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INITIATIVE ABOUT FOOD
& FOOD SYSTEMS

/ Australia /

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A Few Food Scripts

The notion of “food script” is one that comes from a performance-based understanding of gastronomy. It is a way to imagine the written or unwritten rules and patterns that influence and describe how food systems behave. In other words, one can think of the various contexts, situations, and ‘realities’ of food as being composed of both guidelines for interaction and myriad possible enactments of those guidelines. Any moment in which food is involved, therefore, is both scripted (structured, ordered, and pre-determined) and improvisational (variable, messy, and open-ended).

Many things—including various authorities and power structures—tell us that this is not the case. These voices would say that there is a social order that controls how life plays out, and that there are laws and principles of the world that are unbreakable. (Unsurprisingly, this way of seeing things is often in the best interests of the agents behind those voices.) Nonetheless, innovation, mutation, and evolution just keep on happening—and what are those processes if not creative and unpredictable riffs on what we thought was *the way things are and will always be*?

Many of our scripts are extremely useful—the rules for passing through urban intersections, our shared values about workplace behavior, the recipes we inherit for making excellent desserts. They provide helpful instructions and create reassuring boundaries, both of which humans need. Yet they can also restrict our freedom to play, as well as the potential to discover that which is new or under-developed. This is why naming things as scripted-and-improvised—and engaging with that inherent tension—is a valuable approach when dealing with food and food systems. The dynamic movement between guidance and evasion, or between reiteration and renovation, is what leads us to discovery. It also offers the potential to change *the ways things are* when we are not so happy with that status quo.

At the 2016 Symposium of Australian Gastronomy in Melbourne, food scholar Josh Evans and I gave a joint plenary presentation that proposed a few of these ideas and how they might be useful in wider scales of food practice. Josh’s work at the Nordic Food Lab over the past years served as substance for imagining scientific experimentation with food as a set of improvisations around various scripts. Culinary and laboratory guidelines, principles of chemistry, biology, and physics, and the objective of producing gustatory pleasure are all different kinds of scripts—some more formalized in text, some more socio-culturally embodied. From my own experience in gastronomy, food pedagogy, and performance theory, I used the plenary time to set up a few frameworks for understanding ‘scriptedness’ as a written or unwritten proposal for action or reaction. (Examples included recipes, shopping lists, and menus, but also musical scores, street signs, and academic research methods....)

For Josh and me, more important than the words and images we expressed and showed was the potential for the symposiasts to pick up this model and run with it in their own food practices. Our interest

in talking about food and food systems through scriptedness and improvisation was to let it be useful for others, whether they be theorists, practitioners, eaters, or all three at once. (As indeed most of us are....)

The script/improvisation model can help those who observe, analyze, and describe food systems to perceive and interpret what is going on, in ways they might not have previously done. If they were to go on and engage in those systems through various food practices, the model might help them identify opportunities for intervening differently, potentially disrupting dominant systems of power and finding new, more sustainable, and more equitable ways of 'doing' food. And for every eater, the concept aids in becoming attuned to the potential enactments around food scripts, including how they both help *and* restrict us. It can therefore let us feel the confidence and reassurance to grow, make, serve, and consume food in ways that are culturally relevant and socially appropriate to our own conditions.

(Of course, it should be noted that most of the people who were at the Symposium already felt a pretty high degree of social, cultural, political, and economic empowerment. But if that sense of privilege can be spread among a much broader demographic—perhaps through the work we will continue to do in food—it might contribute to upending the comfortable positions that both Big Food and the empowered middle classes have come to occupy.... We'll see.)

In what follows, I have gathered a few snapshots of various food moments, images that seem to suggest the potential for something to happen next. I interpret them as invitations for a subsequent improvisation to take place, or perhaps as documents of a performance that has already happened. It's up to you, really—the reader/perceiver of this text—to decide how to interpret them. What you do with them, what you think, make, or feel afterwards, well that's yet to be seen.

Wait, one second.... Suddenly it's all starting to sound very familiar, no?

