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Qualified Ingredients: Professionalism in Chefs' Culinary Ingredient Selection

Faisal Akbar Zaenal [1]*, Hamka Naping [2], Syamsu Rijal [3], Yahya [4]

[1,3]*Politeknik Pariwisata Makassar, Indonesia*
[2,4]*Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia*

*Corresponding Author: *faisalakbar85@poltekparmakassar.ac.id*

Abstract: Professionalism in gastronomy is often judged through visible outputs – brigade leadership, menu design, and guest experience – while chefs' ingredient work remains largely backstage. Existing research has been less explicit about how chefs qualify ingredients as professional judgment under real-time service constraints. This study defines chefs' knowledge of qualified ingredients and identifies two complementary evaluative logics: naturalistic quality in cookery and built-in quality in pastry and bakery. Drawing on a qualitative field study involving six purposively selected chefs working in hotel and independent operations, we conducted one-to-one, face-to-face interviews in 2024, transcribed them verbatim, and analysed the data thematically through manual coding. Chefs treated ingredient selection not as a routine purchasing task but as qualification work resolved through kitchen practice. Labels, brands, and price informed initial screening, while performance in use determined acceptance – sensory behaviour in context for cookery, and functional performance and repeatability within pastry-and-bakery production systems such as doughs, batters, creams, and fillings. The analysis also shows how these logics converge in hybrid judgement when service tightens margins, clarifying professionalism as the sustained labour of making ingredient decisions defensible so that technical integrity and intended sensory character can both hold under pressure. The study reframes ingredient selection as situated professional judgement and supports the inclusion of ingredient qualification as an explicit learning outcome in vocational culinary education.

Keywords: Built-in Quality; Commercial Kitchens; Ingredient Qualification; Ingredient Selection; Naturalistic Quality; Professional Judgement.

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Introduction

Professionalism brings together competence, action, ethics, and responsibility, and it is sustained through ongoing learning and skill development (Agravat & Macwan, 2024; DeIuliis, 2024). It is also tied to social legitimacy: professional authority rests not only on technical expertise but also on standards of conduct recognised by others (Tapper & Millett, 2015). In hospitality and gastronomy, that legitimacy is often judged through visible outputs and guest-facing experiences – what reaches the plate and what is perceived in the dining room (Castillo-Manzano & Zarzoso, 2023; Chiang & Guo, 2021; Daries et al., 2021). This emphasis foregrounds service performance, menu design, and the guest experience, while less visible practices such as ingredient selection are seldom examined explicitly as sites of professional judgement, even though chefs may treat them as foundational to product quality.

Research on chef professionalism largely follows this emphasis on public-facing work. In high-end and contemporary kitchens, chefs are frequently framed as brigade leaders and entrepreneurial actors, with professionalism expressed through coordination, innovation, and reputation (Elbasha & Baruch, 2022; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2022). Related studies map the competencies that sustain chefs in demanding environments – organising labour, managing knowledge, and coping with organisational pressures (Bressan et al., 2023; Filimonau et al., 2024; Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2022; Traynor et al., 2022). Taken together, this literature shows

convincingly what professionalism looks like in public; it has paid far less attention to how professionalism is enacted in the quieter backstage decisions made before service, including the ingredient judgements that shape what can be produced reliably once service is underway.

Beyond professionalism and leadership, scholarship on culinary creativity and menu development likewise underscores the centrality of ingredient decisions. Studies of creativity show how chefs generate and refine ideas within aesthetic, technical, and organisational constraints, treating ingredients as the material through which dishes and dining experiences are composed (Ekincek & Günay, 2023; Hsia et al., 2021; Öztürk, 2024). Research on menu and recipe development similarly highlights the need to balance flavour, structure, and operational viability under cost, mise en place, holding quality, and service tempo (Behnke, 2023; Petkova et al., 2024). Practice-based culinary texts go further by treating ingredient selection as anticipatory work: chefs must judge how ingredients will behave across techniques and production systems in both cookery and pastry-and-bakery (Chugh, 2025; Vaclavik & Haynes, 2013; Varghese, 2020). This body of work shows clearly why ingredient decisions matter, but it still does not explain – at the level of chefs' own reasoning – how ingredients become "qualified," or how that knowledge is mobilised in everyday commercial kitchen practice conditions.

