ISSN 2572-9764 02

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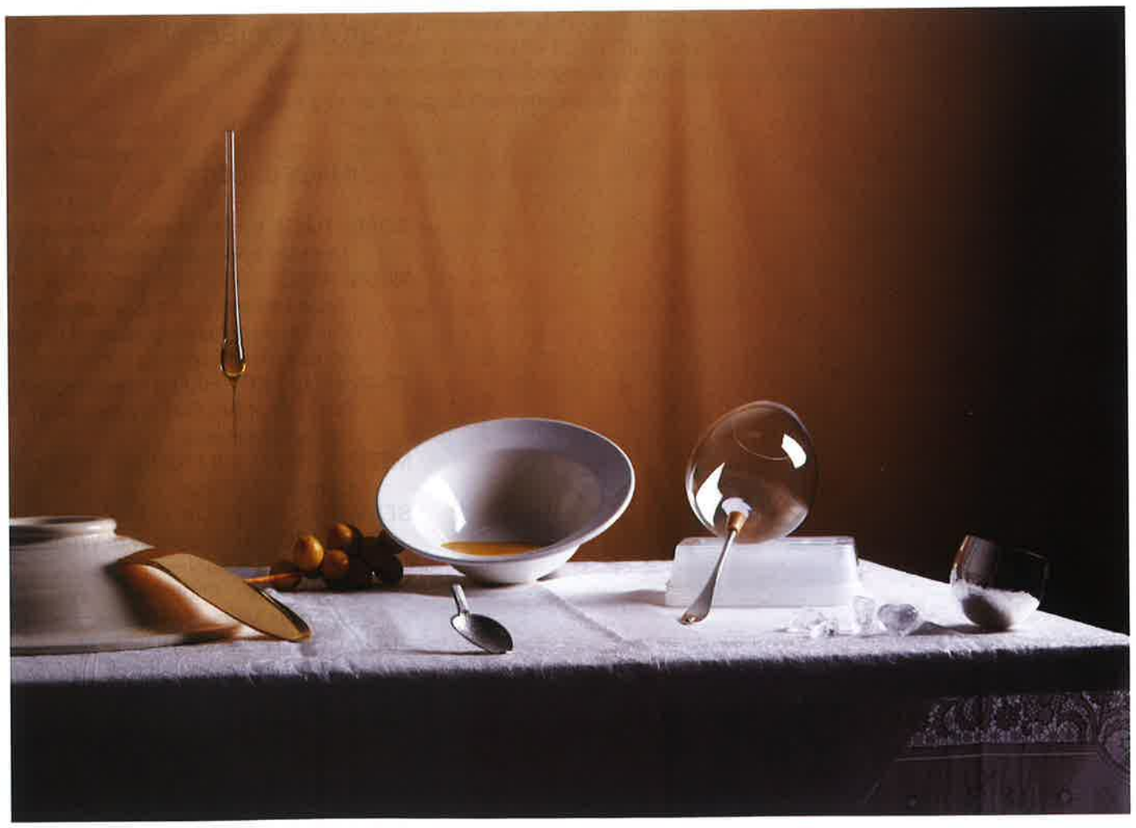
The Future of Food

Knife, Fork, Spoon, Hand



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TEXT BY ANDREAS FABIAN & CHARLES MICHEL

Licking, sucking, touching, slurping. When did the explicit enjoyment of food become a guilty pleasure; a naughty, rude act? Aren't the pleasures of food some of the most important of human experiences, contributing both to our physical and psychological wellness? We can't deny that some of the most delicious food experiences often come from sucking fingers, eating with our bare hands, or licking a cone or even the plate. Social etiquette and table manners, mediated by the utensils we use to interact with food (cutlery and plateware), appear to be taking us away from certain pleasures of eating instead of getting us closer to them.

Andreas Fabian and Charles Michel met through the Crossmodal Research Laboratory at the experimental psychology department of Oxford University. When Fabian asked Michel, "What is the best compliment you've ever had for your cooking?" he responded, "When people lick the plate!" Ideas immediately connected and they started creating a series of intuitive eating utensils such as a "Licking plate," "Hand Bowl," and "Goûte spoon," that a year later, were exhibited at the Science Museum in London in an exhibition on *Cravings*.

