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# The Future of Tableware and Cooking Vessels: Some Predictions and Practical Experiments

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# The Future of Tableware and Cooking Vessels: Some Predictions and Practical Experiments

*Ken Albala*

In the five centuries since the advent of the fork as a standard eating utensil, the evolution of tableware and cutlery has been fairly stagnant. There have been periods of proliferation in the size, number and type of cutlery – witness the rigid formality of the Victorian era with its vast array of knives, forks, spoons and dishes for separate courses, or even the Baroque era with its fanciful elaborate serving vessels. There have also been periods of relative informality, when meal structures and ingredients were simplified and so too were the utensils on the table. The Arts and Crafts era, as well as the early eighteenth-century *nouvelle cuisine* movement, sought to streamline tableware by reducing the number of forms required for service and multi-purposing simple but functional items.

48 We are currently in another period of casualization, when, in terms of cuisine, increasingly local produce takes precedence over exotic ingredients, traditional techniques over experimental, the craft of cooking over art, and consequently our cutlery is also becoming simpler, reduced to its basic minimum, as are plates, which come in two basic sizes, and stemware, of which one or two simple forms serve for every beverage. Moreover, if we trace developments of the past few decades in the industrial food sector, it is safe to say that products are increasingly being designed which require no utensils whatsoever. There have long been pizza, hot dogs and hamburgers, which normally demand a paper plate, Styrofoam carton or paper wrapping. But the most popular new products are meant to be eaten by hand, preferably one hand, on the go, while standing or typing at one's desk, driving in the car or watching television. Hot pockets, prefabricated burritos, yoghurt in tubes, shakes in plastic cups. Not only have utensils, plastic or otherwise, become superfluous, but an entire generation may be completely bereft of the manual dexterity demanded for successful engagement of the knife and fork. Culinary historians may look back on these past few centuries as a strange anomaly in the history of table manners, the singular era when people employed unusual metal implements to convey food to their mouths.

I am not condemning these developments, only bearing witness. Nonetheless I do believe it is time for the culinary vanguard to assert their influence in curtailing the total and utter demise of tableware, and that includes the dinner table itself. It is not merely that without a table the social relations that commensal gatherings engender will likewise wither. It is not merely that waste in the form of packaging will proliferate as individuals can choose whatever they like for every meal, pop it in the microwave and

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eat whenever they please, tossing the containers of every single meal. Nor is it merely nostalgia for proper formal service with dozens of superfluous vessels designed for single recipes, which only the wealthiest of households could afford. I am speaking here of true evolution of entirely new eating vessels, utensils and even cookware.

There have been a few fascinating new forms worthy of mention. I will ignore the flimsy plastic spork, which was really only intended to save money for fast-food restaurants and was never really good at either spearing or scooping food. But recently there is a company selling an object called the knork. It is a hefty stainless steel fork with an edge on one side sharp enough to cut food, but not so threatening that you would fear putting it in your mouth. I own a set and use them all the time. Although this is obviously only an adaptation of a regular fork, it is beautiful and well balanced and I think represents a step in the right direction. It might actually prove indispensable for one-armed people.

Another new item, brilliant in conception but an utter failure in execution, is the obol. Imagine a large bowl tilted slightly forward with a lower chamber designed to hold milk and an upper chamber that holds cereal. The idea is that you scoop cereal from the upper chamber into the lower as you eat, preventing the cereal from getting soggy. Ignore the fact that breakfast cereal is actually engineered specifically to prevent it from going soggy; this is clearly intended for slower eaters who want to avoid even the slightest chance of limp corn flakes. The only problems are that they are made of cheap plastic in garish colours and that the specially designed spoon looks very much like a baby rattle. So this, in my opinion, is only another step toward the total infantilization of consumption. It is a large baby-bowl, and would go perfectly with a sippy cup for juice.

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To their credit, many experimental restaurants in the past few decades have used uniquely designed tableware to accompany their molecular creations. For example, at Alinea in Chicago a few years ago you might be served bacon on a trapeze, spun liquorice on a television antenna, or my favourite, a toilet bowl-shaped white ceramic vessel at the bottom of which were little bits of shellfish, to consume which you had to practically place your entire face into the bowl, only to realize that the whole contraption was set atop a pillow of lavender gas slowly deflating, which enveloped the diner in a fragrant cloud. Aesthetically, it worked brilliantly. But this is not the kind of utensil that will ever make it into ordinary restaurants, let alone homes.