What is missing, then, is a practice-based explanation of ingredient qualification as professional judgement: how chefs conceptualise the knowledge by which ingredients are judged fit for specific products; how that judgement is justified, recalibrated, and defended under service pressure, and how the logic of qualification differs across cookery and pastry-and-bakery domains. Without such an account, ingredient selection is easily reduced to purchasing routines, label reputation, or static product knowledge (Cho et al., 2021; Vasilakakis & Sdrali, 2023; Winata et al., 2023), rather than being understood as situated expertise that underpins reliable culinary outcomes in commercial kitchens.

Accordingly, this study is guided by two research questions: (RQ1) How do chefs in professional commercial kitchens practise ingredient selection as a process of ingredient qualification under real-time service constraints? (RQ2) What evaluative logics organise chefs' knowledge of qualified ingredients across cookery and pastry-and-bakery work, and what do these logics reveal about chef professionalism?

To address these questions, we develop the concept of knowledge of qualified ingredients. We then identify two complementary evaluative logics – naturalistic quality in cookery and built-in quality in pastry-and-bakery – and show how qualification is structured and recalibrated under service constraints.

Methodology

This qualitative field study examines ingredient selection as a process of ingredient qualification in professional commercial kitchens. Rather than estimating the prevalence of particular selection criteria, the study is concept-driven and aims to clarify how chefs articulate, justify, and recalibrate their ingredient judgements under real-time service constraints. We treat ingredient judgment as situated work embedded in everyday production, drawing on chefs' accounts of decision episodes and the practical reasoning through which an ingredient becomes "qualified" for a product.

Participants were purposively selected as chefs who routinely hold responsibility for ingredient quality judgements in professional commercial kitchens. The dataset comprised six participants across two domains to enable analytical comparison: three cookery participants (two Executive Chefs, P1 and P3; and one Executive Sous Chef, P2) and three pastry-and-bakery participants (a Pastry Chef, P4; a Pastry Chef–Chocolatier, P5; and a Pastry Sous Chef, P6). This balanced design (three participants per domain) was conceptually adequate for the aims of the paper because it anchors each evaluative logic in multiple information-rich cases within its relevant domain and role, rather than relying on a single exemplar. The sample was therefore designed for depth and contrast – capturing decision-making from positions where ingredient qualification is enacted under service constraints – rather than for statistical representativeness. Analytic sufficiency was assessed iteratively; subsequent interviews did not add substantively new thematic dimensions to the two-logics comparison.

Data were collected through face-to-face, one-to-one in-depth interviews conducted between 8 June 2024 and 10 October 2024. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes (mean 80 minutes; median 90 minutes) and were audio-recorded with permission before being transcribed verbatim. Interview venues were selected separately from participants' operational workplaces to avoid conflating meeting locations with kitchen settings. For three participants (P1, P5, and P6), interviews were held in a training-kitchen laboratory at a vocational higher-education institution (HEI) as a neutral meeting venue rather than at their workplaces. The remaining interviews took place on-site at relevant hospitality and food-service operations (two hotel operations and one independent restaurant operation; P2–P4). One interview was briefly interrupted due to ongoing kitchen activity (P1). Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristic

Code	Domain	Role	Workplace type (operational setting)	Interview venue (meeting place)	Date (YYYY-MM-DD)	Mode	Duration (minutes)	Career length (years, approx.)
P1	Cookery	Executive Chef	Independent restaurant kitchen (commercial)	Training kitchen laboratory (vocational HEI)	2024-10-07	Face-to-face	90	34
P2	Cookery	Executive Sous Chef	Hotel kitchen (commercial)	On-site hotel operation	2024-10-10	Face-to-face	90	27
P3	Cookery	Executive Chef	Hotel kitchen (commercial)	On-site hotel operation	2024-06-08	Face-to-face	60	30
P4	Pastry-and-bakery	Pastry Chef	Independent restaurant operation (commercial)	On-site independent operation	2024-08-17	Face-to-face	90	27
P5	Pastry-and-bakery	Pastry Chef–Chocolatier	Pastry production – central kitchen (commercial)	Training kitchen laboratory (vocational HEI)	2024-07-29	Face-to-face	90	12
P6	Pastry-and-bakery	Pastry Sous Chef	Hotel pastry operation (commercial)	Training kitchen laboratory (vocational HEI)	2024-07-29	Face-to-face	60	8

Note. HEI = higher-education institution. "Training kitchen laboratory (vocational HEI)" indicates a neutral meeting venue rather than the participant's operational workplace. Career length is an approximate summary based on participants' self-reported career histories.

