

Designing Eating Experiences: We Are How We Eat

As humans have evolved, so have our eating habits, from raw food to cooked to fine dining. Today, eating is usually on the go, and without much thought. The choices have grown exponentially, as have our traditions and rules surrounding cultural etiquette. Western civilizations have adapted a worldly approach to their cuisine, adapting types of food to fit their liking. Although we have adapted the flavors, textures and types of food, the experience of eating a specific dish or genre is often lost. Western world “faux pas” and superstitions revolving around eating often contradict with other cultures’ traditions. For instance, in Ethiopia meals are shared off of the same plate and eaten with hands and pieces of bread. However, if a friend were to grab a piece of chicken off of another’s plate at dinner in America, it would be considered rude. How often have you seen someone eat a handful of pasta and meatballs? Probably never, since it’s considered unsanitary and gross. Of course many eat pizza, burgers, fries, and sandwiches with their hands. So, where is that line between faux pas and tradition? One step over into “faux pas” and the diner will feel uncomfortable.

As a product designer with a strong interest in the experiences surrounding the art of eating, I decided to explore the global cultural differences and norms concerning food for my capstone project at the University of Michigan’s School of Art and Design. As the world is continuing to get smaller and smaller with cultural tensions rising, eating is one of the few things we can all relate to over and experience together. I will focus on community and superstitions in my exploration of eating

experiences and culminate my research, work, and products into a one night only dining experience that focuses on pushing the diners out of their comfort zone and into thinking about the relations between cultures through eating habits. To understand those relations and have the diners experience a meaningful meal, I followed a variety of paths of research including anthropological, material, food science and historical investigation.

Evolution of the Modern Meal

To understand the way we do the things we do, one must have an understanding of history. So, I delved into books, articles and talks on the evolution of cooking, the kitchen and eating. Humans first started eating what they could gather and kill, and enjoyed that food raw until one day, someone, intentional or not, decided to drop a piece of meat into the fire at night. From that point on, we distinguished ourselves from other mammals by our ability to create tools, and objects and eat cooked food. As Heribert Watzke, the founder of the food material science department at Nestle, says, we are who we are because we cook; or as he calls us, “coctivors” (Watzke). Since the invention of controlled fire and the idea of cooking, humans have constantly looked at new ways to heat food stuff to a certain temperature and alter that food stuff in appetizing ways. After the industrial revolution in the late 1800’s, designers began to look to new ways technology can enhance the cooking and eating experiences. For instance, the Frankfurt kitchen supposedly increased productivity by decreasing cooking time and standardizing the space or even GE’s energy star appliances today that decrease your electricity bill and environmental footprint.

Design has always played a huge role in cooking and eating. By analyzing how different cultures have approached this, I delved further into my Integrative Project.

Design Research

Experiencing a meal has a lot to do with the setting that the meal is being enjoyed in. Whether it is being devoured on the way to work by car, subway or walking, or it is enjoyed in the cluttered family kitchen or a fancy restaurant with pristine white tablecloths each environment provides a unique encounter with the food. Yet there are other factors besides the environment that the food is consumed in, such as all five senses smell, sight, touch, sound and taste.

To understand the simple yet oddly complicated idea of eating and its relation to the individual and the society, I began to ask questions about people's favorite and least favorite eating experience, how and where they consume most of their meals, their favorite part about eating. I did this by giving out surveys to 20 different people and recording their stories. Analyzing the similarities in the answers as well as why certain meals might draw on upsetting or uplifting memories, I began to understand trends and habits of food consumption by my peers in the western world. On top of outside observations, I began to keep a food journal, logging notes about interesting experiences relating to food, dining and cooking. To understand the traditions and customs of other cultures, I had to turn to books and journals with a few visits to "exotic" restaurants. I visited Blue Nile on a few occasions, and talked to the owner of the Korean bar, Tomukun, about his families eating traditions.