So what I would like to present for this talk are a few ideas describing what might become new forms of cutlery, tableware and cooking vessels for the future. In all I have attempted to avoid replicating the industrial aesthetic of mass production, stark whiteness, the bland uniformity which has dominated restaurant service and made its way into private homes. Giving everyone the same exact plates and bowls, I think, gives us the illusion of democratic equality. In fact people don't want or need to eat the same amount of food. Why should portions and the vessels that hold them be uniform? These forms are executed in clay simply because that is the medium in which I work

best, but – with one exception – they could be wood, glass, metal or anything else with inherent beauty and durability. Clay, obviously, is fragile, but it is an abundant and affordable natural resource. Each vessel is also designed to solve a very specific gastronomic problem for which the radically horizontal nature of contemporary vessels has obviated any possible solution.

Moreover, these objects have been designed with the fundamental premise that all material culture is a reflection of larger values, aspirations and fears inherent in culture on the whole. For example, an obsession with contamination leads to increasingly sanitary utensils designed to privatize space and shield it from the germs of others. Portable food obviously reflects a culture concerned with speed and efficiency and a work ethic that marginalizes time spent leisurely poking at food with curious implements. A culture in which shared communal feasting – and thus shared group experience – is valued will pick from a common platter, seated in a circle as equals. Thus these objects are as much a prediction about the future direction of our civilization as they are specific utensils intended to address my own idiosyncratic culinary pet peeves.

In the future, due to what I perceive as our increasing psychological need to exercise our teeth in ways that satisfy our primal urge to destroy food that resonates in our head, people will increasingly demand a device that insures long term crunchiness of fried foods. Why will crunch be psychologically more important in the future? The idea is predicated on the Freudian notion that as civilization progresses we are asked to suppress a greater number of libidinal urges, among which is the hard-wired instinct to destroy and consume food. Crunching on some level replicates the advantageous behaviour that conduced toward our survival as a species: cracking open tough nuts and seeds, bones and other outer casings to get at nourishing food. Today bones are increasingly removed, food is processed so there is no need to break things open with our teeth, yet we still get satisfaction from this behaviour and at some level require it. Thus modern manufacturers have artificially put crunch back into food. Think of the way fast-food hamburgers are abetted with lettuce and squirt blood-like ketchup when chomped on. This is no accident. Or think of the ingenious engineering that devised a potato chip of the optimal size and shape to maximize resonance potential, for the loudest possible crunch.

To address this problem in the domestic setting with cooked food, I offer you the first object (overleaf). Its form is dictated first by the difficulty of keeping crunchy fried food from going soggy on a horizontal surface as moisture escapes from below. Second it prevents the food from being completely inundated by a sauce that is either on the same plate and runs into it, or even worse is dumped on top of it. The problem of maintaining the crunch is solved by keeping the food elevated above the surface of the plate, which is accomplished by a series of small wheel-thrown pointed nubbins of varying height that allow the least possible contact with the fried surface of the food. Thus steam escapes. The problem of sauce is also solved by a separate, permanently-affixed shallow bowl which holds the sauce and into which food can be dipped.



The object is also multifunctional. It can hold french fries or nuggets – which I believe will be the food of the future, as well as tempura-coated vegetables, panko-crusted fried shrimp, even crunchy batter-coated croquettes or fully encased miniature hamburgers or hot dogs – foods that we can expect to arrive any moment. None of these requires cutlery and the entire meal can be carried by an individual anywhere without the disastrous consequences of putting these foods and sauce on a regular plate or, even worse, eating them from an enclosed container or wrapped in paper which destroys any possibility of crunchiness. One completely unexpected use is for small pancakes which, in my opinion, become sodden and disgusting if syrup is poured over. These are eaten by hand and dipped into maple syrup. Artichokes also work nicely, as any excess water from steaming or boiling can drip down onto the plate below.

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For my second proposal, in the interest of environmental sustainability, I decided to design a utensil that requires minimal energy input to manufacture, would be sturdy enough for a long-term use, but would also cater to the increasing desire for portability in food. Our desire to eat while going somewhere or doing something else, shows no sign of abating. This is essentially a hollow bamboo tube with an interior nodule burned out with a hot iron rod, and a spoon shape carved into the tip. The bamboo serves as a natural insulator so your fingers aren't burned. The advantage it has over thermoses is that it can't break and, if it does, it's very easy to grow in your backyard and make

new ones. It also doesn't give the food a metallic flavour like most portable drinking containers. It has a strap so you can sling it over your shoulder and a cork stopper so the contents don't spill. The narrow aperture also makes sipping much easier than with a wide-mouthed rim and facilitates swallowing solid contents from the tube, which would otherwise need to be fished out with a spoon. Most importantly, the bamboo tube can be microwaved, unlike metal containers, so if it's carried to work at room temperature it can be popped in a refrigerator and then go straight into the microwave oven. Obviously you can also drink coffee or even cold beverages from it as well.