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Ohyver et al., 2025). Coding was conducted manually by the first author, with iterative recoding and the use of analytic memos (Bingham, 2023; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023) to refine emerging patterns across participants. Analysis proceeded in two steps: first, we identified segments where chefs described specific episodes of ingredient judgement; second, we grouped these segments into higher-order themes that captured how ingredient qualification was reasoned and justified under service constraints. Themes were then compared across the two domains (cookery versus pastry-and-bakery) to clarify similarities and differences in evaluative logic, leading to the articulation of naturalistic quality and built-in quality as two complementary organising logics.

Trustworthiness was supported primarily through peer debriefing to test interpretations, surface alternative readings, and refine analytic claims (Ahmed, 2024; Dahal, 2025). After initial coding and theme development, the emerging themes and the two-logics account were discussed with an academic colleague experienced in qualitative analysis and vocational culinary education.

Credibility and confirmability were further strengthened through iterative recoding and analytic memos documenting how interpretations developed across cases (Bingham, 2023; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). As the primary interviewer and coder, the first author used reflexive memoing to surface and manage prior assumptions about culinary work and ingredient quality; peer debriefing provided an additional check on interpretation. Because the study relied on interview data, triangulation across data sources was limited. Instead, dependability and transferability were supported by maintaining an audit trail – linking codes to transcript excerpts and recording key analytic decisions as the coding framework evolved – and by providing transparent descriptions of participant roles, operational settings, and the service conditions under which ingredient judgements were described (Johnson et al., 2020).

Results and Discussions

Results

Across interviews, chefs described ingredient selection not as a routine extension of purchasing but as a form of qualification work that shapes whether dishes and products can be produced reliably under service conditions. This work was organised through two complementary evaluative logics. In cookery, chefs emphasised naturalistic quality, judging ingredients through sensory behaviour in context – how products behaved when handled, cooked, and served under time pressure. In pastry-and-bakery work, chefs emphasised built-in quality, assessing ingredients through functional performance and repeatability within production systems such as doughs, batters, creams, and fillings.

In cookery, chefs described qualification as a judgement grounded in use rather than inspection. Initial cues such as labels, brands, and price could narrow options, but ingredients were ultimately "qualified" when their sensory behaviour held up in context - how they responded to handling, heat, timing, and plating under service pressure. One executive chef framed this as the "intrinsic energy" of ingredients (P1) and illustrated it with pandan leaves: when handled carefully with poultry, he described pandan leaves as deepening aroma and flavour without masking the character of the main protein. In this logic, quality was not treated as a fixed market category; it was established in the dish through performance at the point of use.

Two cookery participants stressed that qualification was often settled at the range rather than at receiving. Aromatics and proteins, they said, were not simply checked and signed off; they had to be "read" during service – smelled, tasted, and watched to see how they behaved under heat and time. What counted was not an ingredient's appearance at delivery but what it did in the pan: how quickly aroma lifted, how moisture released or held, and how the same piece could respond differently when seared hard, simmered gently, braised longer, or fired quickly on the grill (P2; P3). This is why receiving was described as provisional. A delivery might look acceptable, yet once service began, the ingredient could "turn" with the rhythm of the kitchen: a slightly wetter batch, a hot spot on the range, a longer hold than planned, a run of tickets on the rail that compressed every margin. Rather than making a single pass–fail call, they spoke about "working with" the ingredient as the dish unfolded – tasting at familiar moments, recalibrating heat, layering seasoning, and making small corrections before a problem became visible on the plate. The adjustments were modest but cumulative: when aromatics went in, how long they were allowed to develop, where salt and acidity entered, and which finishing moves helped keep flavour and mouthfeel stable when time was tight, and variability had less room to show itself. Qualification, in this sense, was reached when the ingredient's sensory contribution could still be steered towards the intended aroma, taste, and mouthfeel at the point of use, despite the pressures of service (P2; P3).