Their collaboration aims to remedy the modern-day disconnection to our senses (and food) through the design of unconventional cutlery and plateware. By proposing an alternative for modern tables, touching and even licking food could be made an elegant act. Integrating a tool as part of the sensual experience of food can implicitly heighten our awareness of the beauty of eating, hopefully taking the diner closer to food and its pleasures, rather than away from it.

In this article, the authors will explain the rationale behind their approach to food experience design through innovative eating utensils —Fabian from the angle of design and philosophy, and Michel from multisensory perception and culinary art.

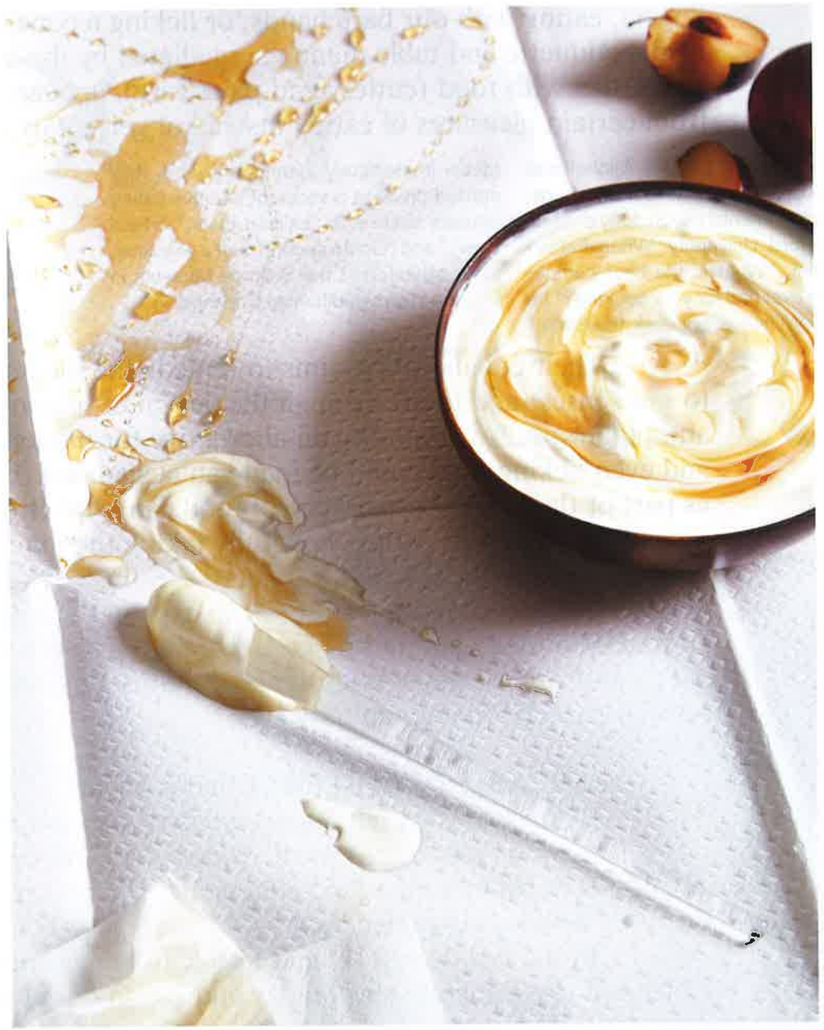
THE TASTE OF CUTLERY, Charles Michel

'Optimal design will increasingly come from reverse engineering the processes of the mind' (Spence & Gallace, 2014)

Let's begin with a bold statement: The best recipes don't make the most delicious experiences.

In the last decade, a field of scientific research coined *gastrophysics*, a blend of experimental psychology and cognitive science, has provided evidence that the pleasures of eating are not just about the physical and molecular properties of food or drink. It can be said that flavor is a perception (not a sensation) created in our brains (not in our mouths), informed by the integration of information coming from all our senses. Vision, touch, olfaction, audition and, of course, taste, all play a role in modulating our experience of foods. Eating might be the most multisensory experiences a human can live, yet, when designing foods, we mostly think of what happens in the mouth: texture, aromatic complexity, taste balance, temperature. While these aspects play a fundamental role, the "everything else," such as expectations, atmosphere and social conventions, model our experiences much more than we imagine.

Amidst the complexity of food experience, when it comes to designing flavor, there is one approach that is rarely acknowledged and probably from which there is most to gain in terms of quality of ritual, purpose and enjoyment: the tools we use to contain and bring food to the mouth. Indeed, cutlery impacts our enjoyment much more deeply than we think, and its influence is broad, affecting taste perception, value perception, attention and the way we engage with the food.



