SUSTAINABILITY IN LUXURY GASTRONOMY:
ARE CELEBRITY CHEFS VOCAL ABOUT IT?

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ABSTRACT

Chefs, and particularly Michelin-starred ones, have evolved from almost anonymous figures into influential human brands, popularising luxury gastronomy to the general public. This popularity has brought an increasing demand for sustainability in luxury gastronomy. Although luxury and sustainability have often been seen as conflicting concepts, fine dining increasingly serves as a space where these dimensions intersect through creative and responsible practices. However, while research has examined how chefs promote sustainability within their restaurants, little is known about how they personally communicate these values. This study examines the personal communication on social media of the 25 most powerful Italian chefs identified by Forbes, investigating whether and how they advocate for sustainability, as well as the types of messages they employ. The findings offer insights into the role of celebrity chefs in shaping public discourse on sustainable luxury gastronomy beyond the restaurant setting.

Keywords: celebrity chef, sustainability, communication, luxury gastronomy

INTRODUCTION

From being relegated to the background in the past, chefs have become recognisable public figures (Yang et al., 2025). Thanks to culinary-related TV shows, as well as popular fictional movies and series, curiosity about chefs has increased, transforming them into human brands (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Celebrity chefs often emerge from Michelin-starred restaurants, benefiting from the prestige the guide confers. Moreover, since 2020, Michelin has begun rewarding restaurants with a green star for excelling in sustainability practices (Michelin, 2023). These awards offer symbolic recognition to restaurants and institutionalise a growing trend in gastronomy (Pinto & Yu, 2025). On one hand, there is a rising demand for more sustainable goods, even in the luxury context (Gasulla Tortajada et al., 2024), as well as services, including luxury gastronomy (Batat, 2021). On the other hand, leading restaurants are setting new sustainability standards, using gastronomy to innovate the relationship between food, nature, and society (Pinto & Yu, 2025). However, the relationship between luxury and sustainability is complex and fragmented. While sustainability is often linked to moderation and simplicity, luxury is usually associated with abundance and the use of rare resources (Batat, 2020). Similarly, fine dining has traditionally been characterised by abundance, exotic ingredients, disregard for seasonality, and widespread use of animal proteins (Batat, 2020). Despite this, luxury restaurants today are among the most dynamic and rapidly growing sectors of the luxury industry, and recent research has begun to reveal positive links between sustainability and luxury gastronomy (Batat, 2020, 2022). Michelin-starred chefs have begun adopting sustainable practices, both to reduce costs through waste management and to foster creativity and innovation, offering unique experiences to their guests (Batat, 2020). Furthermore, some restaurants have been shown to significantly impact their food systems (Pesci & Brinkley, 2022; Richardson & Fernqvist, 2024), fostering connectedness within alternative food networks (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2025). Despite these positive findings, studies remain fragmented and highly context-dependent. In certain contexts, sustainability practices in luxury restaurants may not be entirely risk-free, as customers might perceive sustainability-related changes as detracting from their experience, which could influence their intentions (Peng, 2020). Additionally, increased awareness has made customers more perceptive and sensitive to sustainability issues, raising the risk of greenwashing for restaurateurs (Batat, 2022; Peng, 2020; Szabo & Webster, 2021; Yang et al., 2025). Nevertheless, celebrity chefs exert substantial influence over their clients (Rodrigues et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2025), including promoting sustainable food trends (Batat, 2020, 2022; Richardson & Fernqvist, 2024).

While most research focuses on celebrity chefs' ability to affect customers' sustainability awareness through the experiences offered at their restaurants, little is known about chefs' influence outside their restaurants, particularly through communication channels such as social media. To address this gap, this research provides an exploratory look into celebrity chefs' personal communication strategies, aiming to answer the following research questions: 1) Do celebrity chefs promote sustainability causes in their personal communication? and 2) What types of messages do they use?

To answer these questions, this research presents an exploratory analysis of the personal communication of the 25 most influential chefs, as identified by Forbes (2025), on social media, highlighting the primary themes of their communication strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While popularity has brought chefs greater success and more work opportunities, it has also increased expectations beyond their culinary skills, both from the public and critics. Today, celebrity chefs are expected to incorporate sustainability aspects in their work, addressing