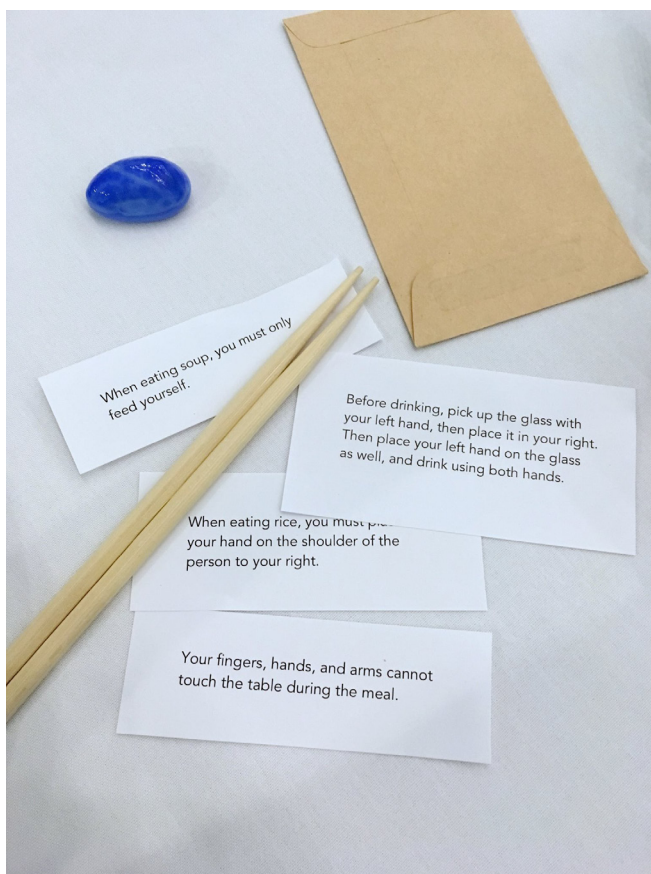


photo: Lisa Vockenhuber/Finespitz.at

The rules of the table are only rarely written down, generally in etiquette books that are more often used as references for our more formal food occasions. Nonetheless, each of us seems to know what to do—more or less—when faced with a plateful or bowlful of food, along with some eating implements and a cohort of fellow diners.

What happens when new and unfamiliar rules are introduced into that setting? And what happens if some of those rules interfere with or contradict each other, or bump up against the unwritten guidelines that are already embodied within us?

On Day III of the Symposium of Australian Gastronomy, I curated a set of imposed scripts for the midday meal. Each eater at our "Lunch by the Rules" received an unmarked envelope bearing four different dining instructions. What they chose to do with those rules—obey, improvise, interpret, or rebel—was up to them.

At some tables, the rules became the focus of conversation and behaviour. At others, the scraps of paper were twisted up and chucked on the ground. What would you do, when faced with such a situation? More importantly, why?

This page out of Josh Evans' notebook from his time at the Nordic Food Lab in Copenhagen, Denmark, shows a flowchart for making "insect garum." (*Garum*, an ancient Roman condiment, was made from fermented fish and fish entrails, and was probably quite similar to nước mắm and other forms of fish sauce commonly used in various Asian cuisines.)

The branches of this flowchart-structured 'recipe' suggest various moments in the process of making insect garum when decisions need to be taken by the maker. Different elements are separated, and then different culinary and scientific techniques are enacted with or upon them.

What does this script say about what took place in the Lab? Do we see Josh's hands wielding a chinois sieve, dumping waste material into the bin, or tasting the 'final' results? Do the spaces of the Lab, its equipment and surfaces, and Josh's colleagues and visitors figure in what happened? And what of the microbial and enzymatic agents that must be at work at the same time? What scripts guide their actions—and how might they be improvising around those scripts, unbeknownst to the human observer...?

