

Figure 1. Typographic Mise en place. Source: Carolina Belluzzi M.G., Alessia Carcamo, Andrea Vanni et al., 2020.

# EATING WITH TYPE: DESIGNING A LETTERPRESS WORKSHOP BASED ON TYPEFUL THINKING APPROACH FOR FOOD EDUCATION

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Starting from the observation of an evident precariousness in the contemporary relationship between man and food, this contribution is meant to show a new proposal of workshops for children in the K=12, Grade 4–5 category, aimed at stimulating in a creative and experiential way a critical and conscious thinking about food. Starting from the methodology of Artful Thinking and Object Based Learning, the project shifts the pedagogical focus from the interaction with the artistic object to the interaction with the design object; and in particular with the movable type, identified as an activating element of the educational process in the transition from Artful to Typeful Thinking. The Typeful Thinking workshop therefore represents a potentially innovative food education tool that leverages on the concretisation of critical thinking through five thinking routines that go from conceptual abstraction –through a physical artefact, the letterpress printing– to their tangibility.

typeful thinkin / letterpress printing / workshop / educational design / object based learning



Figure 2. Letterpress Workshop at National Central Library in Rome. Source: Slab, (E. Scotucci, A. Vendetti), 2020.

## PREMISE

In contemporary society, the relationship between man and food is part of a complex system that origins economic, social, cultural and value impacts (Corazza, Scagnelli 2016). The dangerous precariousness of this system makes innovation an imperative: new challenges require new learning methodologies (OECD 2018). Pedagogy, assisted by the discipline of Design, can contribute to the pursuit of social innovation, able to satisfy shared needs (Mulgan et al. 2007).

One of the most fertile experiences of this activity is precisely the use of workshop as an educational learning tool (Marzotto, Caotorta 2007); moreover, already in the past (Freinet 1973) it had been demonstrated that the use of typographic composition should be considered a valid pedagogical tool. In recent years, attention has been paid to the relationship between typography and food (Hyndman 2015), with a strong emphasis on the experiential question. Against this background, the research project to be presented here aims to highlight the possibility and effectiveness of the design object (typefaces) and its semantic value as a pedagogical tool for reflection related to the theme of food and its education through design-oriented workshops (Freeman et al. 2014).

## Typeful Thinking

### Routines

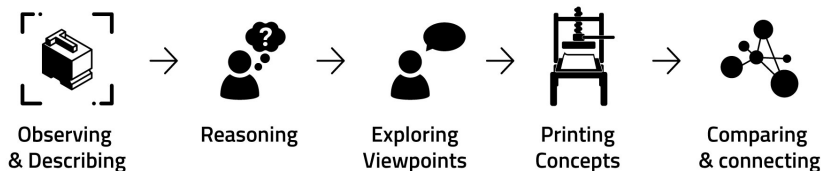


Figure 3. Typeful Thinking Routines. Source: Carlotta Belluzzi Mus, Alessio Caccamo, Andrea Vendetti, 2020.

In order to obtain effective outcomes from the project, pedagogical workshops belonging to the methodological field of Object Based Learning (Chatterjee, Hannan 2015) and Artful Thinking Program<sup>1</sup>—focused on up-close, hands-on and physical interactions (Schultz 2019)—have been taken as a model. Compared to the state of the art of the above mentioned methodologies, the innovation element offered is the substitution of the artistic object—which implies the univocal fruition of the artefact—to the design object—whose fruition can match an activity—as an activating element of the educational process: from Artful to Typeful Thinking. In particular, the movable type is chosen as an iconic element of visual communication design.

### THE TYPEFUL THINKING WORKSHOP

The location chosen for the experimentation is the movable type printing house and research centre Slab<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2). The activities designed by us are aimed at a heterogeneous group of 10-15 children in the K=123, Grade 4-5 category, and require experts skilled into pedagogy, nutrition, design, and letterpress printing.

The Typeful Thinking workshop is based on the sequence of five stages (Fig. 3) able to stimulate in a creative and experiential way the critical and conscious reflection on the food issue starting from the statement that morphological attributes of the

letters, like the roundness/angularity of the type shapes represent a key element in the crossmodal matching of tastes with shapes (Velasco, Woods, Deroy, Spence 2015).

### **Thinking routine 1: Observing & Describing**

It represents children's first contact and interaction with the type-object. The structure of the See, Think, Wonder<sup>4</sup> model has been chosen for the definition of the first in-depth activity. In the specific case, the object of investigation is a series of single movable types chosen on the basis of possible morphological analogies able to stimulate an association/reflection on the food issue. The selection is made up of 15 wooden types between 12 and 15 typographic lines (55–70 mm), arranged above a tablecloth (Fig. 3), which offers a visual context aimed at highlighting that the topic of the workshop is food. In order to represent the single typographic set in a coherent and neutral way, the letter 'R' was chosen, as it formally lacks direct references to the food—which is obviously not possible with other more connoted letters, such as 'I' or 'O'. The group of children, once the kit is shown, will be asked to answer three key questions: what they see; what they think; what they imagine compared to what they have just seen/touched. For instance, a bold typeface could be associated with a fat food, rather than a thin typeface that could evoke, instead, a light food (Velasco, Hyndman, Spence 2018).

### **Thinking routine 2: Reasoning**

After the first phase, the group of children will be asked to make a first reasoned formulation of free thoughts. The basic structure follows the Claim, Support, Question. A series of statements will then be listed and recorded and will become the basis for the final reflection of the step in progress (Question). For instance, a child looking to a bold slab typeface could be brought to think that this typeface is linked to “hamburger” or similar food because of the visual connection between the form and the brand identity of former famous Fast Food Chain. Children and educators will establish a dialogue on peer with the statements made, trying to highlight, strengthen, or modify the thoughts expressed at the beginning of the activity.

