

Notes on Food Design Thinking as a platform for learning and teaching.

by Pedro Reissig, PhD © 2015

The happiest definition that I have developed for Food Design is: **Food Design includes any action that can improve our relationship with food individually or collectively in diverse ways and instances, including the design of food products, materials, experiences, practices, technology, environments, and systems.** By happiest I mean a definition that frames a way of thinking and acting, motivating open and critical thinking with a propositive attitude.

Food Design is a complex and comprehensive platform resulting from the need to put **into perspective** the large (huge and ever growing) amount and variety of considerations and consequences involved in our relationship with food. Food Design in this sense is akin to the phenomena of ecology when it first evolved decades ago, sharing the necessity to see how all the parts fit together, **integrating** fragmented knowledge into a trans-disciplinary, multi-participatory global context in a **systematic** manner. The Food universe has become so complex and presents so many challenges that a response like Food Design is natural and welcome. Food Design proposes to change the idea of a food user for a **food decider**, and it is with this spirit that we can empower ourselves for improving our relationship with food as persons and professionals.

Something to keep in mind is that unfortunately Food Design is often misunderstood as food styling and also connotes genetically modified food (GMO), especially in the USA. Even though the field of Food Design is rapidly growing, there are still many misconceptions around it. Another consideration to highlight regards treating Food Design as a new "specialization" within the menu of options generally existing in the industrial design discipline, as with furniture, consumer goods, and other product oriented foci. This would miss the point all together since food deserves a separate treatment for many reasons, as detailed further below.

When considering definitions it is good to keep in mind the different contexts in which they are construed. In the case of looking at professional design practice, by and large I have sensed three emerging directions in which Food Design is currently being developed as a field of expertise, each of which would benefit from a more specific definition useful to its interests and objectives.

1. One tendency is towards Food Designers who work in industry, in the most traditional sense of an industrial designer's competence and scope, and growing in presence as design led innovation makes headway in the food processing business. The challenge here is to not succumb to maximizing profits over the values of improving our relationship with food, not very popular in the business world, but ever more significant in politics and culture at large. A Food Designer in industry goes beyond designing an edible product or packaging, but digs further into how to improve our relationship with food and eating through industrial production.
2. Another direction in which Food Designers are working in has to do with a more personal role centered mainly on participatory experiences and conceptual, artistic expressions. Examples of these initiatives include boutique and author based firms specializing in food events, performances and other highly visual and media prone phenomena, not few of which challenge existing limits and notions regarding what food can mean for us as an experience.
3. The third area of work which is being consolidated under the umbrella of Food Design refers to more strategic and research based developments, including systems thinking, social innovation, process design and the like. These initiatives are often academically related since there is not yet a significant market demand for this area of expertise and sensibility. Examples of this type of interest in Food Design includes innovation oriented initiatives, mainly focusing on problem identification and solving, mainly in cultures of scarcity and/or instability of basic needs.

Far from pretending to categorize the recent advances in this emerging field, the goal is to begin visualizing patterns, clusters and other indicators of interest and activities in an otherwise unmapped territory. There certainly are other directions for Food Designers to imagine and pursue, but these are the ones that seem to

be consolidating most rapidly. The big question here is what to expect from professional practice in this new field, and how best to identify the skills, attitudes and framework needed to sustain it.

Towards a didactics and pedagogy of Food Design

These notes focus on the usefulness of a specific didactics for Food Design, and also consider the implications of a Food Design pedagogy given the vital and strategic nature of food in our lives and society.

There are sufficient particularities of Food Design as a discipline to merit this consideration. By way of enumeration of the specificity of Food Design, and not necessarily in order of importance, are:

- Food Design deals with the very real materials we biologically consume in order to live. It is literally vital to our existence.
- Food Design deals with products we put into our bodies and which become our bodies. A process of physiological transformations beyond any comprehensible means since we tend to take it for granted. Here the model of food as fuel is controverted since fuel in the mechanistic system does not become the motor, it just runs through it. In the organic system fuel is transformed into the body.
- Food Design deals with putting things into our bodies through our mouths, a very intimate and personal act.
- Food Design is an intrinsic part of all of our daily lives to the degree that we consider making food choices to be an expression of design. This makes Food Design into a familiar and daily practice, not an optional or remote activity.
- Food Design has direct implications for our health, both good and bad. This makes it of vital importance to have a good relationship with and around food, and implies ethical considerations at many levels, mainly personal, political and economical.
- Food Design looks at all the actors and instances of food as a production, distribution and consumption system, further implying ethical considerations at various levels, including industry, commerce and culture.