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The third object addresses what appears to be a decided trend away from recipes that are cloudy, muddled and contain many ingredients thrown onto a plate or in a bowl where they mix into an indistinguishable mess. Eventually all the flavours mix so thoroughly that they lose their individuality. As long as the quality and texture of ingredients remains a preoccupation in gastronomic circles, a vessel that would allow them to complement each other without getting lost in a soup or stew would be an aesthetic boon.

The design also allows food to be eaten in a specified sequence of contrasting flavours from lightest to strongest, yet within a single vessel presented at the table in one course. It also contains a heating chamber for hot coals or Sterno flame below so the contents never get cold. So it is a kind of brazier soup pot, something akin to the Mongolian hot



pot, but meant for an individual diner, and not requiring the entire process of dipping ingredients one by one into the communal pot and then fishing them out. But the aesthetic effect is similar in that each course flavours and adds to the subsequent ones.

The separate courses are maintained distinct by use of several successively smaller interlocking bowls with perforations below. This allows steam to constantly rise up from soup in the base, but never lets any ingredient overcook or fall apart. In the lowest chamber is placed a stock which is kept at a low simmer with a few lumps of coal or Sterno beneath. Immediately above it is a skein of noodles which steam gently to cook. Above them is meat, cut into thin slivers, which is also cooked with steam, which drips down and flavours the noodles and eventually falls back into the base to be reheated. Above the meat are choice vegetables which require only the lightest steaming to retain integrity. The base might be beef, chicken, shellfish, absolutely any form of protein would work. Moreover the sequence can be altered or even abandoned altogether. A series of dumplings might be contained in each chamber. Or a delicate egg custard in one chamber, a whole oyster in another, a wild mushroom in another. The drama of individual ingredients gradually revealed as the diner removes each successive chamber is intended to heighten the entire experience. The fragrant steam also wafts continually before the diner, preventing the inevitable cooling and pallor that results from a bowl of soup being left open to the elements.

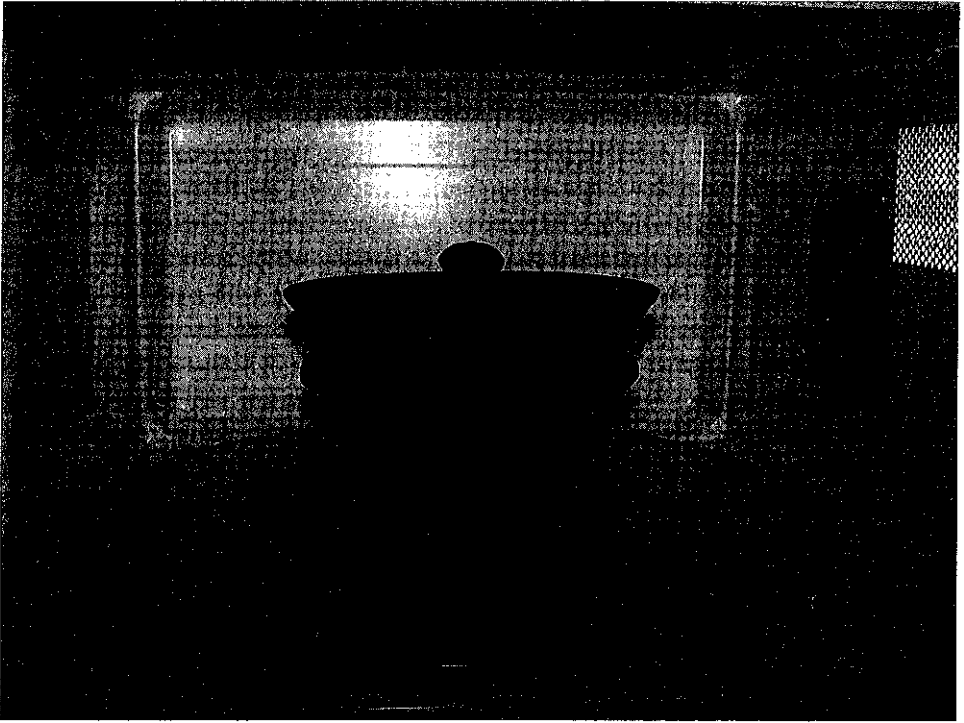
Nor would the chef be limited to Asian recipes. A chicken stock beneath some small steamed tamales with vegetables on the upper layers would work. So too would ravioli in the middle chamber, with perhaps fresh peas in the top. The trick would be for the chef to time how long it took to eat successive courses and to make sure each was perfectly cooked right about the time that layer was opened.

