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Interdisciplinary Sandwich

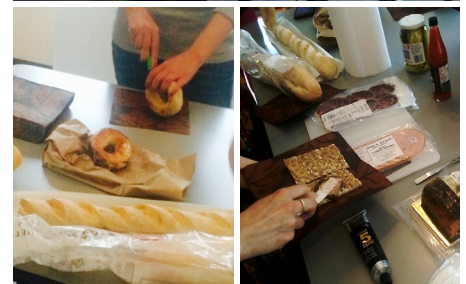
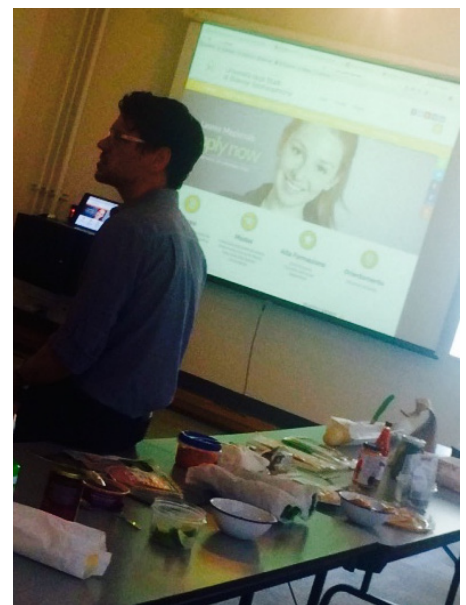
It may seem crazy to think that making a handheld lunch—bread, fillings, condiments—could possibly bring out academic insights, but sometimes food has a way of doing just that.

For the “Interdisciplinary Sandwich” workshop at OCAD University in Toronto on June 20, 2016, participants were asked to riff on the idea of the Vietnamese *bánh mì*, in such a way as to embody their own personal research questions, conundrums, or scholarly challenges.

As a multi-layered, multi-cultural sandwich, a *bánh mì* is already a food that raises questions about historical culinary practices and their contemporary enactments. Is it Asian, with its pickled vegetables and *nước mắm* (fish sauce), chopped chiles and BBQ pork? Or is it French, with its baguette base, pâté variants, and mayonnaise? And what of the implicit colonial heritage—or the fact that *bánh mì* can be found and appreciated in Montréal, Oslo, and Ho Chi Minh City alike? Does it lose its *bánh mì*-ness when it travels? Or like pizza and sushi, does it become an icon of the convergence of local and global, tradition and innovation? It has been said that all dishes are authentic to the place and time of their making, in which case a *bánh mì* is at home wherever it is assembled and eaten.

Whatever your responses to these eco-gastronomic questions, the design students at OCADu were all-too-willing to explore them in detail, through the conception, prototyping, iteration, and consumption of their *inter-* sandwiches. The language of design and gastronomy merged into one on that day, as we shared perspectives about material culture, mental-manual practices, and reflexivity.

In one case, a student made a sandwich with all the ingredients she knew she liked, and another with all the ingredients she was skeptical about. In the end, she put the two together, letting familiarity and pleasure contaminate neophobia and disgust. Another woman, all-too-aware of her lack of time during any given day (between commitments to school, family, and work), made four little sandwiches with as many foods as she could reach, so she could ‘have it all’ while respecting her



on-the-go lifestyle. One fellow—interested in design process and pedagogy—sat back and watched everyone else make their sandwiches before stepping up to the table to prepare his own. During the discussion, he said that he was far less interested in the *outcome* of a given design engagement, but instead fascinated by how decisions get made and enacted in the course of a process of *doing*. For him, the taste of the thing was moot—how he (and others) got there was the intriguing part.

As we discussed the ways in which the sandwiches did or did not manifest the students' research questions, it became ever more clear how foods (and other designed things) both represent and construct themselves over time: 'representation' and 'meaning' are always braided together in complex ways. For example, some students started out with what they thought was a clear sandwich concept, but as they put the pieces together and reflected on what was happening in real time, they had to modify both the concept and the sandwich itself. Others just leapt in to the process, and as tempeh was smeared with aioli, or dried seaweed sprinkled on capicollo, the symbolic significance of the food appeared in front of them. *Making* was intuitive; *thinking* emerged over time.

Towards the end of the workshop, I asked the group if anyone had made a sandwich that was just, well, *whatever*—and had then came up with a justifying rationale later on (i.e., when I asked them to explain their design rationales...) A few hands tentatively rose, and when I cheered their honesty, a few more did the same. This is normal in exploratory and speculative work—and to acknowledge that symbolic meaning is often formally attributed to things *after* they are made is a good and appropriate gastronomic learning.

In the days that followed, OCADu professor Nancy Snow told me that many of the participants noted they felt a renewed sense of momentum towards their academic pursuits. Some had found that the workshop unblocked questions or issues that they were facing. Some enjoyed taking a 'break' from schoolwork in order to have a convivial lunch. And some relished the idea that food and design can come together in the form of gastronomy—a new concept for many of them.

Most exciting for me was that, in the space of just a few hours, gastronomy had become a tool to shift mental and physical energies around and to unlock creative capacities. As food always does, it reminded us of the deep connectivity between mind and body, past and present, and sensation and cognition. No high-concept pedagogical tools needed—just a few nice things to eat, spread out on a table.

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Montreal, Québec



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