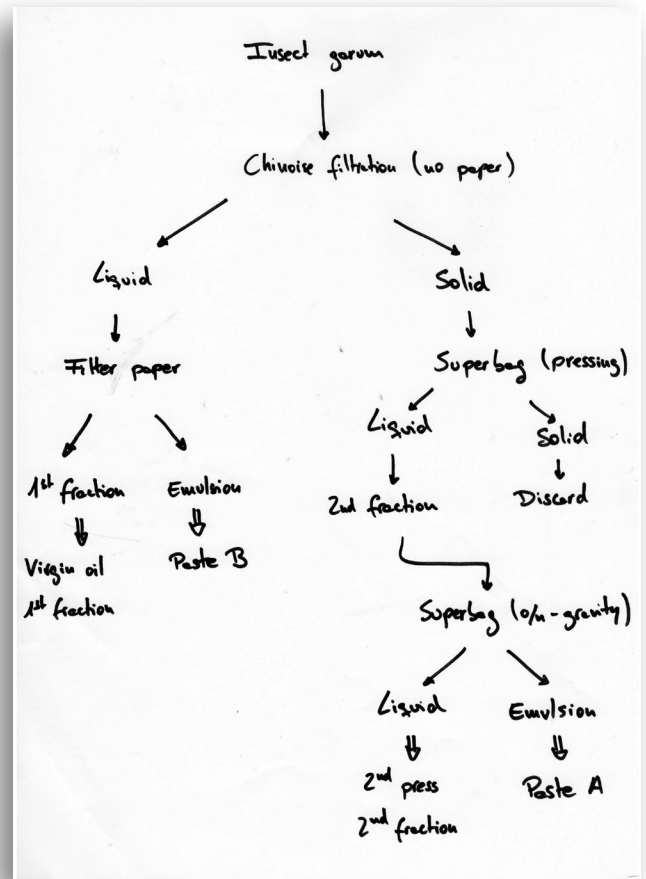
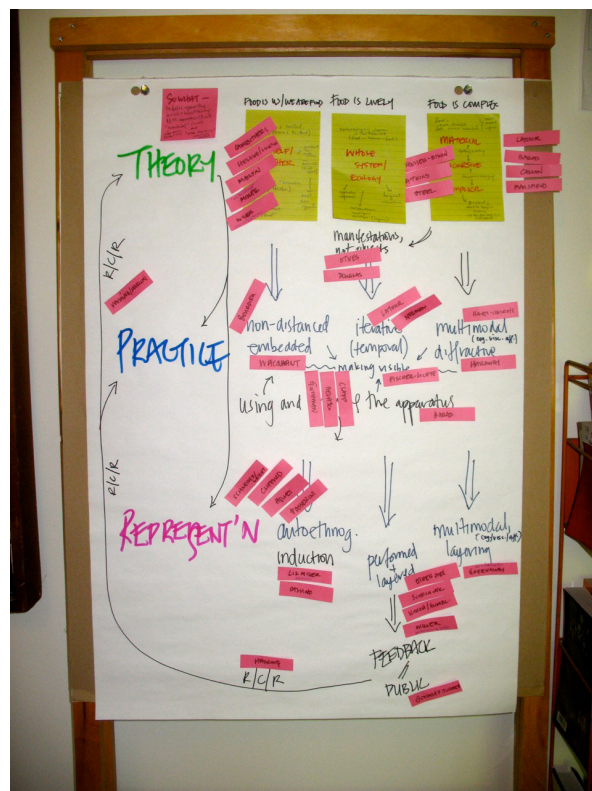


image: Josh Evans/Nordic Food Lab



Another kind of flowchart, from another kind of food research. In this case, a flipchart page with words, arrows, and scraps of Post-It notes that together attempt to describe the process of doing "research-creation-reporting," a hybrid method of academic work.

First conceived and championed by several institutions in Montreal, Québec (Canada), research-creation was an acknowledgement that both the head and hands participate in any kind of scholarly practice. Moreover, when material engagement (like that within art, engineering, and food-making) is actively brought together with the social sciences and humanities, new kinds of knowledge and understanding can be generated.

Research-creation blends theory with practice, and when "-reporting" is appended, reflection and feedback (from readers, audiences, and peers) are added to the mix. But then when you try to document that process in a clear, tidy way (like in the form of a script on a flipchart page), the result is not so simple. Messy? You betcha. And that's the beauty of having a set of guidelines and the permission to improvise—they give you the space in which to make a mess and then see what comes of it.



photo: Lisa Vockenhuber/Finespitz.at

Look, it's David, sitting in a chair, in what seems to be a university classroom.

Look, it's the Canadian director of an international knowledge-exchange initiative about food and food systems, recalling stories of "hero food" and cured whale and kimchi and dehydration, from when he was in Timor-Leste and Norway and Korea and Ecuador. What is he about to say, here in Australia?

Look, it's an actor in a polyvocal performance about food and foodways from around the world. But what about the other voices? We can't really sense them. And is there any food matter creating effects in the moment when this photograph was captured? What is the audience doing? Aren't they performing too?

Show and Tell (me what you know) took place on December 3, 2016, at the University of Melbourne, during the Symposium of Australian Gastronomy. There was a script, there were many improvisations. Lots of voices and other, more quiet things made their presence known. What does this particular document tell of that performance? What does it prescribe for the next iteration of what happens?

On the final night of the Symposium, chef Annie Smithers served up a remarkable feast, riffing on the food-related texts of Charles Fourier. A 19th century French philosopher and contemporary of Brillat-Savarin and Grimod de la Reyniere, Fourier wrote about utopian socialism. He also coined the term "gastrosophy," as both a critique of and response to those aforementioned gastronomes, who he found to be too prescriptive and rules-bound for his own liking.

As the meal commenced (with radishes, salt, and some very good bread and butter), one of my tablemates picked up this tiny whole radish and skewered it with a safety pin. She leaned in close to me, and attached the edible corsage to my lapel. What do you suppose suggested to her that she do that?



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