

Juli Capella

“We are rapidly entering a phase of humanity in which food increasingly resembles a product, elaborated to a greater or lesser degree”

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Cooking is Designing

Is designing a chair comparable to cooking a pizza?

Can we think of cooking as designing food? Both creative processes, designing and cooking, share some basic traits yet they also differ in the nature of their object and durability. Design as a projective tool serves the food environment, from extractive processes to the phase of actual ‘design’ and packaging. The food industry and new gastronomy are closely linked to design.

Similarities between Designing and Cooking

Can we consider a foodstuff as a design? Not at first glance. Primeval foods sprout in nature. Such is the case of fruit and vegetables. We can also contemplate hunting and fishing as activities for directly obtaining food. But how many people today eat what they themselves grow, harvest, hunt or fish? Hardly any. We are rapidly entering a phase of humanity in which food increasingly resembles a product, elaborated to a greater or lesser degree. From this perspective we may admit the presence of design in food, for all products are born of a more or less conscious process.

In the book entitled *Mechanization Takes Command*, Sigfried Giedion¹ mentions the Cincinnati slaughterhouse of the late nineteenth century as the birth of the modern assembly line. If, for instance, we consider farm animals as a source of food, we may conclude that the farm’s organisation and its procedures for mass fattening and slaughtering animals are genuine meat-producing projects, very similar to the process of producing objects in an industrial factory. Indeed, this important food sector is referred to as the meat industry, and as its methods become gradually sophisticated they increasingly resemble those of an industrial project.

What interests us here is to discover the relations between design and food or, to be more precise, between design and cooked food, the differences between designing and preparing food products. We shall also propose parallels between both creative processes, in order to establish the possible connections between those responsible for each, namely designers and cooks. Along these lines, we

¹ Giedion, S. *Mechanization Takes Command, a Contribution to Anonymous History*. Nova York: Oxford University Press, 1948.

shall take a statement made by Ferran Adrià in the late twentieth century as a starting point: 'To cook is to design food.'² Adrià went on to announce the basic difference between the two activities: the lifespan of the product obtained. However, an in-depth study of both in conceptual terms will once again radically shorten the distance between them, as we shall now see.

All creative processes comprise at least three chronological stages—idea, definition and materialisation—which are similarly found in the design of objects and that of food. The creation of a chair, for instance, begins with an idea or concept, which is then defined by a scale drawing, the choice of materials conceived for the appropriate production technique, often followed by the making of a mock-up and quite likely by a life-size prototype to verify its details. Last but not least, the third step is the manufacturing of the chair itself, following the chosen process: moulding, tooling, mechanised production, etc. The chair is ready to be distributed, sold and used. Much the same steps are taken in certain food production processes, such as that of a frozen pizza, in so far as we start from a concept or idea, followed by a technical culinary description of the procedure, i.e. the making of a recipe also based on the manufacturing processes of the company that has

ordered it and will produce it. This is the second stage, that of the technical description, that corresponds to the plans. The next phase is that of prototyping, that consists of a range of tests until the exact ingredients are found (the materials), the right quantities, arrangement, preservation, etc. Once defined, the article will enter the production phase before it is sold and used, or in this case, consumed. Designing and cooking therefore require similar qualities: creativity or innovation, imagination, technical capacity, a good memory and practice or experience.

And yet, let's think again of the creative process of a chair, though this time of a unique piece, in which case he who has the idea, executes it and sells it is one and the same person. This is a traditional, artisanal design process in which each chair will be different to the previous one; it may be similar, but it won't be produced by an automated manufacturing system or mould. On the contrary, this process will have more in common with the one used by a chef preparing a restaurant menu: once he has conceived the order of the dishes he will offer according to market availability, he himself will prepare and serve them. No dish will be like the one preceding it, although it may be similar. Here the coincidence between the process of making an object and an article of food is even greater. Industrialised products resemble industrial food, just as traditional handcrafted designs resemble home-made or restaurant menus.

As regards the ranges of food, we could consider the first (fresh food) and the third (frozen, unprepared ingredients) as raw material, and the second (tinned food), the fourth (precooked products) and the fifth (precooked deep-frozen pro-

2 Capella, J.
Tapas. Spanish Design for Food. Barcelona: AC/E
- Lunwerg 2013.

“Design offers permanent products whereas cooking offers perishables, products that at best have limited lifespans”



▲ The normality of difference. New alternatives to the mass production of objects. Diagram published in *Temes de Disseny* No. 19 (2002).

