business line and a personal line that I didn't want to cross" (25, R2).

Second, some chefs expressed that it felt inauthentic—that is, "name dropping" (25, R2)—to mention their mentors' names in the press: "We can't bear to make up some, I'm going to say,

well, BS story to sell to people that we don't believe in ourselves" (21, R2). These chefs resisted the PR game, even though they had intentionally worked for high-status mentors like legacy chefs. This rejection of macro-occupational pressures to maintain mentor connections is notable because it distinguished the choices of divergent chefs from those of their legacy peers.

Third, some divergent chefs explained that they were uncomfortable advertising their connections due to macro-level pressure from audiences: the risk of promoting unrealistic customer expectations. A chef with a culinary style quite distant from his mentor's explained: "I don't want to say like, 'Oh, I worked with [mentor], two Michelin star,' and for [diners] to come to expect kind of wacky sensory food" (21, R2). This risk intensified for higher status mentors, for example, "Higher profile the chef, the fussier and more critical customer bar, for sure" (23, R2). Thus, while legacy chefs saw their mentors as a symbolic resource that helped set appropriate expectations for diners and amplify their brands, divergent chefs framed these connections as potential roadblocks to establishing optimally distinctive identities. Strategies for mitigating these feelings of discomfort were more straightforward for divergent chefs than for legacy chefs: they simply chose not to talk about their mentors publicly or did so only "lightly."

Finally, because divergent chefs were intentionally not emulating their mentors' food, some spoke of facing difficulties in crafting a culinary style that was truly distinctive, for example, "Being bold and courageous, to do something completely different—that's way harder. To get rewarded on that, it's just harder because you're just going out on your own" (25, R2). Indeed, being truly distinctive was not only difficult, but perceived as the less publicly rewarded path. During a follow-up interview, Chef 10 acknowledged that creating truly novel products remained an ongoing challenge: "That's my sort of next chapter, is to try and explore something there, the challenge is to do something that's new, but that can push boundaries again."

4.3 | Outcomes of optimal distinctiveness trajectories: Implications for audience evaluations

These two trajectories have different performance implications. Although financial performance implications of an identity may be difficult to assess, we uncovered evidence that these trajectories did have an impact on the perceptions and evaluations of elite critics and diners. Importantly, the performance outcomes of each trajectory aligned with the key performance criteria chefs discussed in interviews. Legacy chefs defined success as (a) attracting customers in a highly competitive market, (b) profitability, and (c) building a brand (see Appendix B, Table B1 for data examples). Divergent chefs referred to the first two performance goals but also described success as not about creating big brands. Instead, they focused on opening one-off restaurants that catered to local audiences, for example, "The whole point was to open a really good neighborhood spot" (10); "We're looking for financial achievement versus kind of recognition" (21, R2). A legacy chef described divergent chefs as "play[ing] a smaller game" (24, R2).

4.3.1 | Elite critics' perceptions

We found that legacy chefs (10 of 15 in our sample) were more likely than divergent chefs to have received high-status awards such as Michelin stars or AA Rosettes for their restaurants (see Table 1). Few legacy chefs discussed directly chasing stars (e.g., "I would love to achieve a green Michelin star one day"; 24, R2), but they did recognize the value in metrics of success:

"Accolades are good because they obviously drive customers" (20, R2). In contrast, divergent chefs often mentioned explicitly choosing to work and train in Michelin starred restaurants but expressed a strong desire not to chase such accolades in their own restaurants, seeing them as "too much of a risk" (21, R2) (see Appendix B, Table B2 for more illustrative quotes).

Differences in attention from elite critics might be attributable to legacy chefs' strategy to play up mentor connections, which aligns with the Michelin guide's evaluation schema: "If the chef has worked or has been trained in a high-quality restaurant, we will try to plan the visit early in the year, so that we can go back if we think it is worth a star" (Khaire et al. 2014, p. 6). Beyond a motivation to opt out of such accolades, a lack of attention from elite critics may have been an unintended consequence for divergent chefs, confirming Zuckerman's (1999) classic theory that spanning categories leads to illegitimacy. In cuisine, conformity tends to be rewarded over originality. For example, one of the few divergent chefs who received a Michelin star recalled the inspectors not knowing how to categorize his food: "[Michelin was] like, do we give you a star? Do we give you a Bib Gourmand? We don't know 'cause it doesn't really sort of sit in a category" (10, R2). Although divergent chefs' restaurants were less generously rewarded by high-status evaluation organizations like Michelin, they still had successful restaurants, more often receiving recognition from the popular press, for example, "Time Out Best Chips for London" (23).

4.3.2 | Diners' perceptions

Analyses of diners' online reviews showed that a legacy identity influenced diners, but a divergent identity did not, likely because diners were not aware of divergent chefs' connections with mentors. The legacy identity influenced diners in two ways: First, diners referenced mentor associations as motivating their restaurant selections. Although these reviews were only a small portion of the overall reviews for a focal chef's restaurant(s), they provide evidence that diners do in fact pay attention and respond to legacy chefs' discursive practices, for example, "I had read several reviews of the [restaurant name] and was particularly excited by the fact that [Chef 12] used to work with [mentor]" (Online review). Chefs also recognized that their mentor connections could help drive traffic: "I think there's a lot of people that have come [to my restaurant] ... because they've come to [my mentor's] things before" (7). Mentors signaled market positioning for diners and informed their expectations: "When you say, 'I worked at [mentor's restaurant]', I think that also gives people a very, very small window into what they might expect of me" (6). Second, legacy material practices influenced diners' evaluations. Diners explicitly compared their dining experiences to their experiences at mentors' restaurants, for example, "The food [of Chef 13] is outstanding and even better than [mentor's]" (Online review). This suggests that diners cognitively assessed chefs' material choices relative to those of their mentors, and that they primarily understood this relationship through the food (see Appendix B, Table B1 for more illustrative quotes).

4.3.3 | Other long-term outcomes

In addition to increased attention from critics and diners, legacy chefs reaped other long-term benefits that aligned with their own performance goals, especially their desire to build profitable and sustainable brands. They typically developed more than one restaurant, for example,

at the time of writing, legacy chefs were operating 1.6 restaurants, on average (vs. 0.95 restaurants operated by divergent chefs). They were more likely to have appeared on TV and to have written cookbooks (see Table 1), both of which helped amass diner recognition, including outside of London, and drive traffic to their restaurants. A legacy chef explained the importance of these strategies: "If I write a cookbook and ... I do [TV show], I reckon it's going to be easier to fill this dining room, and I was right [laughs]" (6). By creating brands with diverse revenue streams, legacy chefs had stronger potential for growth and profitability in an industry plagued by small margins. However, divergent chefs took a more diverse career perspective. For instance, follow-up interviews and archival data revealed that divergent chefs who closed their restaurants pursued other food related careers (e.g., food writer), whereas legacy chefs who closed their restaurants often launched other restaurants.

4.4 | Outliers

Finally, we briefly discuss some outliers in our data: chefs who did not completely align with either the legacy or the divergent trajectory and employed both types of material and discursive practices (Chefs 14, 18, 22). These chefs' experiences reveal some unique dynamics between material and discursive strategies and audiences' responses. For example, the importance of legacy material practices for diners' assessments of chefs' restaurants is best evidenced by the case of Chef 22, who prepared dishes in the same ethnic cuisine category as their mentor but actively sought to claim a divergent identity both discursively ("I told my PR company, drop that word [protégé]"), and materially ("it's [the food] completely different"). Despite his best efforts to establish a divergent identity, diners repeatedly referred to his mentor in online reviews due to the high overlap in cuisine: "The chef is an [mentor] protégé ..."; "Watch out [mentor], you've got some competition"; "Even better than [mentor's restaurant]." Conversely, diners did not make these connections for Chefs 14 and 18, who both mentioned their mentors in the press extensively but did not mimic their cuisine (i.e., legacy discursive practices/divergent material practices). Although these are outliers, these examples imply that a chef's material practices may convey legacy status more than discursive practices.

4.5 | Summary of findings

We summarize our main findings in Table 3. Our data reveal two potential trajectories to establish an optimally distinct identity from a mentor: legacy and divergent. Both trajectories have interpersonal origins. A legacy trajectory is rooted in chefs' positive interpersonal experiences with their mentors, whereas a divergent trajectory was driven by multiple factors generally associated with negative interpersonal experiences and a lack of emotional ties with their mentors. Given that one of the key dimensions of mentoring is psychosocial support and a protégé's perceptions of emotional ties towards a mentor define its quality (i.e., positive equated with high-quality, negative with low-quality), it is perhaps not surprising that legacy chefs see themselves in high-quality mentoring relationships, which they then use as fuel to materially emulate their mentors' cuisines and publicize their close mentoring relationships (e.g., in the press, cookbooks, and websites). In contrast, chefs on the divergent trajectory materially and discursively distance their food and public brands from their mentors, practices that are driven by a desire to do something different and stand out.

