

In The Weeds

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Integrative Project Thesis Paper
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If you asked how I was doing half an hour ago, I probably would've told you I was stressing out about working on my thesis, finding a job post grad, and making sure I don't end up proving my aunt who is so sure my art degree is a waste of time right. Y'know, the usual.

If you were to ask me how I was doing fifteen minutes ago, when I was baking a batch of cookies, I also would've said I was stressed out. I was double checking that I didn't forget to buy the vanilla extract at the store, second guessing how many cups of flour I had already put in, walking by the oven every few minutes to make sure I wasn't burning the whole batch.

If you asked how I'm doing now as I sit, reclining on my couch, plate of cookies in hand, I'd say I'm feeling pretty good. Before, I was pacing frantically in front of the oven, face red, hands fidgeting. Now I'm fairly calm, cool, and collected. As soon as the cookies are out I am instantly relaxed. Not just about hovering over the cookies to assure they're done to perfection, but about my anxieties overall. For a few moments, my swirling thoughts are calm, and I can enjoy a bite of a warm chocolate chip cookie.

Some people say they don't like cooking because it's too stressful. But for me, I've found that cooking soothes my general anxieties by making me more anxious about the task at hand. I'll focus on the process required of the recipe, and I'll execute the steps to the best of my ability. Cooking makes me anxious, but it's something I can control, a phenomenon I realized only recently. And even if my cookies get scorched in the oven, hey – they're just cookies.

My IP project is a series of graphic personal vignettes that show my experiences of cooking relating to anxiety and comfort. Throughout the creation of this work I asked myself, why does cooking relieve my anxiety? And, is this experience specific to me, or universal? The novel explores the ways in which I use food as a coping mechanism for anxiety – not simply in eating but specifically in the process of making.

I. Anxiety and Control

Is this just a “me” thing? When I picked the topic for my project I decided to focus on my love of cooking; specifically, the way in which cooking relieves my own anxieties. I tend to get nervous about a lot of things – it runs in the family. But regardless of what I’m stressed about, I’ve always found cooking to be a form of relaxation for me despite having moments in which the act of cooking makes me temporarily more anxious. So, is this a “me” thing? Or is this coping mechanism something more widely understood? This juxtaposition of anxiety and calm became something I wanted to examine more deeply.

In my research, I came across several studies which highlighted the exact phenomenon I had felt. A study done by Weems et. al. on a group of youths between the ages of 9 and 17 suggested that “perceived control over anxiety related events” was negatively correlated with “self-reported anxiety levels”¹ – meaning the subjects would feel more anxious if they believed they had less control over the source of their anxiety. The study goes on to suggest that these anxiety disorders are associated with the idea that anxiety is uncontrollable. This study speaks

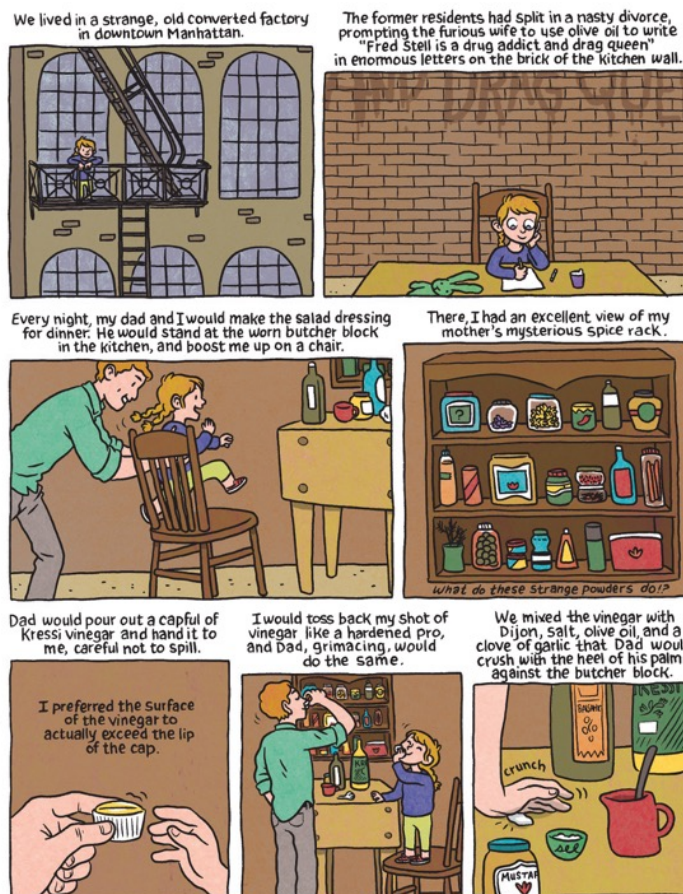
¹ Carl F. Weems, et al., “The Role of Control in Childhood Anxiety Disorders,” *Cognitive Therapy and Research* (2003) 27: 557

directly to the emotions I felt whenever I would get upset about things I couldn't control or had very limited control over; things like flying on a plane or having a successful future. This brings us to the second aspect of my research – how to alleviate this anxiety.