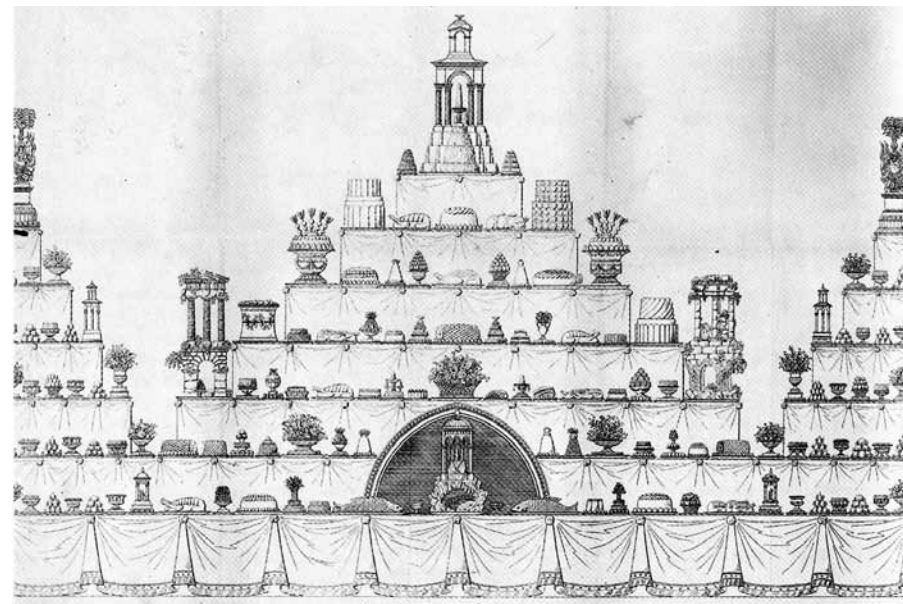
ducts ready to be thawed and eaten) as industrial produce. We should not forget though that some high cuisine restaurants regularly resort to the fifth range for their own supply.

Food as Ephemeral Design

In spite of the similarities between design and cooking, we also come across huge differences that separate the two disciplines. The first and most meaningful, as argued by Adrià, is the fact that design offers permanent products whereas cooking offers perishables, products that at best have limited lifespans. Long-lasting versus ephemeral. In both sectors, products have an expiry date, although we suspect that a chair will last longer, that it may be repaired and may even be handed down from generation to generation. A dish has to be tasted immediately, as it will lose organoleptic qualities as time goes by and will eventually decompose. Some products, like cured meats or wine, actually improve with aging, the Chinese delicacy of millennium eggs, for instance, buried in the earth for years to preserve their best flavour. Usually, however, food is eaten straight away whereas products can be used for longer periods. The ephemeral nature of food is a huge challenge for chefs, who find it difficult to repeat their creations exactly, given their dependence on fluctuations in the food market and on their skill or manual precision. Once it has been served, all trace of the dish disap-

pears, which prevents it from being preserved and analysed. The world of food is crueller than that of designed objects. There can be no museums of cooked dishes, however extraordinary those dishes may have been; at the most, only photos and recordings, that will never be able to fully capture their sensory quality. We cannot delight in the original taste of the cakes made by Marie-Antoine Carême in the late eighteenth century; only his lush drawings have survived (as well as a cook he worked as an architect). We shall never taste the flavour of the Peach Melba dessert invented in 1892 by Auguste Escoffier at the Savoy Hotel in London, or smell the fragrance of the Tournedos Rossini, his tribute to the Italian composer. All we can do is repeat his recipes, over and over again. We can, however, enjoy one of the original Thonet No. 14 chairs of 1859 kept in a museum, and if we have purchased one at an auction and it happens to be in good condition, we may even be able to sit on it. Above all, we can continue to faithfully reproduce it forever more. The same goes for the Cesca Chair by Marcel Breuer and for recent chair designs by Jasper Morrison. But nobody will be able to taste the deconstructed potato omelette invented by Ferran Adrià and Carles Abellán in 1996, only see reproductions of it.