The device might even be used for a series of sweets, with perhaps a sweet almond-based stock in the base, a rice pudding above it, rose-flavoured confections above that and a small stick of cinnamon on top just for aroma. It is essentially a deconstruction into several courses of something that would ordinarily be separated.

I wondered who would want to keep such an unwieldy vessel taking up precious shelf space, when it occurred to me that each part also serves another function. The base alone could be used to keep any meal warm like a little chafing dish. Any one of the upper chambers can be used as a miniature colander, and the bottom stock chamber is simply a bowl. In other words each separate part serves another function in the kitchen. I also considered how such an implement might be produced on a larger scale and for people who don't happen to have hot coals readily available. An electric heating element of exactly the kind used to heat tea kettles would work perfectly.

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One development in contemporary cooking that seems almost certain to continue in its steady decline is the use of a conventional oven. There are many reasons for this: time involved to heat it up, energy costs, and particularly the tendency for it to heat the whole house. This was once an added benefit, but with central heating, not to



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mention global warming, the oven may well become a relic of the past. Where I live in California, the oven is completely impractical for more than half the year and in the future many other places will probably experience comparable summer heat as well.

At the same time, though, we have seen a growing interest in baking bread, not perhaps for daily consumption, but as a leisure activity for do-it-yourself types. The bread machine was a solution for some people in recent past decades, but it is entirely unsatisfying for those who want the pleasure of mixing ingredients, kneading dough and watching it rise. You basically dump the ingredients in the chamber and come back hours later to a freshly baked cube-shaped loaf. For the very same reason that in the mid twentieth century a completely idiot-proof cake mix never caught on because people wanted the illusion of having actually cooked something with the self-delusion of creative input – adding fresh eggs and oil gave the impression of cooking – it seems unlikely that the bread machine will remain a feature of our material culture in the future.

How to solve these seemingly irreconcilable tendencies: not wanting to use the oven but wanting to bake bread and enjoy the satisfaction of having actually made the bread yourself? Not long ago I would have never even suggested a promising future for the microwave oven. In fact I condemned it as the work of the devil. It obviously cannot brown food, though a few experimental models have recently attempted to do just this. They are combination toaster ovens and microwaves, so they can cook food with waves then heat with electric coils to brown food. An ordinary microwave, as it turns out,



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does cook vegetables nicely, bakes a potato, and even foods like eggplant or zucchini in a covered casserole. But it is hard to imagine it browning a bread crust.

Another solution presented itself to me, not with a hybrid oven, but using a very ancient technology inspired by archaeological finds. In ancient Egypt there was a very practical problem with the use of wild leavened starters for bread, and especially the use of emmer wheat. Such dough tends to absorb a lot of water at first; then, as it proves, the moisture is gradually released, making a dough much stickier than at the outset. This complicates the task of transferring the loaves into the oven on a peel. Baking many loaves at once in a wood-burning oven and shifting them around with a peel often causes them to deflate as they are moved.

These problems were ingeniously solved by baking loaves in what amounts to a small cone-shaped oven within the oven. At first these cones were probably just set into hot ashes to bake like a Dutch oven, but the long narrow cones were almost certainly used inside another oven. I think this device was perhaps suggested by what in ceramics is called a saggar, an enclosed ceramic chamber in which you put the pot to be fired, which prevents pots from sticking to each other. (These are especially helpful with glazed ceramics.) The Egyptians were the first to use copper and cobalt in their bright blue enamelled wares – which would require a saggar to stack in a kiln. The bread cone is essentially the same idea. You let the dough rise in its own clay chamber, which then is simply placed in the pre-fired oven to bake. Because it is cone-shaped, the bread can be easily slipped out afterwards.

Why not adapt this basic technology to a microwave? The advantage in my mind is that most materials that can be used in a microwave don't conduct heat well. Obviously metal can't be used at all and plastic stays cool. Glass has such a slick impermeable surface that it would prevent a crust from forming on bread. Unglazed ceramics, exactly the type you would find on an oven floor or in a clay testa, Romertopf or similar vessel, actually heats in the microwave and draws moisture from the surface of the bread. So an unglazed baking cone, shorter than the ancient Egyptian vessels, and covered so it facilitates an upper crust, was the answer.

A regular bread dough was kneaded in the vessel itself, left to rise and baked, so to speak, in the microwave on low temperature. Since it cooks from within, one need not worry about a gummy interior. And the clay did indeed draw moisture from the surface creating an exterior crust. Other shapes are also possible; a low oval shape would also fit better into a microwave well.

In any case, these are simply a few experiments that suggest ways that material culture might change in the future given evolving eating habits and social structures, cooking technologies, and the need to find more sustainable materials for tableware and cooking vessels.