I've always used cooking to relieve my anxieties. After reading the study by Weems et al. I realized this method worked because while cooking would make me anxious to a certain extent, it was a form of anxiety that I had control over – this feeling of being in control allowed me to ground myself and become calmer. In her research, *Art Educational Practices; Fostering Self-Control and Improving Focus for Students Coping with Anxiety*, Alexandra Ogle supports this idea that creative practices aid in the alleviation of anxiety. In particular she discusses that activities such as art allow students to calm themselves by fostering feelings of control as well as allowing them to exert their energy into their projects.² Now you may be thinking, 'but Alexa, you draw all the time! Isn't that enough?' Well, in some ways, art works to help alleviate anxiety, but only so much. Because being an artist is my career, I end up being critical of my work. While this isn't a negative thing, it does mean that drawing doesn't always work for coping, so I seek out a different method. Cooking has become my creative outlet for anxiety – I know what will happen if I follow the recipe, I can control how the recipe will turn out, and the stakes are low enough that I don't need to worry about the recipe being perfect. Dominos exists for a reason.

II. Graphic Novels and Influences

² Alexandra Ogle, *Art Educational Practices; Fostering Self-Control and Improving Focus for Students Coping with Anxiety*. ERIC Clearinghouse, 2013: 19.



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Lucy Knisley, *Relish*, 2013.³ This particular page exemplifies one of the many moments Knisley references in which her life was marked by food or the making of food.

I knew I wanted to make my own graphic novel about food ever since I read Lucy Knisley's graphic novel *Relish* back when I was a senior in high school. *Relish* recounts Knisley's life as it intersects with food – an amalgamation of important moments in her life and the food by which they have been marked⁴. My own work has taken strong influence from Knisley's

³ Hillary Brown, "Relish by Lucy Knisley," *Paste Magazine.com*, last modified April 3, 2013, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2013/04/relish-by-lucy-knisley.html>

⁴ Lucy Knisley, *Relish* (New York: First Second, 2013).

Relish. While my thesis is similarly an accumulation of my own experiences with cooking – as well as a few recipes for the reader to follow along with – it also differs in a few significant ways. Primarily, my series of vignettes focuses specifically on moments in which I experience bouts of anxiety, and the way in which cooking aids in the alleviation of said anxiety; *Relish* is more of a sampling of various moments throughout Knisley’s life.



Samin Nosrat, *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, 2017.⁵ This is an example of one of the recipes that appears in Nosrat's cookbook. Here, we see the graphic and fluid way in which the recipe is illustrated.

I've also consulted other illustrated forms of cooking and food, such as recently published and acclaimed cookbook *Salt Fat Acid Heat* by Samin Nosrat. While not a graphic novel, Nosrat's cookbook stands out among the rest because it contains no photography. In a

⁵ Francis Lam, "Samin Nosrat on mastering salt, fat, acid and heat," *The Splendid Table*, last modified May 5, 2017, <https://www.splendidtable.org/story/samin-nosrat-on-mastering-salt-fat-acid-and-heat>

groundbreaking format, every recipe and example given in *Salt Fat Acid Heat* is paired with food illustrations⁶. And intentionally so, as it turns out. In an interview with *Cherry Bombe* magazine Nosrat comments that she specifically wanted all the imagery in her cookbook to be drawn in order for her readers to feel less pressure to have their dishes look picture perfect. She states, “the entire message of the book is to inspire and empower the reader to cook intuitively... illustrating that with beautiful, perfectly styled photos would be disingenuous. There’s no visual ideal I want [the reader] to aim for... Illustration allows for freedom.”⁷ I loved this idea of freedom and flexibility through illustration, and it became part of the reason why I chose to illustrate all the recipes in my vignettes as opposed to including photos. My goal for my audience is to focus on the way in which cooking can be a tool to alleviate anxiety – something that can’t be achieved if they are constantly worrying about how their cookies are going to look.

Methodology:

When I first approached IP back in September I knew I wanted to make a graphic novel. The content of it, however, was a complete mystery to me. I began brainstorming by making lists of potential ideas – this consisted of writing about my seven-year relationship with my boyfriend, my experience fencing in high school, or something about my enjoyment of cooking. My idea became to combine these three topics by making work about relationships and fencing with food as the common thread. I wanted to create five short stories that would highlight

⁶ Samin Nosrat, *Salt Fat Acid Heat* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

⁷ Priya Krishna. “The Magic Formula.” *Cherry Bombe*. 2017, 62-63.