Just a note on reproducibility: the world of cuisine is more generous when it comes to sharing discoveries and disclosing recipes, even personal tricks, and the fact that a proposal is successful enough to be reproduced or adapted by others is cause for pride; the world of design, on the other hand, zealously preserves



▲ Drawings by Marie-Antoine Carême, chef and architect. Illustrations from his book *Le Pâtissier royal parisien, ou Traité élémentaire et pratique de la pâtisserie ancienne et moderne de l'Entremets de sucre, des entrées froides et des socles*, J. G. Dentu, Paris, 1815. Online edition [accessed: 15 March 2015]. Available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k852393jr=Le+p%C3%A2tissier+royal+parisien+ou+Trait%C3%A9+%C3%A9l%C3%A9mentaire+et+pratique+de+la+p%C3%A2tisserie+ancienne+et+moderne+.langES>.

technical documentation, presents patents and threatens whoever dares to copy or be inspired by somebody else's proposals with a lawsuit. The profitability of mass reproduction in the industrial field makes this protection necessary.

Another substantial difference between design and cooking lies in their contents. In the case of product design, objects are made to fulfil a purpose that is more or less practical, thus combining form and function. Utility is usually one of the keys to defending their virtue. There is unlikely to be a market niche for a chair that can't be sat on (although we must admit that useless or uncomfortable chairs do exist and some people actually buy them). The gastronomic world works with food and also has a form-function relationship (Carême himself insisted on paying attention to taste and to presentation). While the appearance of food assumes increasing importance given that we eat with our eyes, what is important is to achieve the right taste. Yet food's purpose of pleasing is accompanied by another crucial though latent issue, nutrition, and here we come across another discrepancy: mankind can live without chairs but not without eating. We can sit on the floor but we must eat at least twice a day, whatever we fancy, and we don't even need to cook. Over and above the pleasure we take in food in developed countries, our instinct makes us eat several times a day (it has been calculated that we will have approximately a hundred thousand meals in a full lifetime).

Design to Assist in Cooking

We have outlined the possible similarities and differences between designing and cooking. But we could change our point of view and analyse design as a tool that assists gastronomy. Design is a tool of creation, and can therefore be applied to any creative human environment. Practically everything around us has been designed, whether we're aware of the fact or not. If we review the world of food we'll see how it also fits in with this premise.

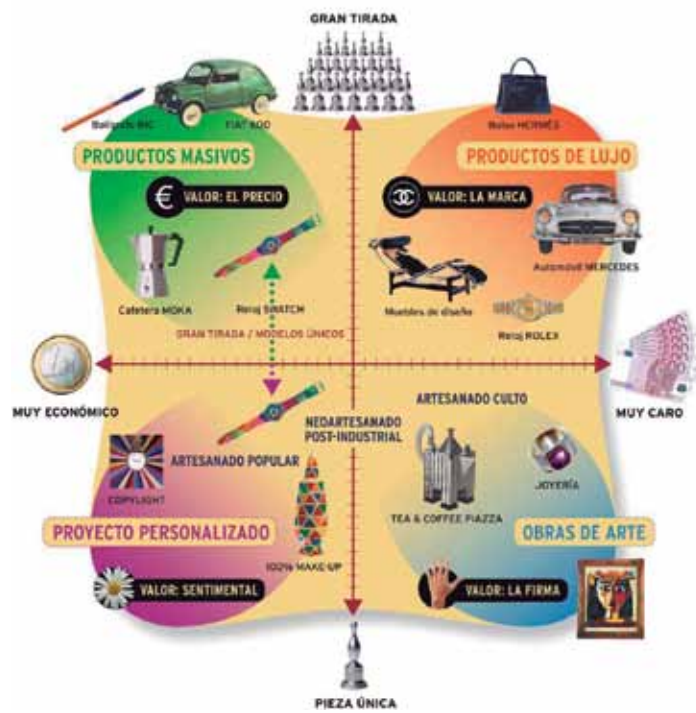
In the first place, design comes to our help during the process of obtaining food. The actual organisation of a kitchen garden can be understood as a project. It too has been designed. The reed tripod used to support tomato plants, for instance, is an artefact that improves their growth. No doubt the arts of fishing and hunting, with their different devices, are areas for displaying the most specialised and pertinent designs. The ingenious and lethal invention of the humble fish hook has yet to be surpassed.

Following this reasoning and bringing it to our days, we will realise that there can be no food production without applied design. As we have mentioned regarding the meat industry, all other sectors—from bakeries to prepared dishes—organise their production in a similar way to product making. The process concludes with a crucial design contribution: packaging and labelling. This specialisation of design is a huge incentive in the food trade, one that will obviously require the

assistance of a specialised professional and will not be the responsibility of the chef.