TABLE 3 Summary of optimal distinctiveness trajectories.

	Optimal distinctiveness trajectory	
Dimension	**Legacy**	**Divergent**
Self-selection	• Work with high-status mentor to learn from "the best"	
Origins	• *Interpersonal drivers*: Positive and high-quality mentoring experience	• *Interpersonal drivers*: Negative mentoring experience and/or absence of emotional ties • *Other drivers*: ○ Resistance to occupational standards of success (e.g., elite accolades) ○ Personal ambition for creative independence
Strategic practices	Mentor is primary "exemplar" reference point via: • *Material practices*: emulate culinary style → consistent over time • *Discursive practices*: use high quality mentoring relationship as part of branding (e.g., press, websites, cookbooks, TV) → consistent over time (as allowed)	Others (peers, family, travel) as reference points via: • *Material practices*: cooking different food from mentor, cumulative experiences shaping food • *Discursive practices*: acknowledge/downplay associations with mentor or no mention
Tensions	Early career experiences: • *Tension*: Macro (occupation and audience)/micro (mentor) pressures to maintaining connection to mentor vs. desire for differentiation driven by micro pressures (self) ○ *Negotiation*: manage interpersonal relationship with mentor and adopt long-term perspective over career Later career experiences: • Awards/evolving mentoring relationships resolve early career tensions • *Tension*: limited movement outside of market category	Early career experiences: • *Tensions*: Macro (audience) pressures to maintain clear expectations but create distinctive food; fear over such connections driven by micro (mentor and self) pressures ○ *Negotiation*: silence/minimal discussion of mentor relationships Later career experiences: • *Tension*: Sustaining creativity and novelty
Self-defined success criteria	• Attracting customers in a highly competitive environment • Profitability • Building a brand	• Attracting customers in a highly competitive environment • Profitability • Staying small
Outcomes	• More elite critic awards (e.g., Michelin stars, AA Rosettes) • Drive diner selection and perceptions of evaluation • Multiple restaurants • Global brand presence (e.g., TV, cookbooks)	• Fewer elite critic awards (e.g., Michelin stars, AA Rosettes) • Single restaurants or other food businesses • Local media awards (e.g., "Best Chips")

In their pursuit of optimal distinction, all chefs experience tensions and trade-offs from a mix of pressures at the macro (occupation and audience) and micro (mentor and oneself) levels. Early in legacy chefs' careers, these pressures combine to create a tension between maintaining connections with mentors (as expected by audiences, peers, and mentors) and achieving a distinctive identity (which they desire). They manage this tension by employing several discrete practices largely focused on creating psychological and structural distance from their mentors at the start of their careers. This tension eases with time as they achieve success and their mentoring relationships evolve, only to be replaced by new pressures later in their careers, that is, feeling pigeonholed into a market category. Divergent chefs, meanwhile, reject occupational pressures to maintain relationships, but still must manage micro-level pressures associated with their personal desire for distinction and fear of overstepping a mentor relationship, as well as macro-level pressures to satisfy audience expectations. Divergent chefs manage these tensions by choosing not to disclose or minimally acknowledging mentoring relationships.

Both trajectories also have different performance implications that align with chefs' own criteria of success: legacy chefs gain more elite recognition and long-term benefits (e.g., establishing a brand, a personal goal), whereas divergent chefs rarely win the same accolades but attain their personal goals of remaining small. Finally, our data reveals that strategic positioning as a legacy or divergent chef is largely durable, which is why we call these "trajectories" of optimal distinctiveness. Next, we discuss how these findings contribute to scholarship.

5 | DISCUSSION

We performed an inductive qualitative investigation to explore how creative producers strategically position themselves in the market in reference to well-known mentors. To answer this question, we drew from a variety of qualitative data sources: longitudinal in-depth interviews with successful chef-owners, archival materials (i.e., media interviews, websites, and menus), and external evaluations from elite critics and diners (i.e., awards and online reviews). Our analysis has revealed two trajectories of optimal distinctiveness: legacy or divergent. Each trajectory has different origins (i.e., positive or negative mentoring experiences), strategic practices (i.e., material and discursive), tensions at the micro (i.e., mentor and personal) and macro (i.e., occupation and audience) levels, and performance implications for their ventures (i.e., awards, customer demand, and brand potential). Below, we unpack how these findings contribute to optimal distinctiveness theory. We also explore the generalizability of our findings beyond creative industries and suggest some ideas for future research.

5.1 | Unpacking how and why producers claim optimal distinctiveness

Our study responds to calls to rethink optimal distinctiveness as "a dynamic process" (Zhao, 2022, p. 4) by presenting a comprehensive picture of how the process unfolds for producers and their organizations, including its origins, associated strategic practices, tensions, and performance outcomes. First, we identified an unexpected driver of optimal distinctiveness: interpersonal relationships. Whereas prior work has considered macro-outsider forces as influencing an organization's capacity to achieve optimal distinctiveness (e.g., changing market conditions like evolving consumer preferences (Zhao, 2022)), our findings show that at least in

the context of culinary work micro forces (e.g., personal relationships) may be just as—if not more—influential. Our empirical data supports Zuckerman's (2016) proposition that some differentiation choices may be driven by a founder's internal needs rather than solely by competition for resources (see also Grimes, 2018; Zuzul & Tripsas, 2020).

The residue of chefs' experiences with their well-known mentors shaped their strategic positioning choices in two directions. For legacy chefs, perceived high-quality mentoring led to a pursuit of what we could call "optimal similarity," whereby they repeatedly emphasized commonalities between themselves and their mentors. Mentors' successful organizations served as exemplar reference points for legacy chefs, who prioritized emulation as they launched their careers and ventures (Younger & Fisher, 2020; Zhao et al., 2018). In contrast, divergent chefs who lacked emotional ties with their mentors prioritized differentiation, another potential response to an exemplar (Younger & Fisher, 2020). Our findings thus respond to recent interest in the varied audience and producer responses to exemplars (Majzoubi et al., 2025; Zhao, 2022), suggesting that even in the same market, optimal distinctiveness can manifest differently for different producers. This has implications for how we theorize optimal distinctiveness more broadly, suggesting that producers can claim "moderate" degrees of distinction from a reference point in several ways (Durand & Haans, 2022).

Second, our findings show how producers achieve optimal distinctiveness through a set of discrete practices, answering scholarly calls to move beyond focusing on a single firm dimension (Zhao, 2022; Zhao et al., 2017). Triangulating how chefs publicly refer to their mentors in the press, how they privately refer to their mentors during research interviews, and the stylistic choices they make on their menus enabled us to uncover both material and discursive practices used to pursue optimal distinctiveness and how they interplay with each other. We discovered, for example, a temporal relationship between discursive practices and material practices: when trying to attract an initial customer base, producers leverage both dimensions equally, but as they establish themselves this becomes less of a focus because there are fewer opportunities to engage in discursive practices. As the chefs explained, unless they open new restaurants or write cookbooks, they simply receive less press. Relatedly, we found that consumers prioritize material over discursive practices, that is, they evaluate a chef's identity mostly through the food itself. Taken together, these findings on the relationship between material and discursive practices reveals how producers may be constrained in their ability to "configure and orchestrate a variety of strategic resources" (Zhao, 2022, p. 21) in the pursuit optimal distinctiveness as their organizations evolve. In some industries, leveraging cultural symbols may be insufficient to establish optimally distinctive identities without complementary material practices (Giorgi et al., 2015). Our findings also shed light on the separation phase in mentoring theory, revealing that the structural work protégés deploy during separation may endure beyond their psychological work (Kram, 1985).