In pastry-and-bakery work, qualification was described less as "reading" ingredients in the moment and more as locking in built-in performance before service begins. One pastry chef pointed out that a cream or filling can look acceptable in the bowl yet fail later – splitting after holding, slackening after piping, or losing structure once it meets heat or humidity – so ingredients were judged by what they enabled the recipe to deliver repeatedly, not by how they appeared at delivery (P5). In this domain, "qualified" ingredients were those that behaved predictably in

production: they held shape, emulsified cleanly, and carried consistent texture across batches, even when output had to be scaled and timed against service (P5).

A pastry sous chef described qualification as something you feel in the system before you trust it in production: doughs, batters, and creams "tell on" ingredients when the kitchen asks for repeatability (P6). He spoke about watching how a batch mixes – whether it comes together cleanly or fights back – then tracking what happens after resting, shaping, and baking, when small differences become amplified. In this logic, ingredients were "qualified" when they reduced surprise: the same flour, fat, or dairy behaved consistently across days and batch sizes, and the product held its intended structure through the full chain of work – mixing, lamination or aeration, proofing, baking, cooling, and holding (P6). A pastry chef made a similar point in an all-day dining outlet, where humidity and service tempo can expose weak ingredients quickly: a filling that looks smooth at finishing can weep later, a batter that seems stable can lose lift in the oven, and a crust that appears set can soften once it meets a moist component (P4). Qualification, then, was described as a form of prevention: selecting ingredients that keep the product's "built-in" properties intact so texture remains repeatable even when the kitchen is scaling output and timing batches against service (P4; P6).

Chefs did not treat naturalistic quality and built-in quality as two sealed compartments; they described moments in practice where the logics began to blur once service put the kitchen under strain. In cookery, "naturalistic" judgement – reading aroma lift, moisture release and heat response – remained central, but it became inseparable from a quieter question of repeatability when the same pan work had to survive the rhythm of tickets: batching, holding, reheating and plating without drifting off target (P2). In those moments, an ingredient could be exciting in the first pass and still fail the kitchen if it did not carry consistently across repeated cycles – if it dulled, turned harsh, or lost its line once time, heat, and holding began to stack up. Pastry-and-bakery participants described the overlap from the other direction. They were committed to built-in performance – structure, emulsion stability, repeatable texture – yet they also watched for sensory behaviour, especially in humid, high-tempo settings where a product was exposed, portioned, held, and served rather than judged only at the bench (P4; P6). An ingredient might meet functional expectations in production but still be rejected if it produced an unexpected taste shift once the product sat, warmed, or absorbed moisture in the dining environment; likewise, a "stable" component was not fully qualified if it compromised the intended aroma or mouthfeel at the point of service (P4; P6). Overlap, then, was narrated as a hybrid judgement: chefs sought ingredients that could hold technical integrity and sensory character at the same time – so the product remained repeatable without becoming bland, and expressive without becoming fragile – when service tightened margins and variability had less room to hide (P2; P4; P6).

P3's account from a hotel kitchen put it in practical terms: qualification was not a once-and-for-all verdict at delivery, because ingredients could shift with season and humidity in ways that only became apparent in storage and during service. He used fresh chilli as an example. In the rainy season, chillies carried higher moisture and deteriorated faster – softening, developing mould, and showing early signs of spoilage – so the same "acceptable" delivery could become unstable on the line and in the cold room. In the dry season, by contrast, chillies were firmer, more durable, and less prone to rapid spoilage, making them easier to hold without quality drifting across service cycles. The seasonal shift was not only physical but sensory: rainy-season chillies tasted less sharp, with heat perceived as diluted, whereas dry-season chillies were more "biting" and aromatic, as if the same quantity landed differently in the dish. For P3, this was why receiving remained provisional. What counted was not the chilli's appearance at the door but how it behaved once the kitchen had to run it through real work – storage, prep, and repeated service moments – where moisture, time, and ambient humidity could alter both usability and flavour. Qualification, in his telling, meant adjusting judgment to these conditions: assessing whether the ingredient would stay stable long enough to support consistent output and whether its flavour contribution could still be steered towards the intended heat and aroma under service pressure (P3).

