

The Sound of Generations:

In the Kitchen



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4/21/08

Kitch·en \ **kich-uh** n \ , *noun*: The place in a home where life happens and stories begin.

Generations and Kitchens

On a mission to travel through time in the kitchen, I read cookbooks and even tried out recipes dating back to 1890. I am interested in using culinary experiences to explore age groups and families. My work in sound installation is focused on capturing the cooking stories that bind people together, and documenting the pattern of trends and interests that history reveals to us as generations cycle over time.



Background

My interest in kitchens and generations stems from my career: I design kitchens for a business run by my grandfather and his brother that my great-grandfather started in 1948.



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The interest in and skills for designing kitchens seem to have been passed down through generations in my family like an old recipe.

Only a few short years ago, immigrants in my great-grandparents' generation intentionally hid their backgrounds and tried to assimilate to the American culture in which they so desperately wanted to belong. Like virtually everyone else during the Depression, my great-grandparents had a garden because food was expensive and scarce. The prosperity of the following generations, along with the invention and marketing of convenience foods, caused people to think differently about food. Today we're again seeing a shift. The old way, growing your own food at home without pesticides, is new again. Young women are reclaiming and updating the domestic duties of their ancestors like cooking, sewing, and raising a family.

The process of eating with family is a reflection of culture. Meals create occasions for everyone to be around a table talking and sharing stories. The food itself is passed between people of different generations, just as the processes and techniques of cooking are passed from one generation to the next.

Sound Work

There's something special about the power of voice, and the way it evokes character and age even in the absence of any visual clues. My work is about creating audio cooking portraits, using the medium of sound, to share the voices and personal reflections of the people with whom I cook. The absence of photos in my installation also allows



viewers to project these voices onto people they know, or perhaps even onto a time in their own lives. To me, storytelling is very closely related to the kitchen. Not only through the conversation at the family dinner table, but also because whenever I cook, I listen to stories from NPR's *This American Life* and David Sedaris' humorous tales of his family. I love imagining the people whose voices come from the radio. They inspire me to find my own way of seeking out and recording stories about the topics

I'm drawn to, as well as preserving and sharing them.



Kitchen Failures: Track 1
This story happened just this past Christmas. A friend and I baked hundreds of cookies, all from scratch, using various recipes. When we shopped for gingerbread ingredients, we realized that there are different types of molasses. As 24-year-

olds who hadn't really used molasses for anything, we mistakenly used Blackstrap instead of fancy molasses. There was no fixing this mistake, no matter how hard we tried! This story reminds listeners of their own mistakes. My mom, for instance, used one fourth cup of salt instead of one fourth teaspoon in her first batch of cookies.

The Microwaver: Track 2

My 29-year-old husband tells of experiences throughout his life with microwaves. This device became very popular while he was growing up in the 1980s, as women were focusing on careers and education instead of cooking. Microwave dinners and fast foods provided ways that women could both work and fulfill their roles as wife and mother. When he was in second grade, he made a Swanson's TV meal, without taking the aluminum foil off. During college, he accidentally cooked a frozen burrito for 20 minutes instead of two. This summer, after recently getting married and getting brand new platinum-rimmed fine china, he used it in the microwave.

Five Cup Salad Rite of Passage: Track 3

My 5-year-old cousin makes "5-cup salad," and she sees this as a rite of passage of sorts. She feels grown up for remembering all of the ingredients. I ask her where she learned how to make this recipe, and she says she learned it from her mom. She thinks her mom learned it from her Grandma Judy, and that *she* learned it from *her* mom. In reality, this recipe has not been handed down from mother to daughter, it's just one of your typical 1950s salad dishes. It's comprised of pineapple, mandarin oranges, marshmallows, coconut, and yogurt, and always seems to appear at potlucks and family gatherings.



Birthday Surprise: Track 4

I decided to secretly bake a cake for my mom's birthday, with no previous cooking experience. While she was gone, I used a Betty Crocker cake mix, and added frosting and mini M&Ms that I conveniently found in the pantry. We never really made things from scratch so I didn't realize it was possible to make cake and brownies without a box until years later. In the end, it was keeping the secret, not making the cake, that was the most memorable part of the gift.



S-P-A-M: Track 5

A story told by a World War II veteran tells of the ingenuity of American food manufacturers at the time: ham in a tin box that would "keep" without refrigeration. Even the soldiers fighting overseas today have experiences with bad Army food. After my father-in-law listened to this story, he shared his father's similar experience with Spam and chocolate during World War II. Instantly, this went from being just a story from an older generation to being a story from my *extended family*.



Installation

An important element of my work is interactivity. I want people to feel they are in a room where the recordings could have been created, and to discover elements that they can link to the sound while they're in the space. I like the sound installation work of Liz Phillips. Her piece on the right, titled *Echo Location*, uses video projections and restaurant sounds coming from kitchen objects to evoke the culture of food, community, and eating in Queens, NY.





My installation looks like any regular kitchen, with the addition of sound coming from a set of speakers. The viewers/listeners hear a nine and a half minute loop of stories (*Track 6*) told by people of various ages, and are invited to move around the space, interact, read, taste, and rearrange.



Closer inspection reveals that the foods they taste are referenced in the stories, as they find ingredients and utensils in the kitchen cabinets. Cookbooks from various decades help the viewer gain insight about how the methods of cooking have changed and adapted over the years. Although different age groups will have different experiences in the kitchen, the goal is that they would all go away from the piece thinking about the cultural elements of

cooking. I want to inspire the viewers to share stories with, cook with, listen to, and ultimately appreciate different generations of their own families.

My project gives the viewer a cycle of stories that speak to the cycle of generations as well as the cycles within a person's life. There is no beginning or end to the series, but each piece is heard in the context of the preceding and ensuing clips. For the first time ever, I'm planting a garden this spring, and this cycle in my own family continues.