In addition to consumer research, I have been exploring how form language and cultural and historical connotations determine material choice for the products I am designing to enhance the communal yet potentially uncomfortable eating experience I am designing. Eating the food of another culture can allow us more insight into their particular traditions and ways of thinking than learning and studying their language for years could. "Far more than spoken language itself, food can serve as a mediator between different cultures, opening methods of cooking to all manner of invention, cross-pollination and contamination." (Montanari)

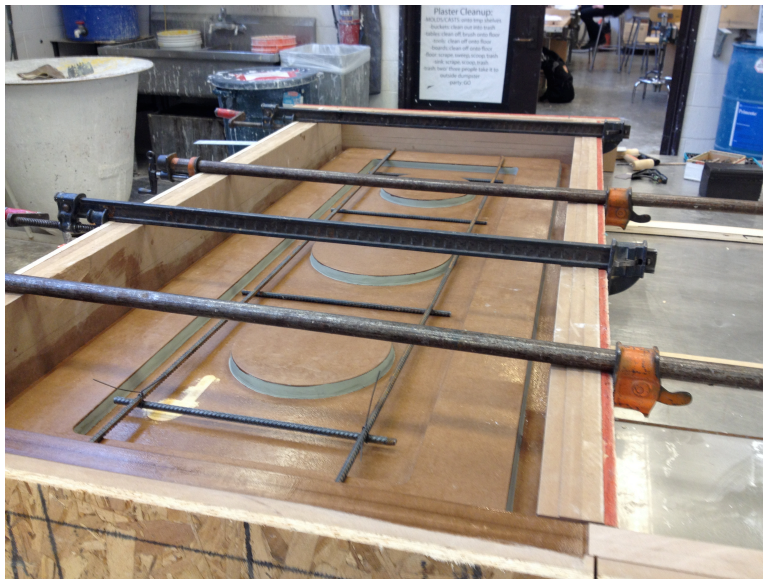
Food can express how vastly different we all are, but at the same time, tell how similar we are to each other. Looking to Marije Vogelzang, an eating designer from Amsterdam, and her work with designing the experiences around food, I began to understand and appreciate her philosophy that food is already perfect designed and that "food goes to the stomach, but it can also activate the brain and can rouse strong memories and emotions."(Vogelzang).

Marije's dinners have explored the senses through a project that involves eating on the beat and community in her Christmas dinner for the infamous design company, Droog Design. Her experience and insights have been a huge influence in my research and conceptual development of the project.

Product Criteria and Goals

The plan was to design a communal eating experience that looks at Ethiopian, Asian and American eating habits, history and taboos and the intersection of those. This one night event will hopefully force the diners out of their comfort zone and

break down their sense of individualism and into a communal happening that tears apart social norms and investigates the overlap of traditions and taboos. The dinner will be set around a table made from hydrocal and sealed with a food grade glossy sealant with indentations in the table form that become serving and eating spaces. The table will be poured into a MDF mold routed on the CNC machine and then sealed with numerous coats of shellac.



Hydrocal was chosen for its visual similarity to porcelain and its strength. The tabletop becomes every diner's plate, juxtaposing the luxury and antiquity of porcelain with form language that is reminiscent of a pig trough. The seating will be a wooden bench, also blurring the lines between individual space and community. Traditional silverware will not be utilized as "the fork appeared either as a form of extreme refinement of the habits of social etiquette or as sheer necessity when approaching foods..."(Montanari). Many cultures in the world eat solely with their hands, utilizing bread as the tool to gather and bring the meal to their mouth. The way meals are served was radically transformed by a new custom in the mid nineteenth century called "service a la russe" which meant that the meals courses were served in succession versus simultaneously on the table as they had been, and still are in China, Japan and other countries. My decision to revert back to the courses being served all at one time is structured around the idea that it is up to the individual to choose according to their own desire and needs. It allows for a community sense, but also individual decisions.

The diners will come to the table and find 6 packages around the trough style indentation, which they are each to open. Inside will be different "ingredients" to the dinner, which they then have to figure out and assemble into a three-course meal that they will enjoy simultaneously. Each pair will include one component that can serve as an edible vessel to transport the food from table to mouth. The puzzle approach to the dining experience allows for an allusion to communal cooking as well as communal dining.



Conclusion

Eating will always be a part of our lives since it provides us with life and intertwines with our identity. As the old saying goes, “you are what you eat.” But it’s more than that. It’s not just what we eat, but how we eat. Learning and exploring culture through eating is an important way to bridge the gap between societal differences. Not only are we enjoying an activity that is vital to survival, but able to bond over a shared experience. Exploring cultural boundaries through food and getting diners involved in that exploration will be an ongoing project in my life.



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