environmental and social issues. As one of the interviews collected by Batat (2020) notes, Michelin-starred chefs must utilise their fame to find alternative means of earning income to support their restaurants, since profit is not the primary goal in luxury gastronomy. On this topic, Ferran Adrià, the head chef at the renowned elBulli restaurant, explained that he needed to participate in advertising campaigns for large food companies to fund the high costs of research and development for the restaurant, which could not be covered entirely by the restaurant's revenues (Pujol, 2018). The call for more sustainable practices in luxury gastronomy reflects a global consumption trend (Gasulla Tortajada et al., 2025; Pinto & Yu, 2025), driven by awareness of the restaurant industry's environmental footprint (Madanaguli et al., 2022). Chefs, especially those in luxury gastronomy, act as human brands (Rodrigues et al., 2023), promoting sustainability and shaping behaviours across the entire food chain, from production to consumption (Richardson & Fernqvist, 2024; Batat, 2021), impacting local food systems (Pesci & Brinkley, 2022). The Michelin guide recognised this shift by introducing the green star for sustainability, changing how luxury restaurants communicate their efforts. This move goes beyond operational details to include culinary philosophy, agroecological commitments, and ethical and operational responsibilities (Pinto & Yu, 2025). Michelin Green Star restaurants set the standard in sustainability, combining eco-friendly sourcing and waste reduction with ethical, educational, and community initiatives (Michelin, 2023).

Research on luxury gastronomy has explored chefs' motivations, highlighting both intrinsic factors related to food and the restaurant environment, as well as extrinsic commitments to people (employees and the wider community) and the planet (e.g., recycling and food waste), reflecting a holistic approach to sustainability (Batat, 2020). Regardless of the motives, haute-cuisine chefs are reluctant to compromise their customers' sensory experience for the sake of sustainability; instead, they seek alternative solutions, such as replacing plastic straws with bespoke silver ones, rather than using paper straws that do not provide an adequate sensory experience (Batat, 2020).

Despite these efforts, the sustainability policy and advertisements in luxury restaurants are not risk-free. In specific contexts, such as Taiwan, research has shown that consumers may worry that sustainability practices negatively affect food quality and the restaurant experience, including its value and impact on self-image (Peng, 2020). Moreover, increased public sensitivity towards sustainability in gastronomy (Madanaguli et al., 2022) has been accompanied by a rise in scepticism towards sustainability claims, thereby increasing the risk of greenwashing for restaurants (Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Despite recent academic interest in chefs (Batat, 2020, 2021; Richardson & Fernqvist, 2024), these studies analysed chefs' philosophy and actions regarding sustainability but overlooked their personal communication. Given their popularity on mass and social media, chefs can now reach a larger audience than their immediate clientele, which means their communication does not necessarily involve a restaurant experience. This research examines the online communication

strategies of celebrity chefs, focusing on the presence of sustainability claims and their effective communication.

METHODS

This study analyses the 2025 compilation of the 25 most influential chefs by the Italian Forbes newsroom (Forbes.it, 2025). The researchers analysed the chefs' personal Instagram profiles and official websites; an overview of the analysed sample is presented in Table 1.

The list predominantly comprises Michelin-starred chefs with multiple-starred establishments (the average number of restaurants is 3.68, while the mean number of Michelin stars is 3.24). The sole exception is Alessandro Borghese, whose inclusion reflects his significant presence in mass media rather than Michelin recognition. The majority of chefs are male, with only three women featured among the twenty-five. Six chefs in the sample have also been awarded the Michelin Green Star for their sustainability efforts.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Given the exploratory nature of the study, an inductive approach was used to identify the themes in chefs' communication on Instagram. Preliminary results suggest that the majority of celebrity chefs are unassertive about sustainability in their personal communications, surprisingly even among the green Michelin-starred chefs. The are only three exceptions, Chiara Pavan, who demonstrates her commitment to sustainability through her dishes, kitchen philosophy, and daily activities at restaurants, such as tending to the vegetable garden. Additionally, Jessica Rosval concentrates her sustainability communication more on social sustainability, especially the need for a more inclusive environment within the gastronomy sector. Her discussions on this topic are evident in the interviews and speeches she has given at various events. Last, Norbert Niederkofler periodically dedicates some posts dedicate to explain his "Cook the Mountain" philosophy, highlightin its environmental value. Despite these few exceptions, even

Table1. The analysed chef sample.