Third, our findings reveal the highly consequential outcomes of producers' choices in the pursuit of optimal distinctiveness. The legacy trajectory is more rewarded in terms of elite accolades, diner attention, and brand growth; but why? We theorize that this is due to a positive spillover effect: a legacy identity serves as an endorsement of quality to audiences (Reschke et al., 2018). For example, entrepreneurial ventures have been found to benefit from status spillovers when endorsed by well-known alliance partners (Stuart et al., 1999). Status associations are particularly important in established markets like the culinary industry, in contrast to newer market categories (Jeon et al., 2025). Indeed, as other research has shown, the culinary industry is driven (and constrained) by status (Leschziner, 2015), and elite food critics (e.g., Michelin guide) are especially attuned to such positive status transfers, perhaps because

they already have an interpretive schema to understand the cuisine of high-status master chefs, which they use to make sense of their apprentices (Castellucci & Slavich, 2020; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016). This is not to suggest, however, that protégés from high-status mentors always reap positive benefits: in their study of NBA coaches, Liu et al. (2025) showed that while connections may get a protégé a job, later performance evaluations by employers may be more mixed. Thus, a mentor's status halo may have differing outcomes depending on the audience.

Diners, meanwhile, are non-experts. They often seek food that is familiar, which can be signaled by connections to high-status mentors (Leschziner, 2015). In addition, a legacy identity can guide diners' attention to a chef's restaurant as high quality among competing alternatives (Reschke et al., 2018). Given the limited number of consumers who are willing to pay the high costs of fine dining (e.g., Chef 13's tasting menu starts at GBP 245, around USD 315), this attention is consequential. As these meals are usually reserved for special events to impress, diners are more likely to pay attention to online reviews where mentor connections would be mentioned, and the more notable a chef, the higher the economic returns for their restaurant(s) (Greenberg et al., 2024). Taken together, elite accolades and increased diner attention can immensely shape a legacy chef's career. Prizes have a more significant effect on artistic careers than on other fields (Heinich, 2009) by enhancing the status and visibility of the winners, increasing economic returns and establishing them as trend setters who are emulated by other artists (Faulkner & Anderson, 1987; Negro et al., 2022). Our data reflects this as Michelin stars and AA Rosettes are correlated with other markers of success in the field, such as multiple restaurants and a recognizable brand identity (e.g., TV appearances). In summary, legacy chefs can develop brands with strong potential for growth and profitability, which is important in businesses with traditionally small margins (Lane, 2014; Leschziner, 2015; Svejenova et al., 2015). This confirms that greater social recognition leads to higher economic returns (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999).

5.2 | Revealing the tensions associated with strategic positioning

At the core of optimal distinctiveness theory is the tension between conformity and differentiation, yet researchers have largely focused on stakeholders' perceptions of whether a firm adequately balances the two pressures, leaving questions about how organizations actually accomplish this balancing act (Zhao, 2022). Our qualitative findings help uncover this lacuna, revealing the diverse tensions and trade-offs producers must manage as they make strategic positioning decisions. Specifically, the tension between conformity and differentiation is driven by an interplay between pressures at the micro (i.e., interpersonal relationships with mentors and personal ambitions) and macro (audience expectations and occupational demands) levels that chefs must negotiate differently as their careers progress.

When chefs launch their first restaurants, micro-level pressures stemming from both mentors and their own ambitions appear to be most salient. High-quality mentoring may motivate chefs to pursue legacy identities, but deference to and fear of ostracizing their famous mentors heighten the tension between conformity and distinction. Accordingly, legacy chefs prioritize managing their interpersonal relationships (i.e., negotiating separation from their mentors and distancing their work) to ease the conformity-distinction tension. Divergent chefs respond to this tension by downplaying their interpersonal connections and avoiding leveraging them for resources. Some chefs suggested this was driven by fear; indeed, it is likely easier to remain silent about connections with mentors when mentoring experiences are negative. In addition,

chefs must manage their own personal desires for differentiation, which are present in the early stages of both trajectories.

Early career chefs also must manage macro-level occupational pressures. These pressures are isomorphic in quality, as they emphasize the pursuit of similarity between mentor and protégé and are driven by "normative" processes, that is, from within the profession (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Normative isomorphism is constraining, and chefs must make a "valuation risk" of how much differentiation from a mentor they can seek—being too different may be viewed by professional peers as signaling incompetence or deviance (Zuckerman, 2016, p. 194). Given how little control early career legacy chefs have over these occupational standards, they manage them through acceptance, that is, developing an attitude that independence will come with time. Meanwhile, this occupational pressure for homogenization explains why divergent chefs experience such anxiety when resisting these norms and why they must draw such sharp boundaries publicly (and sometimes privately too) between themselves and a mentor. Finally, macro-level pressures of audience expectations appear important throughout a chef's career, with different intensities. For divergent chefs, there is a concern of managing audience expectations if they claim similarity to a mentor, whereas for legacy chefs, audience expectations become more challenging to resolve later in their careers when they seek to expand into different market categories.

5.3 | Identifying temporal dynamics in the pursuit of optimally distinct identities

Our data explores the role of temporality when pursuing optimally distinctive identities, an underexplored area of interest to scholars (Deephouse, 1999; Majzoubi et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2017, 2018). An unexpected finding from our follow-up interviews and longitudinal archival data is that trajectories are largely consistent over time. This finding is counterintuitive, as we would expect chefs to name-drop or align with a mentor early in their careers to garner necessary resources; and stop upon achieving career success. As researchers have theorized, optimal distinctiveness from competitors is likely more important for new firms than for older ones (Stinchcombe, 1965; Zhao, 2022). Yet, legacy chefs embrace this trajectory over the long term.

Why do we see this consistency? One theory is that rewards for the legacy identity likely lead to a self-reinforcing pattern. When consumers, critics, and mentors reward legacy status, chefs are more likely to remain on the legacy trajectory. During our follow-up interviews, legacy chefs described the ongoing benefits of publicizing their mentoring relationships, suggesting that they understood the performance implications of maintaining these relationships. Founder identities can create self-reinforcing trajectories (Zuzul & Tripsas, 2020), especially in creative work, as a consistent identity (or "style") is rewarded more than simply being a specialist or innovator (Formilan et al., 2021). Once a chef has mastered a specific culinary style, there are strong incentives to adhere to it, especially after they open their first restaurants (Leschziner, 2015). An alternative theory comes from the mentoring literature: legacy chefs with high-quality mentoring experiences are able to flourish in a mentor's shadow in ways that divergent chefs with negative experiences cannot (Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1985). Divergent chefs are on a different self-reinforcing trajectory, whereby shifting from silence to publicly acknowledging mentor connections would appear inauthentic and risky for their market positioning.

The self-reinforcing nature of optimally distinctive trajectories also has unintended consequences. For example, some later-career legacy chefs described feeling "stuck" in their culinary

styles after winning awards, thereby limiting their abilities to pursue truly novel paths for fear of market consequences. It appears that early choices in optimal distinctiveness can impact a producer's ability to change positions later. This contrasts with research showing that after winning Grammy awards, artists tend to release albums that are more likely to stand out stylistically from other artists (Negro et al., 2022). In the food industry, the commercial often outweighs the creative, making market positioning choices much more economically consequential than for musicians, who may have greater latitude for change (Leschziner, 2015). These contrasting findings are a reminder that the pursuit of optimal distinctiveness is highly context-specific (Zhao, 2022). How creative producers plot their trajectories may vary, as audience pressures for stylistic consistency versus distinction are different for each "art world" (Becker, 1982).

5.4 | Generalizability and scope conditions

We believe our findings can be applied to settings beyond the culinary industry and creative work. Indeed, famous mentor–protégé pairs are found in almost every profession; for example, in science (e.g., Sigmund Freud mentored Carl Jung) and athletics (e.g., Phil Jackson mentored Michael Jordan) (Allen & Eby, 2007). Apprenticeships with well-known mentors have been found to have strategic importance across a number of professions, such as law (Kay et al., 2009), sports coaching (Kilduff et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2025), healthcare (Stephens & Dearani, 2021), and academia (Ma et al., 2020). We theorize that the importance of a legacy trajectory is more likely to be high in industries where quality metrics are ambiguous. Karpik (2010) called exchanges of everyday goods and services that are structured to have uncertain quality and are incommensurable as markets of "singularities." For organizations operating in such markets, consumers often purchase goods and services with little knowledge of quality in advance; thus, status functions as a signal to help consumers evaluate offerings (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Malter, 2014; Podolny, 2010). Apprenticeships with famous mentors are one way producers can communicate status to audiences, which in turn promotes trust that the product or service they are providing is high quality. For example, endorsements by a star can confer to audiences the quality of an aspiring comedian, helping distinguish them from other newcomers, especially important given the subjective nature of comedy (Reilly, 2017). Meanwhile, working for a highly reputed NFL coach can bring job-market advantages to protégés (Kilduff et al., 2016). In singularity markets, too much distinctiveness may be a risky path (rather than a source of legitimacy, e.g., Taeuscher et al. (2021)), but a legacy trajectory resolves the central issue of product ambiguity. Indeed, conformity and consistency can even become a source of distinction, for example, Cattani et al. (2017).