Across domains, chefs did not describe ingredient qualification as working through a checklist of "good ingredients", but as a professional capacity to justify why a given ingredient was fit for purpose in a particular kitchen at a particular moment. P1's language of an ingredient's

"intrinsic energy" captured this orientation: ingredients were not treated as fixed categories whose quality was known in advance, but as materials whose value was established through how they behaved in the dish and under the pressures of service (P1). Taken together, the accounts reported above can be summarised through two evaluative logics – cookery leaning on sensory behaviour in context, pastry-and-bakery leaning on built-in performance and repeatability – while also showing that both logics addressed the same practical problem: producing reliable outcomes without losing intended sensory character when margins tightened and variability had less room to hide (P1; P2; P4; P6). Figure 1 synthesises this process by mapping the two evaluative logics, their recalibration during production/service, and the points where they overlap under service constraints.

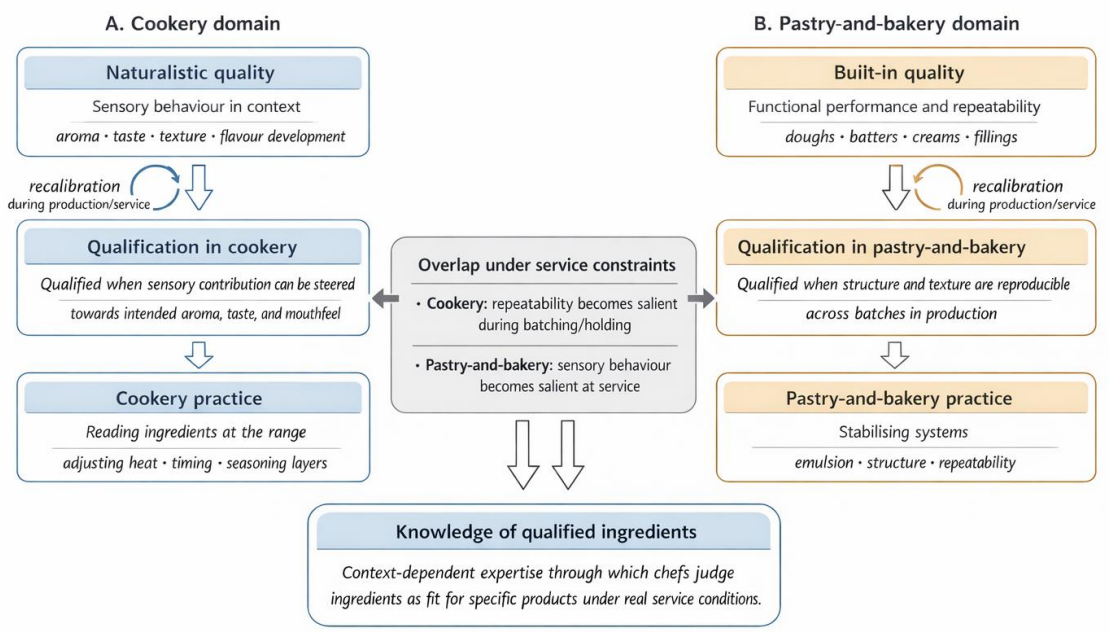

Figure 1. Ingredient qualification as professional judgement under service constraints: Two evaluative logics and their overlap

Figure 1 is intended to be read as a process account of how ingredients become "qualified" in use, rather than as a static classification of ingredient types. In the cookery domain, qualification is anchored in naturalistic quality: chefs judge sensory behaviour in context and recalibrate decisions during service as heat, timing, and holding conditions accumulate. In the pastry-and-bakery domain, qualification is anchored in built-in quality: ingredients are assessed for functional performance and repeatability within production systems (doughs, batters, creams, and fillings), with recalibration occurring as production is scaled and timed against service. The overlap zone makes the empirical point explicit: cookery becomes increasingly concerned with repeatability once batching and holding enter the workflow, while pastry-and-bakery becomes increasingly attentive to sensory behaviour during service, especially under humidity and tempo (P2; P4; P6). In that overlap, chefs are not switching logics; they are solving the same professional problem from two directions – protecting technical integrity and sensory character at once so outcomes remain reliable when margins tighten, and variability has less room to hide (P2; P4; P6).