Chef	Michelin stars	Green Star	No. of restaurants	Sustainability-related contents*
Alessandro Borghese	0	No	2	No
Andrea Antonini	1	No	1	No
Andrea Aprea	2	No	2	No
Antonia Klugmann	1	No	1	No
Antonino Cannavacciuolo	11	No	8	No
Antonio Guida	3	No	2	No
Carlo Cracco	2	No	2	No
Chiara Pavan	1	Yes	2	Yes
Ciccio Sultano	2	No	1	No
Davide Oldani	3	Yes	2	No
Enrico Bartolini	14	Yes	13	No
Enrico Crippa	3	Yes	1	No Social
Fabrizio Mellino	3	No	1	No
Famiglia Cerea	3	No	4	No
Gennaro Esposito	2	No	1	No
Giancarlo Perbellini	3	No	9	No
Heinz Beck	3	No	1	No
Jessica Rosval	1	Yes	1	Yes
Massimiliano Alajmo	3	No	13	No
Mauro Uliassi	3	No	1	No
Moreno Cedroni	2	No	3	No
Niko Romito	7	No	16	No
Nino Di Costanzo	2	No	1	No Social
Norbert Niederkofler	3	Yes	3	Yes
Riccardo Monco	3	No	1	No

*over the last 6 months (may 2025 - November 2025)

among the green-starred chefs, social media channels are mainly used for self-promotion, showcasing their culinary creations, professional achievements, and awards. When sustainability-related acknowledgements are shared, they often serve as a form of legitimisation rather than advocacy, reinforcing the chef's professional credibility—especially when the recognition is from authoritative institutions like Michelin, as an attempt to portray themselves as orchestrators according to Pinto & Yu's framework (2025), and to reduce the risk of greenwashing (Szabo & Webster, 2021). When sustainability is mentioned, it is almost always discussed in a specific context, often related to a particular dish. While chefs explain a dish, they tend to focus on the relationship between the ingredients and their seasonality, as well as their origin, emphasising the connection with local craft producers. This communication strategy aligns with Michelin's (2023) view of sustainability and resonates with evidence from studies of French Michelin-starred chefs (Batat, 2020). Rather than adopting a moralising tone, chefs communicate sustainability through the tangible dimension of food, embedding environmental values in their gastronomic storytelling. Another common theme in Chef's Instagram communication is the promotion of collaboration and events with other colleagues. Chefs often offer special collaboration dinners, where a co-designed menu is presented for an exclusive event. This recurring theme reflects a form of co-branding that aims for mutual exposure and audience sharing. From an aesthetic perspective, their communication remains formal and professionally curated, with limited references to their private lives, resulting in an overall tone that closely mirrors the institutional image of their restaurants. This dynamic is especially true for chefs managing multiple restaurants. For these chefs, their personal accounts often serve as promotional platforms for all their business ventures, acting as a sort of umbrella social media profile that showcases the highlights of their projects. Given that some chefs operate on an international level, communication strategies avoid potentially risky topics that could be misinterpreted by audiences from specific cultures and countries, a finding in line with Peng (2020). In this context, sustainability topics may be conveyed in a more subtle way, as a sort of premium feature of some dishes, like stressing the presence of locally-farmed ingredients.

CONCLUSION and FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

This exploratory study highlights that celebrity chefs' personal communication mainly focuses on professional self-promotion rather than overt advocacy for sustainability. While sustainability does appear in their narratives, it is primarily conveyed indirectly through culinary storytelling, where chefs emphasise ingredient provenance, seasonality, and craftsmanship. This approach enables them to align with sustainability discourses without undermining the aspirational and exclusive image linked to luxury gastronomy. Furthermore, establishing a strong connection among sustainability practices, kitchen philosophy, and dishes aligns with the industry's goal of delivering memorable restaurant experiences to clients. The findings indicate that sustainability communication among celebrity chefs is legitimised through external recognition, particularly from trusted institutions such as Michelin, which diminishes the perceived risk of greenwashing. Furthermore, the formal and institution-like aesthetic of their online presence reinforces their role as professional figures rather than activists. The initial analysis of the chef's personal social media communication emphasises the complex relationship between sustainability and luxury gastronomy. While affirming that it is a crucial aspect in luxury-restaurant strategies, it is rarely at the centre of the Chefs' communication approach, highlighting the risks, especially for Chefs with an international profile. Therefore, to better understand the role of sustainability in celebrity chefs' personal communication strategies, their content should be compared with the online presence of the restaurants they represent. Analysing the chefs' communication in relation to one of the

restaurants will enable us to better understand common strategies, highlighting the role of the institution (i.e., the restaurant) in their communication. Moreover, especially for chefs with an international presence, future developments of this research should check for subtle sustainability message in their communication, in light of the local cultural context in which the restaurant operates. However, despite the interesting practical implications for Chefs and restaurant owners, this comparison may be limited as it is restaurant-centric. Future research should investigate the impact of sustainability communication on customers, aiming to determine whether a more vocal approach on social media could be a valuable communication strategy for celebrity chefs. Additionally, future studies should also consider expanding the sample to include green Michelin-starred restaurants that are also not red-Michelin-starred. Research could reveal interesting trends by comparing different gastronomic offerings, thereby enhancing the generalisability of the results.

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