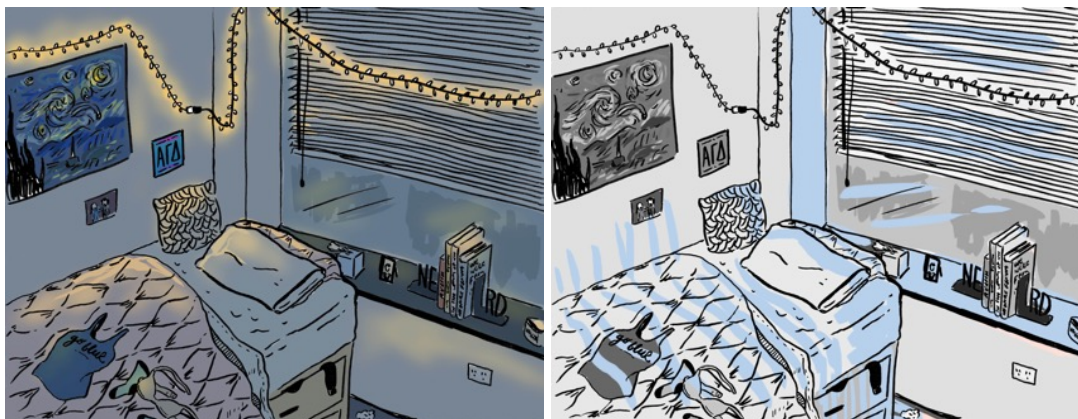
these experiences. While this concept had the potential to be interesting had I refined it more, the way I was working with it was too broad and unfocused, as well as unrealistic given the timeframe in which I had to work.



Excerpt from *In The Weeds*. By parsing the graphic novel from five stories to three I was able to devote more time to details in the illustration as seen above.

One day in November, I had an epiphany while I was lost in thought about cooking. I came to realize why cooking worked so well for me, as I previously mentioned. Once I realized the process gave me a sense of control that I was lacking when I felt anxious, I knew I had to make my project more specific to this idea. In doing so I also decided to bring the number of vignettes down from five to three. I wanted to focus on longer, better stories, rather than

forcing myself to write more, shorter, ones in less time. Doing so allowed me not only to improve the content in each story but also the technical quality of the drawings.



Early color explorations – full color vs. a limited palette/greyscale.

When working to decide what the actual comic would look like I created several color experimentations using full color illustrations, limited color palettes, and greyscale. While I liked the way the full color images looked, it wasn't achievable in the time I had. Instead, I chose to use greyscale images throughout the comic. The recipe at the end of each story though would be in full color. This was not only to add visual interest but also to serve as a marker that the previous story had ended and a new one was to begin.

Creative Work:



In The Weeds, Gallery exhibition setup

My graphic novel, *In The Weeds*, is displayed as printed 8.5"x11" hard copy books. Several copies are placed on a wooden table, which has two wooden chairs alongside it for viewers to sit and read the books. The use of the wooden table and chairs is meant to invoke a feeling of sitting down at a kitchen table; a place that is welcoming and comforting. The chairs have the words "take a seat" written on them to indicate to the gallery visitors that it's ok to touch and interact with the piece, as most gallery settings prohibit touching or getting close to the works.



Excerpts from *In The Weeds* mentioned below. The first image is a visual example of anxiety from the first story while the second image shows the effect of cooking over time.

Each short story in *In The Weeds* individually works to further the idea of comfort through control via cooking. The first story serves to introduce the topic and explain the methodology to the viewer, the second exemplifies the way in which the process works, and the third closes out the piece, bringing it full circle. The layout of certain pages is used to emphasize the feelings of anxiety in the novel; an example of this is seen in the first story when the character is surrounded by an overwhelming amount of plates after testing the jam over and over again. Layout is also used to show the calming affect cooking has – in the second story the page is broken up into nine panels, each showing a different day of the month to create a visualization of cooking as a method of coping over time.

Additionally, my work features a critical inner voice; some have described it as akin to the style of “Lizzie McGuire”. My stories are told by myself – I often use the fact that I’m the

narrator to have some small moments when I poke fun at myself and my logic behind all of this. I find that it not only aids in connecting the audience to the work, but also allows what may seem like daunting subject to be more approachable.

Conclusion:

I believe that the choices I made when creating this work achieve the goals of my project well. The various layouts serve as visual metaphors for the overwhelming feelings of anxiety, the greyscale notes that there is a certain level of seriousness to the project, while the sarcastic nature of the written portions show that it's not so serious that one should fear discussing it. Going forward I would welcome the opportunity to revisit this project and add more details and descriptions to each story. I would also like to experiment more with the way shifts in color can help to push the feelings of anxiety and comfort further. The project thus far, I feel, has effectively completed my goal of explaining the intersection of cooking and anxiety, while also making the subject approachable and giving more insight into my own actions and methods of coping.

Additionally, the research and production of *In The Weeds* allowed for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and why it works. I had heard that creative outlets are often good for relieving stress, but I never understood how, or why I turned to cooking instead of my typical art practice. The big thing I was unaware of was control. While I could conceive the notion that creative outlets would be effective at relieving anxiety, I was unaware of the element of control – within this concept and as a part of my own life. Now, after having written and drawn *In The Weeds*, I am walking away not only with a more complete understanding of

the way in which cooking alleviates my anxiety, but a better understanding of myself.

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