Our findings may also apply to more traditional industries like private equity, venture capital, and philanthropy, where reputation plays an important role in attracting funds from investors and donors. Status spillovers from famous mentors can help increase legitimacy to investors, helping focal firms raise money. Entrepreneurs also must regularly manage an optimal distinctiveness tension (Younger & Fisher, 2020): a well-known mentor may signal "normative appropriateness" to audiences (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, p. 552), but this may only hold in established industries where exemplars are frequently used by audiences to evaluate firms (Majzoubi et al., 2025). For example, new firms in biotechnology were found to benefit from endorsements from high-status organizations in the form of downstream development and commercialization rights (Stuart et al., 1999).

5.5 | Limitations and directions for future research

Our study opens several avenues for future research. First, because we focused on exploring variation among chefs who had already achieved optimal distinctiveness, our findings do not apply to cases of failure. Outliers in our data (chefs who combined legacy and divergent strategies) could be fruitful for investigating atypical trajectories which might lead to such failure. For instance, one outlier chef (14) who had implemented legacy symbolic practices but materially diverged from a mentor recently shuttered all her restaurants. While this is just one case, it suggests that more systematic longitudinal investigation into what happens to these outliers could reveal greater variation in the pursuit of optimal distinctiveness.

Second, our data collection strategies focused on mentors as chefs' primary reference points. However, as we discussed in the findings, chefs hinted that sometimes peers served as additional reference points. Indeed, research has shown that chefs are attuned to where they stand in relation to their peers (Lane, 2014; Leschziner, 2015) and more recently, scholars have questioned how multiple reference points might affect the pursuit of optimal distinctiveness (Zhao, 2022; Zhao & Glynn, 2022). Further investigation into how producers balance competitor and exemplar reference points would be revealing. The importance of one benchmark over another could be geographically driven, for example, in the London culinary market, mentors are more common as exemplar reference points, whereas chefs in less competitive markets view peers as their primary reference points. Examining how geography influences these strategic positioning choices could be another fruitful area of inquiry, especially given recent calls to take context more seriously in optimal distinctiveness research (Zhao, 2022). Moreover, it may be beneficial to explore how chefs without clear mentors achieve success, like Michelin stars, in an industry that rewards protégé-mentor relationships. Peers play more of a developmental role, or these chefs may take longer to achieve the same levels of success compared with legacy chefs.

Third, and finally, most of the chefs in our sample self-selected into their mentors' kitchens, driven by their desire to work for high-status chefs. While chefs noted that *others* may choose to work with mentors for interpersonal reasons, that is, a more positive work environment, no one in our sample openly admitted to such practices (perhaps due to social desirability bias). This finding suggests that protégés may self-select mentors based on their management styles, potentially impacting their subsequent trajectories. Further research could unpack how this self-selection into mentoring relationships influences how producers claim optimal distinctiveness. For instance, those who seek out tyrants as mentors may have a higher exit rate in the industry or may not expect to pursue a legacy path.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this study, we have used longitudinal qualitative data to show how producers position themselves strategically in reference to well-known mentors across their careers. Our findings show that the quality of these relationships is what guides the pursuit of optimal distinctiveness. We have identified variation in the strategic practices employed to establish optimally distinctive identities, as well as tensions associated with each trajectory and different performance outcomes. Seeking the "optimal" position in relation to one's mentor is necessary, but also constraining, as producers must negotiate pressures at both the micro (interpersonal and individual) and macro (occupational and audience-driven) levels.

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APPENDIX A: DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

Here we provide greater detail on our data analysis strategies, which unfolded in three stages. In the first stage, we engaged in "open coding" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Gioia et al., 2013); reviewing the interview transcripts line-by-line to generate inductive findings directly from the data to create a list of codes based largely on chef's language (Charmaz, 2006), paying particular attention to tones in their accounts and evaluative statements about their mentoring relationships. We discovered that chefs described public branding practices that linked them with their mentors when launching their restaurants, but differed in the extent to which they emphasized these relationships: Some informants described themselves as generally seeking to leverage their mentors' success as they opened their restaurants and therefore saw it as important to maintain close ties (e.g., "I think it is important to advertise who I have worked for") and sought to cook similar food (e.g., "I comfortably emulate my mentor's cooking"), whereas others described a desire to distance themselves from their mentors as they established their restaurants (e.g., "I will publicly acknowledge mentor's influence when asked, and downplay associations") and to create novel products (e.g., "I want to be a different in what I cook, unlike others").

We triangulated these first-order codes with the archival data to compare and contrast how chefs described their strategies in interviews and how they presented themselves publicly. Data were largely consistent across the two sources. For example, chefs who described playing up public associations with their mentors during interviews also consistently mentioned their mentors in public discourse (i.e., acknowledging mentors in their cookbooks, referencing mentors in media interviews without being prompted). Similarly, chefs who spoke of emulating a mentor's culinary style exhibited high or medium levels of cuisine similarity with their mentors'

approaches based on our analysis of menus. We then aggregated these first-order codes into broader categories, or second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021), identifying two types of strategic practices vis-à-vis mentoring relationships: Material practices (referring to choices in culinary style) and discursive practices (referring to choices in public discourse).

In the second stage of analysis, we grouped the chefs based on these strategic material and discursive practices. To do this, we mapped all chefs onto a graph that measured material similarity with a mentor (low, medium, high) and discursive similarity (low, characterized by no mentions of a mentor; medium, characterized by mentors mentioned in one form of data, e.g., press or website or cookbook; and high, characterized by two or more forms of data linkages, e.g., press and website, or press and cookbook). From this coding exercise, two constellations in the data emerged: Chefs who exhibited high material and discursive similarity with their mentors, and chefs who exhibited low discursive and low/medium material similarity with their mentors. We also identified outliers to this pattern.

Next, we began to look deeper in the data for similarities and differences across chefs in these two data constellations. We found that differences in strategic efforts were broadly aligned with informants' views of mentorship and their descriptions of their experiences as protégés. While informants in the upper-right quadrant (high material similarity-high discursive similarity) described valuing mentorship in their careers (e.g., "Mentorship is very important to my career and other chefs' careers") and referenced positive experiences training with their mentors (e.g., "I had a high-quality and positive mentoring experience that heavily influenced me"), informants in the lower-left quadrant (low discursive similarity-low/medium material similarity) mostly described negative training experiences (e.g., "I had negative interpersonal experiences with my mentor"), emotional detachment (e.g., "I do not have the same emotional commitment to my mentor as other chefs") and a desire for differentiation (e.g., "I have a strong desire to do something different from my past, unlike other chefs"). We also found variations in the types of challenges and tensions these chefs described based on their strategic efforts, for example: "I feel pressure to stay connected to my mentor, but I also want to establish my own identity" versus "I am uncomfortable advertising my mentor connections, because I feel pressure not to/it's risky to overstep the relationship"; as well as differing career goals (e.g., "I don't chase awards, but they are important in one's success" versus "I distaste and do not seek out a Michelin star/accolades").

In the third stage of data analysis, we focused on theorizing and further merging and refining categories while iteratively engaging with literatures on mentoring, creative work, and optimal distinctiveness to abstract our findings to the theoretical level. Through this process, we identified two optimal distinctiveness trajectories: Legacy and divergent. After identifying these two trajectories, we conducted follow-up interviews with chefs and additional archival data to confirm and enrich our findings. We described the two trajectories and asked chefs to share their thoughts, reactions, and where they saw themselves in these two groupings. Chefs generally agreed with the preliminary findings, and we probed them for more information on tensions and trade-offs associated with each trajectory over time. We also examined outcomes of the two trajectories by analyzing the number of awards chefs received and diners' reviews. In the findings, we explore each of these trajectories in greater detail with illustrative quotes.

APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL DATA TABLES

TABLE B1 Legacy trajectory.