Another component to consider in thinking of a specific didactics for Food Designs shifts the view towards existing disciplines which work with food in diverse ways and instance, so we can better understand the place and context of which Food Design forms part. In this sense we can consider three larger areas of academic and professional practice which work with food, namely:

- Food Sciences: biology, agriculture, engineering, chemistry, nutrition, technology, etc.
- Food Studies: gastronomy, sociology, anthropology, geography, psychology, etc.
- Food Services: culinary arts, hospitality, restaurantism and other commercial meal supplying activities.

Food Design is transdisciplinary in essence, which brings up the question of where this can best fit in an academic context. This consideration depends on many factors, including institutional, cultural, professional and market conditions, but in general terms basic options include:

- Food Design can be born out of regarding an existing discipline (E.g.: Food Design cluster starts out from an existing Industrial Design, Gastronomy, Culinary Arts, Food Science or Food Studies Program)
- Food Design can be created as a consortium of neighboring disciplines (E.g.: Food Design Program starts out from a multi disciplinary menu of course offerings or as an independent study pathway)
- Food Design can be born as its own entity, in its own right (E.g.: Food Design Center is launched on its own as an independent school, program or space, not reporting to other disciplinary entities)

- Food Design can exist at different academic structures and platforms (E.g.: Continuing Ed, Online, Executive, etc.) and different levels; undergraduate, graduate, post graduate.

Another characteristic of Food Design is its trans-actoral nature, transcending closed realms of stakeholders, visualizing decision making cycles, recognizing all the actors involved, from agricultural producers, industry, marketers, media, consumers, post-consumers, and all of these at their varying scales and powers. Food Design cuts across a multiplicity of interests larger than any other issue in our lives, with direct implications of global magnitude regarding climatic, economical and political consequences. This means business; this requires a full and all encompassing vision. Food Design is talking about this in a direct and action oriented manner, it is concerned with asking the right questions before trying to answer them. It is a mode of inquiry made specifically for getting the biggest possible picture regarding food and our relationship to it and our interaction around it. In this context, the idea of a Food Design Pedagogy is in various ways related to the forward thinking of many environmental and social positive movements, from Slow Food to Climate Change and all in between, we cannot ignore the writing on the walls, literally so in the Latin-American context. The connection is clear and meaningful, food is our most vital resource and its control is strategic, therefore to the degree that we have food independence, we maintain determination over our own lives. This offers us dignity and identity, two things we cannot negotiate.

As a footnote and example of the previous comments, Food Design in the Latin-American context recognizes the specific historical moment of the region, celebrating its attributes and uniqueness, while being respectful of limits and unwanted consequences. Latin America is a significant producer of food steeped in cultural richness and diversity, and is home to a variety of social and production models, many of which consider social innovation as a tool for growth, where others might view it as a threat for survival. This highly permeable, rapidly growing and relatively unstable territory offers a complex and fascinating scenario for Food Design action and interaction.

New food paradigms

Following are a loose string of thoughts which go in the same direction, one of redefining a new food paradigm, a new framework of how we understand, relate and interact with and around food.

A good place to frame this search can be by reconsidering one of the most famous of all food sayings: **you are what you eat!** If we turn this phrase around we can consider that **you eat what you are**. This means that your relationship with food is defined by the way you feel and think, the knowledge you have and the context in which you are immersed. Following this idea, which moves away from a conductivist attitude, we can take full responsibility for making the best food and eating choices and empowering ourselves as co-Food Designers.

The idea of being co-Food Designers is inspired by the Slow Food movement's vision for us being co-producers as opposed to mere consumers of food. By seeing ourselves as co-producers we share responsibility for what food is produced and for sustaining the community in which this food forms part of. By analogy, co-Food Designers could feel the right and responsibility to act by any means which can improve our relationship to food in the most diverse ways and instances, in any stage and instance. It is not that hard to feel empowered and motivated by this reality since we are all involved in many food choices every day; from what, where, when and how we eat, to a more critical reflection on *why* we eat. It is surprisingly not as clear as one would think since there are many more complex reasons at work regarding why we eat than meets the eye. Hunger and appetite are two different things, as are wants and desires. Beyond the physiological hunger that triggers our minds to want to eat, we might eat out of duty, guilt, pleasure, convenience, pragmatism, precaution, and other conscious and subconscious motives, so it is a relevant question to ask ourselves, it will put us closer to our best interests and practices.