The "drop"-shaped Goûte spoon by Michel/Fabian was designed for eating creamy foods: it aims at creating a pleasurable experience in the hand and lips, and emulate the sensation of licking one's fingers.

For example, in an experiment we conducted in 2015, we served diners at a large dinner the same food, but half of them with banquet cutlery, and the others canteen cutlery. Unaware of the manipulation, we asked diners to rate how flavorful they found the food, how beautifully presented and plated they thought it was, and how much they would pay for it. Surprisingly, ratings were significantly higher from customers given the banquet cutlery. People were willing to pay 15% more for their food, found it to be more delicious, and found the presentation more beautiful.

But why? The shape and overall design of the two different cutlery sets were very similar. The weight of the banquet cutlery, however, was three times heavier than the cheaper counterpart.

This experiment, published in *Flavour Journal* together with Professor Charles Spence and Carlos Velasco, is just one example of the dramatic changes that cutlery can affect on the eating experience, or may we say, on the flavor of food. Other research from Spence's Crossmodal Research Laboratory at the University of Oxford has shown that the color of the cutlery can affect how sweet or salty food is perceived to be. The same goes for plate color. Plate size has been shown to change how much we eat, and how holding a plate in your hand can change how fast and how much you end up eating.

Despite this evidence, food designers at large seem mostly concerned about products, recipes and the art of cooking—which is a noble endeavor—but fail to acknowledge the complexity of eating psychology, and the importance of the "everything else." Thinking about cutlery to enhance pleasure, guide healthier consumption, and even model the emotional content of eating, is probably one of the most effective ways to make diners engage in different ways—whether that's via changing the social dynamics at the table, or implicitly guiding them towards a more attentive consumption behavior.

We should also remember that many humans today eat with their bare hands. Yet restaurants and canteens—key spaces that shape our everyday well-being—impose cumbersome lumps of metal that hundreds of people may have put in their mouths. And if not metal cutlery, diners are offered single-use plastic objects that add to modern society's mindless waste. But ask yourself this: what is the most successful restaurant brand on earth, the one that feeds more people than any other?

Across towns and cities worldwide, McDonald's serves millions of meals each day to be eaten... with hands. No cutlery. Is that part of their success? Could their success be owed to the fact that they are one of the few restaurants where adults (and children) can indulge by being allowed to eat food with bare hands? Another example of a world-famous staple that should be eaten with hands is pizza. Ask an Italian how it should be consumed; always with hands! There is even an etiquette on how to slice the pizza, how to hold it elegantly and bring it to the mouth—those who learnt the Italian way know that the pizza's juices hold better this way, and each morsel is much more delicious than they could ever be if the pizza were to be eaten with cutlery.

By now, I should have convinced you that the role of cutlery in modern life and social etiquette should at least be put in perspective. Of all the technologies we interact with every day, one of the most intimate (and one of the few we put inside our bodies, apart from the toothbrush) has barely made any evolution in the last few centuries. Innovations in cutlery are made mostly with visual considerations in mind. In our opinion, visual beauty should result from functionality, gesture and the material used to achieve these.

Today, the design of the tactile experience of food is pretty much limited to in-mouth stimulation despite the fact that our hands and lips are two parts of the skin organ that represent the most significant amount of somatosensory cortex in the human brain. And hands and lips could be the focus where cutlery and plateware design could be invited to bring an interesting addition to the multisensory world of eating. Innovating in the way we approach the act of eating could also have a fundamental impact on our food intake and health while maximizing the amount of pleasure we get from eating.

DESIGNING MANNERS, DR. ANDREAS FABIAN

A social etiquette has emerged around the consumption of food in the West that requires the use of a set of tools we refer to as cutlery; e.g. a knife for cutting and a fork and spoon to transport foods from the eating vessel to the mouth. We are socially and culturally guided to learn their use as a function of subtle changes in their size, shape and material, and develop a set of manners that often depend more on social approval, rather than on what enhances the pleasure of food, ultimately creating a distance between the food and us.

Cutlery has become an extension of our hands in the act of eating, an essential part of our daily experiences. Cutlery has evolved with our eating habits and the development of technologies: the 'toolness' of hands has been slowly externalized in the form of utensils that allow us to bring food to the mouth.