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
Origins of the legacy trajectory	*Mentorship is very important to my career and other chefs' careers* • If you look at the people who have really achieved amazing things in the industry, often there will be someone in their background, a head chef or whoever who has helped them ... people that become stars having being well mentored. (5) • Mentoring is the most important thing ... for me it saved my life. (2) • That is the key for being so successful, is that they have had great mentoring and being in a great organization, and it's meant that they've been able to go on and create these amazing restaurants and do these amazing things. I mean like that's sort of the recipe for success, isn't it? (24, R2) *I had a high-quality and positive mentoring experience that heavily influenced me* • I didn't enjoy my time there [a famous chef's restaurant] for various reasons. And so, I obviously don't look at that as like mentorship. I just went there and suffered for a while. Couldn't wait to get out of there. And then I went off to [mentor's restaurant] and it was just [a] really lovely environment. They taught me about culture, about team building. (8, R2) • [My mentor was a] brilliant chef who [was] very organized but would get you to—you *want* to work for him, you want to do things. If he spoke, you listened; he never talked to you in a bad way. He earned my respect pretty quickly. Whereas someone who comes in and just doesn't show you any respect in the way they talk to [you], I don't have time for those people. (8) • I've always really respected the guy ... like I consider him as a person, and you don't think about this sort of culinary legend or whatever. ... he's just a lovely man. (20, R2) • I went and worked for [mentor] for three-and-a-half years and absolutely loved it ... I mean [he]'s someone who I absolutely respect. Like, he's still my head chef; like I have total respect for him, definitely. (24) *I wanted to work for my mentor because of their cooking style and their high status* • I went to work at [mentor's restaurant] because [mentor] had worked with [celebrity chef]. That's it. That's it. That was the only reason. (6) • I want to be on top, and obviously like in my training I want to work for the best, so it's no good for me working at an average restaurant when I know there's better restaurants there, so I'm going to go work for them. (4) • I think I've always wanted to work for the best so I could learn from the best. (13) • I wanted to work at like Michelin star level, and then there was everybody else. There was like really not much variation. And I was traveling around, going to different restaurants, and I was a bit bored because we were cooking the same food but just did slightly different recipes. And I made the decision to go and work for [mentor] because it was just really fascinating, much more interesting. (24)

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
Establishing a legacy identity: Strategic material practices	*I comfortably emulate my mentor's cooking* • [His] philosophy, respect for ingredients, respect for each other ... That's also something that I've really brought through to my own kitchen ... respect for the produce, the producer and nature of the planet, environment, all those things we think a lot about ... that's kind of something I've really brought through. (13) • I aspired to be as good a cook as [him]. I aspired to be someone who looked at ingredients through those eyes, and that sat totally perfectly with me. That's where I wanted to be. I basically sort of went the best way I could to sort of emulate that. (6) • I like to draw influence from lots of places as well because having worked with [my mentor] and worked with ingredients from all over the world, there's always that part of me that, you know, "His cooking is about not having any boundaries," and I like cooking that way. (11) *Food is the primary way to understand a mentor–protégé relationship (theme across legacy and divergent chefs)* • People will write menus for certain audiences or situations. If you work with Raymond Blanc, you're gonna write a menu that's like Raymond Blanc. ... So, the press come in and are like, oh, I can see the influence of Raymond Blanc on this menu. (21, R2) • A chef cannot tell you, "Oh I worked with [celebrity chef] for 5 years but this is my plate, there's nothing here that belongs to [celebrity chef]." [That] is bullshit! (22) • When someone says at the end, like, "That was fantastic, this is one of the best dishes we've eaten," take it all on the chin and accept it. That's what you want to hear, you know. If half of it's [celebrity chef], half of it is [celebrity chef], and then like [celebrity chef] is in there as well, you know, "Thanks for the comments, but none of it's mine, I'm just copying someone." (4) *I still see and admire my mentor as a figure of culinary inspiration* • I don't look at these young hot shots [for inspiration] but someone like [mentor] that constantly strives to be a perfectionist, and everything he does or opens or looks to do just turns to gold. (4) • Having both of them felt like a luxury and they were both inspiring in different ways. You like carry that with you as you—you know, throughout the rest of your life really. (20, R2)
Establishing a legacy identity: Strategic discursive practices	*I think it is important to advertise who I have worked for* • I always make a point of saying where I worked. I'm always very much associated with [him] and always will be, because he has been a massive influence in my life, and I think will always continue to be in that sense. I think I learned an incredible amount from him and [am] still sort of influenced by him. (11) • I don't shy away from it in any way like a lot of people want to ... I think it can only be a good thing that I've learnt from someone as amazing as [my mentor]. (7) • Every press release that's ever come out about me has always said that I worked at [mentor's restaurant], but that's something I'm incredibly proud of. I want people to know that ... I want to be associated with that, because I think that was an incredibly significant part of my life. It was probably the most significant 3 or 4 years of my whole life, definitely, and carved me into what I have then gone on to become. (6)

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	• [As a new chef], it's really tricky to get your foot in the door, to create the buzz. It's kind of tricky when you've never done it before. So, you know, it helped for me to be able to say I worked at [restaurant] and [mentor's restaurant]. (8) • [My mentor] helped me. He was a small investor, and just having him on board helped. He gave me credibility that otherwise my business plan wouldn't have had. So, just by saying [mentor] is an investor, even though he's on the smaller side, it's still counted for a lot. (20) • Interviewer: Do you think that customers, critics in the media really care about who you work for before? Chef: Yeah. Like if you've got big names on your CV then that goes a long way, yeah. (24) • I definitely used his name. It's on my CV and it's on my LinkedIn. And so yeah, I've mentioned his name along with the years ... The reason I put that [his name] on was to try and help me, you know, to help my name, help the business, and help my progression, you know. It was useful. Like for me, it was very useful to be able to say I worked for [mentor's name]. So, I sort of, you know, I milked it for what I could [laughter]. Well, I didn't really, but like, you know, yeah, it was there for my benefit. (24, R2) *Examples of performing positivity of mentor relationship in the press* • I stayed at [mentor's restaurant] for 2 more years and loved absolutely everything about it. The chef, [mentor], is one of the best cooks I have ever met. He remains a good friend and has been a great support and inspiration to me throughout my career. (6, Cookbook) • I also had no idea of the effect it [my mentor's restaurant] would have on my own career, how it would shape and define how and what I like to cook, and how it would open doors for me through association. I loved everything about my time at [that restaurant]. (8, Cookbook) • The confidence that [my mentor] instilled into people and into me as a young chef was really a wake-up call. He put faith in me before I had faith in myself. I think you develop your confidence through those kinds of highs and lows. (13, Media Excerpt) • [He] was welcoming, nurturing, spirited and generous. (12, Media Excerpt) *Examples of playing up culinary emulation in the press* • I'd say [mentor] has had the biggest influence on my cooking. (6, Media Excerpt) • Of course, [my mentor] has influenced my style of cooking ... I'd like to think [mentor's restaurant] and myself have developed together. (14, Media Excerpt) • He taught me to experiment and not to be afraid to try what then seemed to me outlandish combinations. (12, Cookbook) • This is a recipe from the time I spent at [mentor's restaurant], and I still remember the first time I cooked it. It was [his] dish—I used it as a garnish for hake, and it's just great (2, Cookbook)
Establishing a legacy identity: Strategic discursive practices over time	*Examples of chefs describing their mentoring relationship over time in the press* *Example of Chef 7*: • [My mentor] is just next level, not only is he all those things, but you feel that prestige that this is probably the best chef in the world. [Interviewer: Which could be quite intimidating in a way] Yea, no, it could be, a lot of people that don't know him ... He's the best. I