Another implication for being a co-Food Designer is that we can look not only at the food product or material, but we can look at how we relate to it, meaning that it is as important to know how to eat as is getting the right food product on our plates. From eating at the right time, the right amounts, the right order, the right proportions, to knowing how to best chew and swallow, and afterwards how to benefit digestion are just some of the issues which "you eat what you are" brings to attention.

The idea of designing your way to better food choices can be overwhelming, given the immense amount of issues now at stake, the confusion and misinformation surrounding many of them, and the sheer lack of training or education we have in the majority of them. As a footnote, it is astounding yet taken for granted that something so important and meaningful as food is not taught/learned in a deliberate manner for the majority of people at this time in history. Traditionally, food knowledge and practice has been handed down through generations by direct means of family and social life. Generally in women's domain, food preparation and service has been an integral part of the specific culture it is immersed in, considering geographical, economic and other determining factors. As an example, in the U.S.A. prior to the 1970's, food preparation instruction was considered a core element in women's primary education, as part of the domestic skills curriculum known as "Home Economics." Of course, that venue was only suited to conveying the basic mechanics of food for family life, devoid of any critical social or political context. In the last half century this way of transferring knowledge has been altered, and we are in need of new forms of acquiring the tools, know-how, criteria and culture for better relating to food, and specifically, for producing happy eating situations in our daily lives.

If we begin to identify and analyze the many factors that come into play in our food lives, the prospect can really be terrifying because of the magnitude of the task and because of what some of those factors reveal. Just to name a few, we can start at the production end of the spectrum and begin to recognize food products in nature, and how those natural products go through a long sequence of interventions, both physically and economically. To consider what food products end up being good, clean and fair becomes a real challenge. To jump quickly to the other end of the spectrum, the food choices regarding how we actually eat what we finally decided to buy, brings up many other factors related to eating practices, its ergonomics and consequences. Quite a challenge from any perspective! Who does not long to have a traditional food life, where you don't encounter so many decisions, so many unknown consequences? Yet this is the reality many of us now face.

A quick look at the major food decision criteria: nutrition, cost, convenience and pleasure. Nutrition is one of the biggest issues when the food choices are necessary, since it directly impacts on our health and well-being. It is interesting to see the changes in nutrition beliefs and paradigms, as with the all too familiar food pyramid, which has suffered many transformations since it was first used in the 1970's. There is much discussion regarding nutrition and food, and just mentioned here as a consideration that we often base our decisions on information which is questionable at best and is relative regarding culture, context and personal factors.

Regarding cost factors in food choices, just to mention one of the most obvious issues, beyond the controversies of food access and food justice which we would all like to see resolved, the cost of food is a complex issue which must consider fairness and sustainability for all stakeholders. In the big picture maybe some food products should actually have a higher cost than it now does, but other products should have less, reflecting the complex system of subsidies, supply and demand, distortions in global labor costs, etc. This points to the intricacies and inequalities in many nodes of the supply chain, especially when put into the larger picture of economics, communities, health and long term considerations.

Food choices regarding convenience offers many opportunities for involvement and improvement for Food Design. It is worth noting in our daily lives what food choices seem natural and friendly (opening the refrigerator and finding a ready to eat delicious and nutritional food) versus food choices which are very inconvenient (being at work and having to spend time in source food which is does not feel nor taste good). In given contexts (more often in suburbia) it can be difficult and time consuming to acquire fresh and healthy

produce from fair and sustainable sources, compared to convenience and super stores. So it is not an easy issue, market and political forces at work, often against our best interest.

As far as pleasure goes, it is a wondrous thing how our bodies and mind change over time, and what we find tasty and enjoyable in a given moment can change, and vice-versa. This also relates back to the idea that "we eat what we are", so as our knowledge, understanding and experience grow, and our taste becomes more discriminating, we can associate pleasure with health in a personal and environmental sense.

All in all, food choices can be examined, understood, challenged and changed. Some with little effort, others at great expense and yet others seem unchangeable without a revolution of some sort.

This is as far as my thoughts on Food Design Thinking as a learning and teaching platform have come so far, hoping others can find it of use or motivation.