

The Limits of Culinary Judgment: Responsibility When Evidence Is Insufficient

A proposal by Ahmad Issam Maadarani for bounded inference and documented uncertainty

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By **Ahmad Issam Maadarani**

Professional strength does not mean offering an opinion on everything. This article distinguishes describing a tasting observation, assessing dish quality and explaining the cause of a result. These levels require different evidence; conflating them can turn a sound observation into an unsupported conclusion. This is a professional proposal, not an experimentally validated measure of certainty.

1. Three statements with different responsibilities

“The component arrived lukewarm,” “it failed to meet the required temperature,” and “the cook mistimed the cooking” are not equivalent. The first needs the moment of observation specified; the second needs a declared criterion; the third needs information about preparation, transport and waiting. The first two may be defensible while the third remains

unresolved. Judges must identify which statement they can defend and stop at the boundary of its evidence.

2. Dish quality and evidence strength are separate

A dish may clearly underperform against a criterion while the cause remains unknown. A good dish may also provide insufficient evidence of production consistency. Scores should therefore neither rise to compensate for missing information nor fall because the judge cannot explain the cause. Record the assessment permitted by the task, adding a separate description of inference scope: one sample, repeated observation or undocumented conditions. Do not turn these descriptions into invented certainty percentages.

3. Missing evidence does not establish absence

If tasting reveals no distinctive effect of a technique, that technique was not necessarily absent. If a component was not presented separately, assessing it apart from the mixture may be impossible. However, when the brief requires demonstrating the technique or presenting the component separately, failure to provide that evidence becomes failure against a declared requirement. What matters is what had to be demonstrated in advance, not the judge's curiosity afterwards. Where rules allow, “not assessable with available information” preserves this distinction.

4. Hypothetical case: uneven texture

While tasting a filled item, a judge observes a soft centre and a dry edge. The location, character and effect on the bite can be described. Cooking duration alone cannot be declared the cause: thickness or waiting conditions may differ. Actionable feedback would state: “The edge is drier than the centre, interrupting the intended continuity; investigate thickness, cooking conditions and waiting.” This offers a usable diagnosis of the experience without an unsupported causal accusation.

5. Abstention, referral and recusal

Abstention concerns a judgment whose evidence cannot support responsible inference. Referral concerns a question requiring another expertise or examination. Recusal concerns

a relationship that could affect independence. These options must not become ways to evade difficult decisions, nor should their consequences be invented during judging. Specify beforehand who replaces a judge, how missing assessments are handled and when evaluation stops. Sensory assessment alone cannot establish or exclude food safety.

6. A responsible decision record

The proposed record identifies the criterion, observation, conditions, supported conclusion, unresolved alternatives and any necessary next step. Replace a vague “I do not know why” with the missing information and the decision that depends on it. Simple judgments do not all need lengthy files; documentation should match the decision's consequences and potential for challenge. Review examines the link between evidence and conclusion, not the writer's ability to sound confident.

7. A training test

Judges could review identical cases and separate description, assessment and explanation in their reports. Compare reports against predefined criteria: unsupported causal conclusions, clarity of limitations and actionable recommendations. More cautionary phrases should not automatically count as improvement; they may conceal ambiguity. The proposed improvement is that readers can identify what observation supports, what remains hypothetical and which action might resolve it.

8. Conclusion: authority with boundaries

The stronger judge has both a clear reason for a decision and a clear boundary to that reason's validity. The framework asks that the strength of a statement match the strength of its evidence. Criticism retains rigour, responsibility becomes reviewable, and cooks receive an assessment they can understand and act upon instead of a categorical explanation whose basis is unknown.

9. A concise working sheet

Field	Review question	What to record
Description	What exactly was observed?	Specify location, moment and bite.

Field	Review question	What to record
Assessment	Which criterion applies?	State the requirement and its relationship to the observation.
Explanation	What remains hypothetical?	Name missing information and alternatives.
Action	Can a decision be made?	Use the established assessment or referral procedure.

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