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	will always say he is the best human being I've ever met. He is, hands down, he is the most caring, generous, genuine person I've ever met. I could never say enough nice things about him. He is an absolute hero in my eyes. I would always want to aspire to be—I want to aspire to be half of what he is, let alone what he is now. I think a lot of people feel that intimidation ... of level of pressure ... the thing is with [mentor] is that he's so nurturing. He's such an amazing mentor. (7, Media Excerpt, 1 year after opening own restaurant) • I can honestly say [mentor] is the best human being I've ever met. He's amazing. I'd probably have nothing in my career if it weren't for the man. (7, Media Excerpt, 4 years after opening own restaurant) • My time with [mentor] was huge for me. He's an unbelievable cook and an unbelievable human being. He's everything I aspire to be in a chef, even now. We've obviously got a lot of cross-over of recipes through all of our time spent together. The biggest thing I remember him saying is that the worst comment anyone can say when they leave your restaurant, is that the food was bland or didn't taste of anything. So, for me, I'd rather someone walk away and say it's too much rather than say that it didn't taste of anything. (7, Media Excerpt, 6 years after opening own restaurant) *Example of Chef 13*: • He remains a very important figure, both globally and in my life. He's done so much for our industry—more than he gets credit for. His professionalism is what's got a lot of young people into cooking, and he's a great mentor of mine. I'm very lucky to be able to get his advice, and we have a fantastic relationship. It was he who told me about this site ... (13, Media Excerpt, Same year the restaurant opened) • It's funny how many things [mentor] said to me over the years that I didn't pay much attention to at the time, but now I think, "Wow, he was so right!" Now that I have my own restaurant, those things are important. He just always gave me great advice, and he still does. (13, Media Excerpt, 2 years after opening own restaurant). • I still rely on mine [mentor] today. I feel very fortunate to be able to just ask them things all the time. They have such a vast knowledge and experience. I feel like a lot of things [mentor] would say to me when I was younger didn't really resonate as much, and then when I opened my own business it suddenly resonated. (13, Media Excerpt, 7 years after opening own restaurant) *I still believe my mentor is important to mention to the press* • That is a connection that really works for me because he's such an iconic figure in the chef world. When I am connected with him, that's a positive for me, because people are like, "Oh, wow, you worked with [mentor]. Amazing! Well, you trained under one of the best [redacted] chefs around." So, for me, it's not something that I want to remove myself from. It's a nice link that I want to keep going. (24, R2) • I always mention [my mentor] in every article that I write, if it's relevant. I think it's really important to lean into that and kind of just be really proud of it ... He's [mentor] a great person strategically for me to be [linked] up with because he's got a crystal clean reputation and he's great in the industry. So, I think it's really good for me to be like that. (6, R2) • I think you can take your own path whilst crediting other people. I don't think my sort of tone in the media has changed massively over the years. (20, R2)

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	• In some ways, yes, I will always be in his shadow. But equally, I have no issues about that or feel any competition. (20, R2)
Tensions throughout a legacy chef's career	*I feel pressure to stay connected to my mentor, but I also want to establish my own identity (early career)* • There is a desire to try and be different and try and disentangle your restaurant from all the influences, but it's probably easier said than done. (5) • In 10 years' time I don't want to be like milking that I worked with [mentor], so I hope that I've created my own identity enough by then. (7) • Yeah, I mean it's funny because ... when [my restaurant] opened it was, you know, obviously you've got no kind of back-catalogue as such. So everyone's just saying "Formerly of [mentor's restaurant], blah, blah, blah" and people dig up your CV ... I mean half the journalism, a lot of it is very lazy. ... I understand it, and you look forward to the day where you're no longer the product of where you worked before but you're just seen in your own sort of entity. I know for any young chef it probably takes about, you know, 5 or 10 years or something (20) • So there is a desire, yes, to answer your question there is a desire to try and be different and try and disentangle your restaurant from all the influences but it's probably easier said than done sometimes (5) *I managed this pressure by negotiating with my mentor about their role in my career* • When I left [mentor's restaurant], I sat down and spoke with him because I would have never done it under any sort of gray circumstances. If he wasn't happy, I would've stayed like for years, I would never have done anything to ruin that relationship. I said to him, "How long do you want me to stay to get things sorted before I do this?" I was like, "I'm ready to do this but I won't." I would never have done anything to jeopardize that place and to jeopardize the relationship I had with him. I'd rather stay working there and not have opened this ... I would've because of what I owe him ... to get me to this stage of my career. I completely owe it all to that man, so I would never have done anything to break that working relationship—that relationship, not only working relationship. (7) • When you have someone with such a high profile is you can just be seen as [mentor's] protégé, not in your own name, and so I was really careful about that. (13) *I managed this pressure by disregarding or limiting my mentor's advice when I opened my restaurant* • I wanted to keep my head down, and yeah, I felt like I was ready to have my own opinions and stuff from the big chefs I've worked for. (4) • [Interviewer: Did you ask your mentor for advice when opening the restaurant?] A little bit. I mean, yes and no ... I mean everyone's got advice for you and all of it is completely different and random. But maybe the advice that [my mentor] has—to be honest, he'd been running a place in [rural location] that's now owned by a big American company that turns over £14,000,000 a year. And yes, he once had a single restaurant, but it wasn't in central London, really different market and everything else. ... Ultimately, you've got to make your own decisions, and you can only do what feels right for you at the time. (20)

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	• We didn't even tell anyone we were opening the restaurant. [laughter] ... I didn't want [my mentor] to see what I was doing and think it was terrible. [laughter] (24, R2)
	I managed this pressure by believing that with time I will craft an independent identity
	• It's not like I'm like "Right, I need to break away, I need to be this standout sole entity"... I mean, look. People still talk about how Gordon Ramsay worked for Marco. You know what I mean. He's the most established chef in the world, and people still talk about who he worked for, so it's always going to be the way. (7)
	• It's naturally the way when you open, people are like, "Oh, you're from that restaurant." And then as 20 years progress, you have your own identity, and people say, with the next generation, they're from your restaurant. They link the new people to your restaurant and the sort of just natural cycle takes place. ... I didn't need to distinguish myself. I think naturally it just happened by itself. You turn up to work every day and run a restaurant. (3, R2)
	• I still think it's nice that, you know, for both of us to have that attachment. If I do well then it looks good on her, and you know, it's always going to be good for me to be attached to [my mentor] in some way. But yeah, I think once you've set out to do your own thing, you'll kind of define yourself anyway somehow. (14)
	• I guess that's [copying mentor's food] what happens initially and then you find your own feet. So, I think that's the timeframe thing. If you've just gone into your own place, of course you're going to sit with what you know and what you feel comfortable with and then start to branch out from there. ... I know that I stuck with menus that I thought were—that I was confident to be able to get out in the first like two years. And then once everything settled down after three [years], then we really started to experiment more, come up with our own dishes, really dug down into like seasonality and seasonal suppliers and great suppliers around Europe and the UK. (24, R2)
	The tensions and pressures from early in my career have resolved themselves (for the most part) due to accolades and evolving relationships
	• It's [the relationship] changing ... I think with age, because he's getting older now. I think he's, well, he's definitely mellowed. He's definitely mellowed in his older age, so I think that's helped. [short laugh] (24, R2)
	• The only negative I would say is that occasionally people talk about where you worked still a little bit too much in the media and it can feel like they're talking about you. Like you're the sum of your history and have no voice of your own. I'd like to think I've got a relatively unique kind of signature to my food, and how it looks and how it tastes. And there isn't, you know, completely derivative [of] where I've worked at before. Um, so that would be the sole negative, would be when people keep talking about that. And it's like, "Hang on. I've had my own restaurant and a Michelin star for five years now. Can you stop talking about where I learned my trade and just focus on the dishes that I'm putting out?" (20, R2)
	• When I started that restaurant, I'd have been quite obsessive about work and about the restaurant's reputation, or my reputation—all these things, because you're building it from scratch. And then, like I said, you kind of get to a point where you feel comfortable with yourself, or your sort of body of work or whatever it is. (20, R2)

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	• I think having things like a Michelin star, being here for 18 years, having multiple people in the restaurant that have been for 10 years. These things give you a kind of a security blanket and give you a very big sense of personal confidence. Like, not confidence, but reassurance. It's quite reassuring. (6, R2) • I think early in my career ... there's a pressure to prove yourself. To yourself, above and beyond anything else, but obviously to everybody else ... I've proved that. So, I feel less pressure from that regard ... I've had the accolades and I've managed to write cookbooks and I've been on TV and I've managed to do things that were in my wildest dreams. (8, R2) *Now that I am established, I feel pigeonholed into one cuisine (later career)* • It's quite tricky for me. I'm like, I don't know. I'm doing this, I created this amazing [new] brand like off my own back with this complete creative freedom, but I'm scared to put that online because is it going to damage my reputation as a [cuisine type] chef? I don't really know how to play it ... I just feel like everything I've got out should be around [that type of] food, because otherwise it might dilute my specialty and then people will be like "Oh. Well, she's not that committed to [that type of] food." (24, R2) • I feel pressure now that we generate dishes that we are identifiable for in the business, because I think that's a very important thing in the generation we live in now. It's important for Michelin and it's important for me as a brand that we have food that you, those people that scroll through social should see a dish and go: "Oh, that's [restaurant name]." Completely identifiable. (6, R2)
Outcomes of a legacy trajectory	*Key performance criterion #1: We are in a competitive market, and to survive we need customers* • There are so many restaurants in this post code ... it's like if they [diners] don't come to yours, they're going to go into someone else's pretty quickly. So yeah, I think not taking it for granted, the customers walking through the door is pretty, pretty key. (20) • It's like such a competitive marketplace. There's so many brilliant operators opening and doing things, taking the noise away from you. And you've got to constantly be like scrapping for that customer and coming up with things that have people talking about you. (8) • We are in business. We are in competitive business together. There is 10,000 restaurants in London or something, and we're all competing for the same people. And I think sometimes people forget that it is a competitive business. You can be all—you can be all nicey-nicey about it, but, actually, we're all competing, which I know sounds a little bit old school and a bit—but it is business, you know. (6) *Key performance criterion #2: I want to be profitable* • We are here to make money. Another way, there's no business, there's no restaurant. You can be the most amazing chef and you can be so creative, but at the end of the day if somebody is not coming to the restaurant. (2) • Forgive me for saying this, but I want to make a profit as well. (3) • First and foremost, it [the restaurant] needs to be profitable. (20, R2) *Key performance criterion #3: I want to create a brand with longevity* • What has the longevity, and the legs isn't me as a person, as an individual. It's the restaurant. Do you know what I mean? It's the restaurant that needs to stand out as its own thing. (7)