Discussions

Practising Ingredient Selection as Ingredient Qualification in Professional Commercial Kitchens under Real-Time Service Constraints (RQ1)

The findings show that chefs in professional commercial kitchens practise ingredient selection as an ongoing process of ingredient qualification rather than a discrete act of product

choice. Ingredients do not become "qualified" simply by carrying a trusted label, a familiar brand, or an assumed grade; rather, they become qualified through chefs' repeated efforts to determine whether the ingredients remain fit for purpose once they are drawn into the demands of production and service. What matters, therefore, is not only what an ingredient appears to promise at the point of selection, but also how it behaves when exposed to heat, timing, holding, humidity, and service tempo. In this sense, ingredient selection operates as a form of knowing-in-action (Hadjimichael et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2022), through which chefs test, revise, and defend their judgments in use so that reliable quality can still be secured when the tolerance for error narrows under real-time service constraints.

What the findings make clearer, then, is that practising ingredient qualification under real-time service constraints requires more than recognising ingredients that initially appear suitable at the point of selection. It requires the practical competence to judge whether ingredient decisions remain workable as production unfolds and service compresses time, increases repetition, and narrows the margin for adjustment. As service intensifies, chefs must notice early signs of drift, anticipate how ingredients are likely to behave as work unfolds, and recalibrate before variation becomes consequential (Farmer & Hingst, 2025). Ingredient qualification, in this sense, is not exhausted by the initial choice; it is sustained through the ongoing work of keeping flavour, texture, and performance aligned with the intended output as service conditions tighten. Existing studies on creativity, menu development, and operational constraints (Behnke, 2023; Ekincek & Günay, 2023; Hsia et al., 2021; Öztürk, 2024; Petkova et al., 2024) help to situate these pressures. Yet they have been less explicit about how chefs keep ingredient decisions workable under the accumulating demands of service.

Rather than being settled at receiving, ingredient qualification is better understood as a judgement that remains provisional until an ingredient's fitness for purpose has been established across the movement from storage and prep to holding and service (P3). The point is not simply that ingredients change over time, but that their qualification depends on how those changes affect what chefs can still achieve with them under working conditions. P3's account of fresh chilli makes this especially clear: seasonal variation altered not only durability but also the ingredient's sensory force in the dish, making qualification inseparable from the kitchen's need to manage both stability and flavour in use (P3). A comparable temporal logic was evident in pastry-and-bakery, although it appeared through production performance rather than pan work alone; ingredients became qualified insofar as they continued to hold structure, emulsion, texture, and consistency as they moved through the production chain (P4; P5; P6). Ingredient qualification, then, takes shape progressively through an ingredient's ability to support the intended product under service conditions that leave little room for correction.

Seen in this light, practising ingredient qualification involves judging not only whether an ingredient appears suitable at the point of selection, but also whether it can continue to support the intended dish or product once service pressure reduces margins and leaves less room for correction (P2; P3; P4; P6). In this sense, qualification takes on a preventive orientation, not because chefs can eliminate variation altogether, but because they seek to stop small shifts in flavour, texture, structure, or holding performance from escalating into more serious problems during service (P4; P6). Initial suitability, therefore, is insufficient on its own. Ingredients must remain dependable under the conditions in which kitchen work actually unfolds (P2; P3; P4; P6). Ingredient selection, then, becomes part of the work through which chefs preserve room for judgment before service pressures turn manageable variation into failure that is harder to recover from.

This also clarifies why ingredient selection in professional commercial kitchens cannot be reduced to an initial procurement decision. Supplier criteria, delivery checks, and other early assessments remain important for narrowing options and securing an acceptable starting point (Cho et al., 2021; Vasilakakis & Sdrali, 2023). Yet the present findings suggest that such procedures do not exhaust what chefs mean by selection in practice, because selection is only fully resolved through kitchen work itself. Ingredients are reassessed in use as they encounter the technical and temporal demands of production and service. In this sense, ingredient qualification makes clear that selection extends beyond procurement: what is selected is not merely a product that appears acceptable at receiving, but an ingredient that can continue to

justify that choice once the pressures of service begin to test its usability, stability, and contribution to the intended output.