Design is also present in the two main food environments, private and public: the home and the restaurant. Design assists in the kitchen (domestic or professional) by providing an appropriate supply of knives, frying pans, slotted spoons, tongs and a thousand and one specialised products, from serge to a spherification kit. The designs used in kitchens resemble those used in laboratories and in hospitals. They are precise instruments, strictly functional, made with resistant, easy to clean materials like glass and steel. But when food comes out of the kitchen and on to the table, whether it be our dining-room table or a table in a restaurant, its container becomes bolder, more formal and decorative. Dinner services, glassware, cutlery and other tableware shape a space of creative freedom that has been developed over centuries. The decorative arts in porcelain, wood, metal and glass have historically been expressed on the dinner table, offering functionality in food tasting, but also contributing symbolic and artistic values to meals. The austerity of kitchen equipment turns to artistic expression on the table, and one traditional design speciality is devoted to making the utensils chefs use to create their dishes and serve them.

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THE NORMALITY OF DIFFERENCE
New manufacturing alternatives to mass-produced objects

(from left to right, top to down)

LARGE EDITIONS

MASS PRODUCTS

Value: Price
BIC pen, Fiat 600, Moka coffee pot, Swatch watch
Large editions/Unique models

LUXURY ITEMS

Value: Brand
Hermès Bag, Mercedes Car, Rolex Watch, Design Furniture

VERY CHEAP
VERY EXPENSIVE

CUSTOMISED PROJECTS

Value: Sentimental
Popular Craftsmanship
Copylight, 100% Make-Up, Unique Pieces

Post-industrial new craftsmanship

ART WORKS

Value: Signature
Highbrow Craftsmanship
Tea & Coffee Piazza, Jewellery

UNIQUE PIECE

▲ “The normality of difference. New alternatives to the mass production of objects.” Diagram published in *Temes de Disseny* no. 19 (2002).

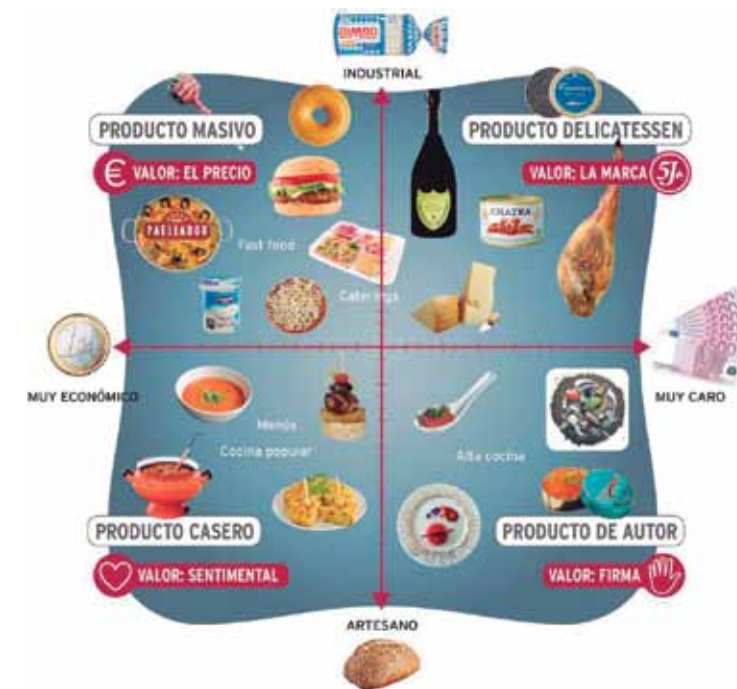
This interrelationship has been brilliantly examined by designer Martín Azúa in the shows entitled *Foodjects (Diseño y Nueva Gastronomía en España)* and *A la mesa! (Diseño y Comida)*, and in the exhibition *Tapas, Spanish Design for Food*, organised by Spain's Public Agency for Cultural Action (AC/E), and the book of the same title.

Over and above the products for the kitchen and the table, we could also speak of the recent collaboration between interior designers and chefs to plan restaurants and bars. But that's another (long) story.

Values of the Food Product. Outline According to Price and Industrialisation

The attached diagram intends to offer an overview of food products that will help us understand their complexity, highlighting their most outstanding values. Let's think of an x/y plane in which the degree of industrialisation of a prepared food is situated on the y-axis. In the lower area we will find a more sophisticated product, one that is handmade and exclusive; in the upper area, a highly industrialised product with barely no trace of man's hand. The purchase cost of the product is established by the x-coordinate or abscissa: on the left, cheap and easy to buy goods; as we move to the right, goods become increasingly expensive.