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	• The restaurant is a vehicle where you can actually ... without a restaurant you really can't do anything. So, once you've got a restaurant then you can do, off that platform, then you're able to do things. I'd like to be known as a successful [redacted] chef that's contributed to the [redacted] food scene over here. For me, having people who have gone through my kitchens and been successful is really important. I think that's a really great thing. I always wanted people to go on to bigger and better things—um, and personally, be financially stable. (24, R2) • You soon realize that people want your time and your name, not your money. Whereas at [first restaurant] I needed to invest money, with the new ones, I just needed to invest myself, sort of thing ... but not financially and that's, it's great. (20) *I don't chase awards, but they are important to one's success* • [If] you can get the Michelin, it kind of creates that sort of attention and brand awareness that restaurants often need for long term success. (8, R2) • It's funny because our Michelin star wasn't—you know, I wasn't one of these chefs who's like I'm desperate to get a Michelin star ... the accolades are only important in so much as they give you credibility. (20) • They [awards] can—I wouldn't say enable you to charge more, but they will potentially ... validate prices because people obviously are aware that it's got a Michelin Star, or just won an award, or whatever it may be. But I think you can still give, you know, give value for money. But yeah, the accolades do help. (20, R2) • The accolades will come secondary without a doubt. I very firmly believe we'll win a Michelin star here. (7) *Mentor associations motivating diners' restaurant selections* • Having eaten at his former governor's [mentor's name] restaurants a few times it seemed rude not to eat here on our recent stay in London. (Online review of Chef 7's restaurant) • We chose this restaurant because of location, [Chef 6's] experience at [mentor's restaurant] under [mentor] and the reviews. (Online review of Chef 6's restaurant) • [Chef 13] used to be Chef Patron at [Mentor's restaurant] holding 3 Michelin stars, therefore our expectations were massive. (Online review of Chef 13's restaurant) *Diners comparing protégés to mentors in their reviews* • Having eaten at his mentor [redacted], and been blown away I can only say the apprentice is light years behind his inspiration. (Online review of Chef 7's restaurant) • For my money [Chef 7] is outgunning his mentor. (Online review of Chef 7's restaurant). • There is no doubting [Chef 13]'s skill as a chef. However, she needs to learn a few lessons from her former boss, [mentor name]... (Online review of Chef 13's restaurant) • Nothing particularly bad but generally felt like a less well considered version of [mentor restaurant]. (Online review of Chef 13's restaurant)

TABLE B2 Divergent trajectory.

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
Origins of a divergent trajectory	*I have distaste for and do not seek out Michelin stars/accolades* • But it's this thing that the people sort of feel that they have to win this accolade. And I'm a great believer in Michelin actually just rewarding people for good food, as opposed to it being due to a set of criteria. I think it's interesting when you've worked in those environments then ... you do step out on your own. Michelin seems to be the ones that everyone seems to want to sort of please. And I think, to me, they're the people we should least be pleasing. (10, R2) • Those who kind of dedicated their lives to the church of Michelin stars and decided that they were going to subject their customers to a three-hour dining experience where their kind of follies and sort of egos were going to put on display, they don't really interest me. They're very dull and flat people. (19) • People do almost anything to get a Michelin star. It's ridiculous ... to keep the standard high to get a Michelin star, people will be absolute arseholes and just not caring about people. You know, it's like very cutthroat, "Whatever, it's just a person, fuck it." (23) • When I was younger, really wanted to go and work at a Michelin restaurant. So that's why I chose [my mentor]. I really felt like that experience was vital for me, so it was really important to me at that stage. But when I was opening my restaurant, I wasn't like "Ohh, I worked at [mentor's restaurant] and we got a Michelin in three months," which was really fast but like, that's not what we're doing. (23, R2) • If I had a small 14 cover restaurant in the countryside and I was like having [mentor]-style tasting menus going on, potentially I could get a Michelin star if I shouted loud enough that I worked with [him] ... like that is a massive risk for a massive reward. There's too much of a risk then, you know, that's the manpower needed and attracting enough guests to make it kind of [be] viable financially ... That's too big a risk. ... too big of an investment. (21, R2) • As long as I'm a nice boss, I feel like I can go to sleep every [night]. And my suppliers are paid. Whereas I've seen in fine dining it's the opposite. It's just, it's very narcissistic and it's all about getting that star. (25, R2) *I had negative interpersonal experiences with my mentor* • That's because they're mentally abused and they need to get away from that person to actually feel like they can stand on their own two feet. (17) • He had a very bad temper, and I remember he absolutely, he unnecessarily had a go at one of the staff members, was very, very nasty. (25) • He was very tough ... He would scream at me on the phone. (26) • I definitely received like the hard end of the stick and, you know, this is how things need to be done and they need to be done now. And if you do them wrong, then there's no time for you to be here. (21) • [He was] very strict ... It is like terrorism there [in mentor's kitchen]. I used to like cry so many times. (22) • It was very, very military. (23)

TABLE B2 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	• People are just, to them, they see it as conscription from national service where you have to subject yourself, maybe less so now but in the past, you'd have to subject yourself to this sort of brutal treatment so that you could tick another box on your CV and say I've worked for [celebrity chef], [celebrity chef], I've worked for [celebrity chef] and all the rest of them. (19) *I do not have the same emotional commitment to my mentor as other chefs (to become a legacy)* • I could see why the people there, they would stick it out and do 10 to 15 years under these big name chefs and then try and make it on their own ... they've done their work and the time in the seat. (25, R2) • But in terms of like feeling pressured to be aligned with these places. Not really, no. I think if I had worked for somewhere for more than five years, potentially, I'd have quite a strong bond with that place and therefore I might feel like I was more aligned. I think you see certain restaurants where, for example, where the guy worked at [famous restaurant] for the majority of his career and, you know, has a real affiliation with [famous restaurant chef] and then they've got almost a brotherhood going there. That feels like he strategically and also emotionally aligned himself with that restaurant. Just through sheer having been part of it for so long, ... I don't feel like any pressure to be affiliated with them in that sense. (21, R2) *I have a strong desire to do something different, unlike other chefs* • I was very clear that's what I wanted to do. And I think, yeah, you want to be recognized for your own work, I suppose, and that's for me what I've always wanted to do. (10, R2) • We wanted to do something, and it was kind of like, "Okay but everyone's doing something. What are we going to do that's going to be different?" (21) • Interviewer: If you were to do it over again, would you align yourself more with your mentor or still be independent? Chef: It was more important for me to be independent and do my own thing. (23, R2) • They were going to be the kind of masters who would nurse your talent and you'd be an acolyte who would be willingly worshipping at their feet and hopefully one day you would be able to do what they were doing. (19)
Establishing a divergent identity: Strategic material practices	*My culinary style is influenced by non-traditional and cumulative experiences* • Your food is your life journey—the detail and everything, the techniques you pick up on the way, the flavors, the combinations you pick up on the way. There will always be a part of [my mentor] on my plate, always, but I think I created something new ... I want to show my journey on my plate. (22) • I never felt that I sort of, I fully embraced a particular food philosophy. But I learned sooner or later that, no matter where you go, you can always take something with you and make that part and parcel of what it is that you end up with ultimately ... I mean everything that we do here and everything that I do here is pretty much a sort of composition of experience. (19) *I want to be a different in what I cook, unlike others* • The question like, "What's your signature dish?" Hate that question. I'm assuming the people in the legacy group love that. They probably "Oh well, I've been cooking this pigs head with [famous chef] for like 25 years." Like, "That's my signature now." It's