Evaluative Logics Organising Chefs' Knowledge of Qualified Ingredients across Cookery and Pastry-and-Bakery Work and Their Implications for Chef Professionalism (RQ2)

What RQ1 makes visible is not only that ingredient selection is practised as qualification under service constraints, but also that chefs rely on two evaluative logics to keep ingredient qualification workable across cookery and pastry-and-bakery domains. These logics are less about categorising ingredients in the abstract than about organising judgement in practice – how chefs decide, under pressure, whether ingredients will still deliver what the kitchen needs. In cookery, qualification is oriented towards naturalistic quality, with ingredients judged through their sensory behaviour in context: how aroma lifts, how moisture moves, and how flavour holds its line once heat, timing, and tempo begin to press (P1; P2). In pastry-and-bakery, qualification is oriented towards built-in quality, with ingredients judged through their functional performance and repeatability within production systems – doughs, batters, creams, and fillings – especially when scale, holding, and humidity begin to test stability (P4; P6). Taken together, the two logics clarify how chefs turn ingredient variation into defensible professional judgement while still pursuing the same practical end: reliable outcomes without sacrificing intended sensory character under service pressure.

Naturalistic quality, as it appears in cookery, is best understood as a way of reading ingredients in situ, where "quality" is established through sensory behaviour as it meets the contingencies of kitchen work rather than through static categories of grade or reputation. What chefs evaluate, then, is whether an ingredient's aroma, moisture behaviour, and flavour line remain steerable once handling, heat, timing, and tempo begin to press (P1; P2; P3). This logic aligns with an epistemology-of-practice, in which judgement takes shape as knowing-in-action (Hadjimichael et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2022), carried by sensory attention and situated adjustment rather than by declarative product knowledge alone. Sensory perception here is not treated as a private "palate", but as a professional mode of attunement to how ingredients perform in context (Schifferstein et al., 2022). In this sense, naturalistic quality also foregrounds tacit competence, not as an invisible residue behind decision-making, but as the practical ability to anticipate drift, recalibrate early, and defend judgment when the margin for error narrows (Farmer & Hingst, 2025).

Built-in quality, as it emerges in pastry-and-bakery work, rests less on reading ingredients moment by moment and more on securing functional performance that will hold once production becomes repetitive, scaled up, and exposed to delay. Here, "quality" is established through what ingredients enable production systems to do reliably – whether doughs, batters, creams, and fillings can be made to behave predictably across batches and through resting, piping, baking, cooling, and holding, especially when humidity and service tempo begin to test stability (P4; P5; P6). In that respect, built-in quality can be read as a practical logic of repeatability and quality assurance, in which the aim is to keep performance consistent without stripping products of their intended texture and finish (Magnusson Sporre et al., 2025). What matters is not simply whether a component looks correct at the bench, but whether it continues to carry structure and texture as time and environment begin to work against it. On this logic, qualification is achieved when ingredients reduce surprise in the system: when emulsions do not split after holding, fillings do not weep, and batters do not lose lift as output is timed to service (P4; P6). Built-in quality, therefore, describes a professional orientation to locking in performance early, so that service pressure does not convert small variation into structural failure later.

What becomes clear when these logics meet in practice is that naturalistic quality and built-in quality are not competing styles of judgement, but complementary ways of keeping ingredient qualification workable once service begins to tighten margins. Under strain, cookery cannot rely on sensory reading alone if the same preparations must survive repetition, holding, and compressed timing without drifting off target (P2). Pastry-and-bakery, meanwhile, cannot rely on functional stability alone if humidity, delay, and handling begin to unsettle texture and sensory

character at the point of delivery (P4; P6). Their overlap therefore marks a hybrid judgement oriented towards the same practical problem from two directions: protecting technical integrity and intended sensory character at once, so that output remains repeatable without becoming bland, while remaining expressive without becoming fragile. This coupling of repeatability with sensory intent aligns with a view of culinary quality as something that is both designable and defensible in practice, rather than reducible to either creativity or standardisation (Magnusson Sporre et al., 2025; Schifferstein et al., 2022). In that sense, the two logics operate in mutually corrective ways, keeping qualification accountable both to sensory behaviour in context and to performance across production systems when variation becomes consequential in real time.