If we abide by these two values, industrialisation and price, we will be able to fit a range of food products currently on the market in the four quadrants. In the



Values of food products, according to their economic value and traditional or industrial production

(from left to right, top to down)

INDUSTRIAL

MASS PRODUCTS

Value: Price
Fast food

DELICATESSEN FOOD

Value: Brand
Caterings

VERY CHEAP

VERY EXPENSIVE

HANDMADE

Value: Sentimental
Menú, Popular cooking

AUTEUR FOOD

Value: Signature
Haute cuisine

HANDMADE

▲ “Values of food products, according to their economic value and traditional or industrial production.” This diagram is adapted from a previous one, developed to analyse the values of products according to their price and circulation, published in *Temes de Disseny*, no. 19 (2002).

upper left quadrant we find cheap and highly industrialised goods, neither raw materials nor fresh produce but prepared food such as frozen pizza or paella that look just like the traditional versions, dairy produce like yoghurt or cheese in portions, and low-cost baked goods (sliced bread and doughnuts are perhaps the most paradigmatic examples). Funnily enough, in this section we come across copies of other more expensive and traditional products such as La Gula del Norte brand that offers a reasonably priced substitute of expensive elver eels. La Gula del Norte was patented in 1989 by a Spanish firm and is based on Japanese surimi.

As regards the restaurant business, in this quadrant we find catering services such as those used by large companies and hospitals. Yet the main feature in this space is fast food, internationally recognised and cheap. In contrast with home-made hamburgers, those produced by fast-food chains are often frozen and are always precisely calculated. In short, we could say that the prevalent values are the low cost of goods, which is only obtained thanks to automated production, low to medium quality materials and mass production.

In the opposite quadrant, the lower right-hand corner contains antithetical groups of food that value quality, specificity, originality and customised food. Price is no obstacle. Here we situate the production of small traditional workshops such as bakeries and chocolate manufacturers. This is the natural space for high cuisine restaurants, raw materials and slow food, and dishes are prepared on a daily basis, at a cost. At the extreme we find *auteur* cuisine, the space of *avant-garde* experimentation, exclusive and at a higher price, where value is attached to the name of the chef. This space resembles that of art, where the artist's signature guarantees the quality of the work, and is illustrated by the dishes created by elBulli, Mugaritz, Diverxo and El Celler de Can Roca, for instance.

The upper right-hand quadrant contains food products in wide circulation though high in cost, quality products such as a leg of ham (from an acorn-fed pig) that has had a long curing process, or most good wines. It is important to have a recognisable brand that will back the goods in this section, which is that of delicatessen and gourmet products with huge sales that have preserved certain traditional procedures despite resorting to industrial processes. Genuine craftsmen are unable to maintain such high production levels and to promote themselves on the national and international markets.

Last but not least, the lower left quadrant contains cheap and individually made food articles in the domestic sphere. We could say that most traditional homes offer these qualities and value traditional dishes: mum's cooking, filled with loving ingredients. But in this section we also find dish-of-the-day restaurants: finger food, tapas, leftovers and inventiveness that offer tasty and affordable recipes. The term 'grandma's cooking' has great sentimental value.

But the diagram can be analysed differently. If we consider processes, production is concentrated in the upper part and preparation in the lower; industrial products above, and handmade, ephemeral (i.e. instantly cooked) products

below, which include most food products save for fast food. And if we think in terms of the creators of meals, we should proceed as follows: while in the upper part we discover industrial formulas, or at best traditional companies that make gourmet products but no authors, in the lower part we find cooks, be they mums, grandmas or acclaimed chefs awarded Michelin stars.

We also come across some funny paradoxes. A tin of genuine Beluga caviar can be as expensive as a tin of imitation caviar created by Adrià and served at elBulli, for instance. Price is neither here nor there, as in the first case what is sought is the tasty uniqueness of scarcity and, in the second, an exciting *avant-garde* experience.

The classification of food products in a flat diagram such as this, where only two variables are taken into account—quantity and price—is no doubt limited, and several other factors could be added to provide it with a third or even a fourth dimension: quality (that can be found in cheap and expensive products), aesthetics, lifespan, etc. These extra elements would present a multidimensional picture, revealing the rich complexity of food as a product and transcending the parameters defined by this printed diagram.