TABLE B2 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	like, cool, but like, get your own signature ... We still change our menu regularly. We still cook other things in that season that we just find interesting in the moment and if someone asked me tomorrow or today what my signature dish is, I don't know. I have cooked many different dishes in the time I've run [my restaurant]—in the thousands. I could tell you maybe some good ones if I really racked my brain, but I mostly can just tell you what's on the menu right now. (21, R2) • The food that I want to cook and food that inspired me isn't necessarily that style of food [Michelin fine dining] ... It's sort of what I would call real food as opposed to, um, tweezer food or, you know, technical food ... Actually, when you look at restaurants around the world, that sit with that one- or two-star level, it all looks the same. ... they all follow this sort of pattern. ... I'm not that interested because it doesn't inspire me. ... I'm more inspired by somebody doing something original, or interesting, or rooted, as I said, in either a cultural link, or just something ... (10, R2)
Establishing a divergent identity: Strategic discursive practices	*I will publicly acknowledge mentor's influence when asked and/or downplay associations* • Interviewer: Do you think it's important for your consumers or your diners or really anyone to know that you've trained in these places? Chef: We've never labored the fact. We try to really focus on the now and what we're doing now and tell more a story. (9) • I think it was definitely important to acknowledge where you've been and where you've gone through, but at the moment I think it was important to definitely acknowledge: this is what I've achieved and that's what I focus on, and it's not off their backs. It's sort of like I've taken what I could from them, and I've grown with it. I don't think that anything I do at the moment is because of that. I think it's because of the achievements of my team and myself. (25, R2) • After 6 months, all the journalists and all the articles, "protégé–protégé–protégé," so I told my PR company, "Drop that word because people come here and expect [my mentor's restaurant]" ... There is an influence of that, but like it's far away from that ... I was still having [an] argument with the PR [firm] until I fired them! And that's what you need to do, to just stick [to] your guns throughout. (22) *Examples of downplaying mentor associations from the press* • Interviewer: Who or what has influenced your cooking the most? Chef: My mother has been my solid rock and foremost influential in my career. I can even remember, back in the day, she would come to my school to teach us about food and cooking. Now, we bounce ideas off each other and I still learn a lot about our heritage through cooking. Even though I'm a classically French trained chef, I still find learning about my own culture the most challenging and interesting. (25, Media Excerpt) • Interviewer: In what ways did your early experiences and personal journey influence your culinary approach and style? Chef: Food was an everyday craft when I was growing up—pragmatic, nourishing. Mum worked full-time, so it was simple things, but the majority cooked from scratch, sometimes from using vegetables she grew in the garden; there was—and still is—a really old grapevine in the greenhouse where she grew tomatoes. My great-gran lived with us for a few years, so there was always old-school Scottish stuff like potted hough in the fridge too, as well as lots of mince. ... I went to work in "fine dining" restaurants to

TABLE B2 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	learn the best way to do things, which was right at the time, but I'm skeptical about much of that style of cooking now! I love craft and connection, sharing and nourishing. (17, Media Excerpt)
Tensions throughout a divergent chef's career	*I am uncomfortable advertising my mentor connections, because it's risky to overstep the relationship* • I wouldn't want [starts laughing] to do that [have mentor invest in restaurant] ... because it's not just like mental, ... there is that relationship beforehand. So that would just be very risky. It also means that they just basically own part of what you're doing, so they'll always have credit. There's no way you're going to get out of that. So yeah, that's something I wouldn't do [chuckles] ... (25) • Someone in the public eye shouldn't really invest in you, 'cause then anything can happen. (25) • I think [our mentor] is around picking at [other protégé's] restaurant eating and testing the food. That that was never something that was going to happen to me ... And she's really busy. But I think if she's going ... to let [anyone] use her name, she's going to make sure that you're doing it right. She's not going to be like [change of voice to casual tone] "Ohhhh, crack on ..." I mean, that's why you want to do it. You want to do your own thing. (23, R2) *I am uncomfortable advertising my mentor connections, because it feels inauthentic to name-drop* • "I think the real thing that matters is the work you currently do and it [previous work with mentor] should only really be lightly referenced ... otherwise it's just kind of name dropping in a way, rather than you've done that work." (25, R2) • We see a lot of restaurants open that have had backing given to them ... like "has worked at [famous restaurant] for one year," "has worked at [famous restaurant] for *x* months," etc. And, you know, necessarily isn't a good thing to promote that fact. I know that PR companies and press love to latch onto that and push it ... I'm not saying that it's detrimental to everyone in that if the head chef of [famous restaurant] goes and opens a restaurant—like he's been head chef for 10 years or whatever—like amazing, like he's obviously going to get great press from that. But I think it's starting to be kind of a meaningless buzzword in a way ... like you could have worked at [famous restaurant] for a year and picked herbs, and now you're opening a restaurant because you worked [there] for a year. And we were always conscious that we didn't really want to try and push our brand to be in line with that. And partly because I did work at [mentor's restaurant] for a year-and-a-half but pastry for eight months, stocks and sauces for two months, like learning transferable skills for myself rather than working there specifically to have worked at that institution, because I knew that I then wanted to go on and get backing and funding because I had been in these institutions. I don't know. It's a double-edged sword in a way. (21) • I think it's similarly linked to the fact that I'm just not one to do that, I guess. There are those people out there that can put on that performance to the press every day and be like "You know, I lived with [famous chef] in his, like, rooftop penthouse and, you know, we made cosmopolitans together and bounced by the moonlight." But, like those people that can do that, like fair play ... Like I said, you've got to have built up a certain repertoire to even think about kind of trying that on in the press, I think. ... Definitely not something I could do. (21, R2)

TABLE B2 (Continued)

Second-order theme	First-order codes with additional data examples
	I am uncomfortable advertising my mentor connections, because then diners will expect my mentor's food • I told my PR company, drop that word because people come here and expect [mentor's restaurant]. They expect big piles of salad, they expect pastries, they expect stuff I don't do. Our food is obviously ... There is an influence of that but like it's far away from that, it's something else. (22) • I feel like then also diners have an expectation of the fact that you know [my mentor's] Italian, that's her style. That's what she does and then they'll potentially come to us and be like "This isn't Italian" [mimics a diner's voice with a tone of disgust]. And I know that you could be really clear on like, well, this is mainly ... an affordable casual dining steak restaurant, and lots of other little small plates, and blah blah blah. It's quite British and there's a lot of beer used, and you can say whatever you like with that. But if you were like "[chef] works with [mentor]" and made more of it, feel like still sort of a lot of customers are quite blinded by certain things and then they'll just be like, "Oh, no, this is not what I expected." (23, R2) • It's on the website and then people come to a restaurant like, criticizing everything, [rather] than just saying, "I'm me, I'm doing this thing, like it or you can you can lump it" ... Everyone's a critic now, and I think that's what's so difficult. ... I think everyone's a bit fearful of what I'm going to say on a blog or review or whatever it might be. Now [I] feel like there's that pressure there. And there's pressure anyway, but let alone if you ... were then making a lot of that relationship with a big-name chef. (23, R2) *It's hard to create something truly distinctive (and to sustain it)* • At one point I was trying to work out how I would develop more of my own style. (23) • I think people don't really have a sense of what my cooking style is yet, and that's what I want to develop the most. Because it's new, it's very hard to define it. (25) • I think I definitely was struggling back then because I wasn't really sure how I wanted to navigate like all the different cuisines that I was like interested in cooking. (25, R2)
Outcomes of a divergent trajectory	*Key Performance Criterion: For me, success is not about creating a big brand* • I think within the industry most people know who I am, but I purposefully don't—I'm not interested in ... trying to be a bigger name ... I'd rather just be quietly in the back. (10, R2) • [Restaurant partner and I] went to the [London Restaurant] Awards and won Best Newcomer in 2019. We're standing behind [famous chef] and it was like our "Best Newcomer [restaurant name]!" And you saw [famous chef] turn to, someone I can't remember who it was, and go like "Who were they?" That's like, that's great for me, That's perfect. ... you don't need to know who I am. All you need to know is that we've won this award and maybe you'll come and visit our restaurant one day. Like all I want is our restaurant to be financially viable, us to make a bit of money and support our lifestyle in a way that we can like support our own children and families. (21, R2)