Existing accounts of chef professionalism tend to foreground what is readily visible – leadership in the brigade, entrepreneurial identity, and performance that can be publicly evaluated (Elbasha & Baruch, 2022; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2022; Traynor et al., 2022). That emphasis, however, leaves less room for the quieter work that makes such visible performance possible in the first place. In this study, professionalism is located in ingredient judgement: sustaining decisions that can still be defended as service pressure tightens and the margin for correction narrows. Naturalistic quality captures the sensory side of that labour, where attention and adjustment keep flavour on track in the moment; built-in quality captures the systems side, where repeatable performance is secured within production processes. Read together, the two logics suggest that professionalism also includes making judgment shareable – articulating, revising, and handing over ingredient calls so that technical integrity and intended sensory character can both survive the pressures of service (Lim & Ok, 2021).

Across cookery and pastry-and-bakery work, then, chefs' knowledge of qualified ingredients is organised through two evaluative logics that keep ingredient qualification workable under service constraints, while responding to different vulnerabilities in practice – sensory drift on the one hand, and system performance on the other. Their overlap shows that qualification is sustained by hybrid judgement rather than by a single rule-set: chefs must secure repeatability without flattening sensory intent, and sustain sensory character without making production fragile (Magnusson Sporre et al., 2025; Schifferstein et al., 2022). What these logics reveal about professionalism is that ingredient judgement is not incidental to "good cooking," but a core professional labour of making decisions defensible as conditions tighten and the scope for correction narrows (Traynor et al., 2022). In that sense, professionalism lies in keeping ingredient qualification accountable to what the kitchen must deliver in real time, and sustaining that accountability across domains where the margin for error is thin.

By making ingredient qualification conceptually explicit as professional judgement under service constraints, this study shifts ingredient selection away from being treated as a procurement routine or a private matter of taste. The two-logics framework specifies how chefs keep ingredient decisions defensible across domains: naturalistic quality foregrounds sensory attunement in context, while built-in quality foregrounds repeatable performance within production systems. The analysis shows that these logics do not sit apart but converge in a hybrid judgement when margins tighten, offering a way of understanding culinary quality as both sensory and systematically designable in practice, rather than as a choice between creativity and standardisation (Magnusson Sporre et al., 2025; Schifferstein et al., 2022). On this reading, professionalism is located in the sustained labour of ingredient judgement that enables kitchens to deliver reliably when variation becomes consequential, rather than only in the more visible registers of leadership, entrepreneurship, or performance (Traynor et al., 2022).

Because the evidence base is interview-led rather than observational, the analysis captures how chefs articulate and justify qualification work more than it traces every micro-decision as it unfolds during periods of peak service. This constrains what can be claimed about the fine-grained timing of judgement in action and about how ingredient calls are negotiated moment by moment within sections. Future research could therefore extend the account through in situ observation of qualification work as it moves between receiving, production, holding, and service during high-tempo periods, where environmental conditions and time pressure reshape decisions in real time (Filimonau et al., 2023). It could also examine how qualification knowledge is transferred within brigades – through handovers, section notes, and apprenticeship-style learning – and whether

making judgment more inspectable changes how novices learn to manage variation without flattening sensory character (Escalante et al., 2024).

Conclusions

Ingredient selection in professional commercial kitchens is completed through work rather than at the point of purchase. Chefs qualify ingredients as they move from receiving into production and service, repeatedly checking whether ingredients remain fit for purpose when time compresses, holding intervenes, and repetition makes drift costly under real-time service constraints. That qualification is organised through two evaluative logics across domains. Cookery relies on naturalistic quality, where ingredients are judged through sensory behaviour in context; pastry-and-bakery relies on built-in quality, where ingredients are judged through functional performance and repeatability within production systems. What these logics reveal about chef professionalism is a form of sustained judgement: keeping ingredient decisions defensible so that technical integrity and intended sensory character can both hold when service leaves little room for correction.

A central contribution of this study is to conceptualise ingredient qualification as a form of professional judgement under service constraints. This offers a practice-based account of how commercial kitchens maintain reliability when variation becomes consequential. The two-logics framework also provides a way of making ingredient judgement more inspectable and teachable by clarifying what chefs attend to, what they test in use, and what constitutes a defensible call across domains, without reducing qualification to a rigid checklist. At the same time, the argument is based on interview material rather than observation. Further research using in situ observation could follow qualification across receiving, production, holding, and service during peak periods, and examine how such judgment is transmitted within brigades through handovers and apprenticeship-style learning.

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