By its very nature, tableware requires handling and use, which raises issues of social interaction, manners and etiquette. Animals eat their food without ceremony, often bloodily. Humans prepare their food carefully, and their eating is refined and ordered, according to cultural codes and social precedence.

The sociologist Norbert Elias sees the development of table manners in the broader context of civilization. Of particular interest is the connection he draws between table manners and language: "… there being people so delicate that they would not wish to eat soup in which you dipped it (the spoon) after putting it into your mouth. This délicatesse, this sensibility and a highly developed feeling for what was embarrassing, was at first a distinguishing feature of small courtly circles, then of court society as a whole. This applies to language in exactly the same way as to our eating habits."

Elias makes clear the way in which, historically, people came to pay the same attention to eating manners as to their way of speaking and writing. Would we nowadays also draw a connection between 'délicatesse' (or language) and manners when observing the booming industry of good quality street food (and fast food) where people eat with their fingers, holding bowls and plates in their hands? Might this trend, in the long run, also influence tableware design and how we eat at the table?

It has been suggested that in the earliest stages, the need for restraint and codified manners was driven by courtly pressures during the reign of Louis XIV and his predecessors at the French court. The introduction of mirrors in the 17th century and the precedent set by the court at the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, may have played a key role in the process of refining our (table) manners. Mirrors enhance our social awareness by allowing us to see ourselves as others see us—separating body and mind. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe how between the 18th and 19th centuries, European aristocracy, followed by the bourgeoisie, started to serve food in a new way. The so-called 'French style' was replaced by the 'Russian style' of serving food: as still common in most restaurants, individual plates of food were served to individual diners instead of a communal dish shared by guests. This clearly represents a shift towards individualism.

The very short distance from "the hand to the mouth" is not only a measure of manners but of how those manners are a metaphor for the history of civilization—representing our cultural values in

a particular civilization in time. Our culturally determined table manners influence the design of cutlery, and the design of our cutlery, in turn, influences our table manners and etiquette. For example, the introduction of the fork as an eating utensil in the 17th century became a 'fashion statement' and then became widely popular.

Cacao drink served in the "Hand bowl" prototype designed by Michel and Fabian. The vessel has a pointed base; hence its function can only be fulfilled when held in the hand. Through the sense of touch, in the palm of the hand, the user experiences sensations of weight, form and temperature.

An indication of how much cutlery has become woven into the fabric of our culture is to examine how it has crept into language: many common sayings relate to cutlery, often to the spoon, illustrating its particular importance. For instance, The Who, in their 1966 song "Substitute," parodied the expression 'born with a silver spoon' with "I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth," relating material (silver/plastic) to status (high/low).

Regardless of the material used to make it, when we eat with a spoon we are using an intensely intimate instrument: aside from feeling it in our mouths and on our lips, it's worth reminding ourselves that we often use spoons that others have previously had in their mouths. Artist Richard

Wentworth described something of this intimate and extraordinary phenomenon, albeit discussing plates: "The strangest thing about plates is that when you sit down to eat you get your own, but the moment you finish it's somebody else's. Plates operate in a complex world of manners, sharedness and separation – a public/private thing, enormously widely experienced. This makes them very special."

Tableware exists within a highly complex field in terms of how it is experienced and how it generates meaning. For example, the way we handle the spoon between thumb and fingers nowadays is defined by manners and etiquette. Handling a spoon instinctively (as a child would), now seems inappropriate and has become culturally determined. In this sense, the spoon cannot be defined only as an eating utensil but must also be reckoned as an instrument of social distinction. Furthermore, a small drop of soup on the bottom of our spoon might cause our entire body language to shift lest it falls and leaves a mark on a table cloth and, more significantly, a stain on our social reputation.

The form of cutlery might change over time depending on technology, fashion and imagination, but its function goes far beyond its purely practical purpose of bringing food to the mouth. Despite the omnipresence of eating tools across cultures, it seems that in recent centuries they have been designed with mainly aesthetic, ergonomic and functional purposes, according to the rituals and social manners of the table.

How interesting could it be to think and design the opposite way—designing social manners according to innovative eating implements and technologies?

Andreas Fabian's "spoon-glass" is a hybrid product, fusing the functions of a silver spoon and a wine glass to develop a new language of interrelations between aesthetics, design languages and functionality in ways which formally, and conceptually, challenge our habitual practices and rituals of dining implements and experiences.