### **Thinking routine 3: Exploring viewpoints**

The reference structure, in this case, is that of the Headlines. With respect to Artful Thinking, the participants are asked to try to synthesise the reflection of the



Figure 4. Example of printing during a Letterpress Workshop at National Central Library in Rome. Source: Slab, (E. Scotucci, A. Vendetti) 2020.

previous phases through an adjective related to the world of food that describes in a punctual way the concepts expressed in the Reasoning. For instance, if a child has developed a concept about fatty or unhealthy food, as burger, he may choose the adjective "fatty" or similar (Velasco, Hyndman, Woods, Spence, 2015). In addition to the choice of the word itself, the children will be asked to choose the typeface that best expresses the concept they have identified.

#### **Thinking routine 4: Printing Concepts**

The greater detachment from Artful Thinking takes place at this stage through the materialisation of thoughts. The group of children will then be asked to compose the chosen adjective with the identified types and proceed with the printing process (Fig. 4). The final output will be the printed version of the chosen adjective composed with the letterpress technique. This stage plays a very important role in terms of pedagogical impact, as participants have the opportunity to follow step by step the process of conceptualisation, design and materialisation of their thinking. This possibility is offered by the letterpress printing, which by its nature allows a total control of the design phase (Caccamo, Vendetti 2019).

## Thinking routine 5: Comparing and connecting

The artefact thus produced will become the object of reflection in the last stage of the laboratory experience. In this Thinking Routine, the children, starting from the observation of the printed concepts, will develop a series of thoughts based on the structure of Connect, Extend, Challenge. In this phase, it will be possible to reveal the first effects in terms of understanding the food issue on the workshop participants. In particular, the dialogue with supervisors and educators will in fact lead the children to confirm or reconsider thoughts and beliefs, in order to replace the instinctive and superstructures-driven thinking with a more conscious and objective knowledge of the characteristics of food: taste, quality, and health.

## CONCLUSIONS

This contribution aims to highlight the possibility of an implementation of the Artful Thinking methodology through the introduction of a thinking routine, identified with letterpress printing. The past scientific results concerning the effectiveness and flexibility of the practices of Artful Thinking and OBL allow us to look with optimism at possible successful outcomes that, of course, will have to be verified as soon as the emergency situation due to Covid-19 will allow it. However, the research of new inclusive, experiential, and hands-on pedagogical approaches has already shown the capability to stimulate the minds of young people (Chatterjee, Hannan 2015). For this reason, unless later denied or extended, we believe that the introduction of the design artefact—and the related Typeful Thinking approach—as a pedagogical tool for active use in food education can actually play a role as an accelerator of the critical abilities and a proper knowledge of nutritional and cultural facts for the children involved.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 The Artful Thinking Program—originally developed in 2013 by Project Zero at Harvard University—uses the figurative power of art to develop students' thinking arrangements, enhancing not only the critical thinking of the individual, but also his or her learning ability.
- 2 Slab is one of the Italian realities involved in safeguarding and spreading the history and culture of typographic printing. Founded in Rome by Elettra Scotucci and Andrea Vendetti in 2019, it has already organised letterpress printing workshops. In particular, Slab organised letterpress workshops in the Biblioteca Centrale Nazionale in Rome.

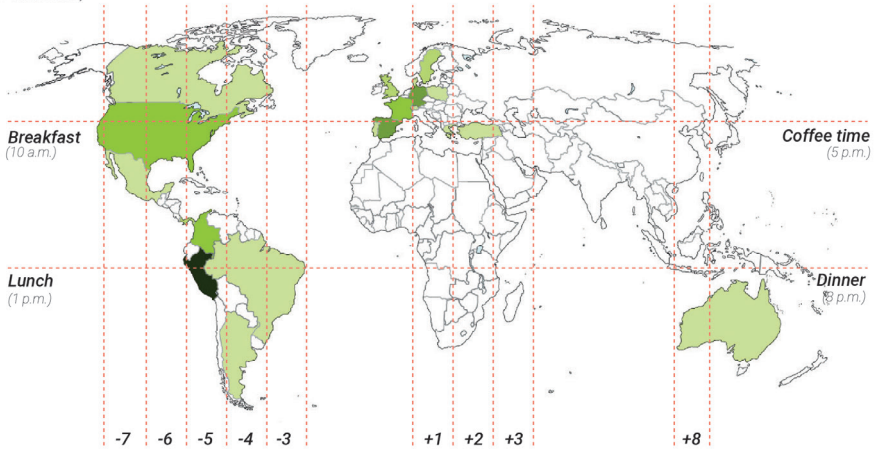
- 3 The K-12 system stands for "from kindergarten to 12th grade". This equates roughly to a school starting age of around five through to Grade 12 at around the age of 18. The system is broken down into three stages: elementary school (Grades K-5), middle school (Grades 6-8), and high school (Grades 9-12).
- 4 The structures mentioned are the result of the development of Harvard's Artful Thinking Model through Project Zero (2013). For further details, structures are available at: [http://pzartfulthinking.org/?page\\_id=2](http://pzartfulthinking.org/?page_id=2)

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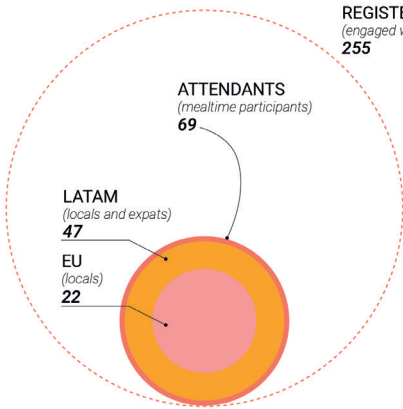
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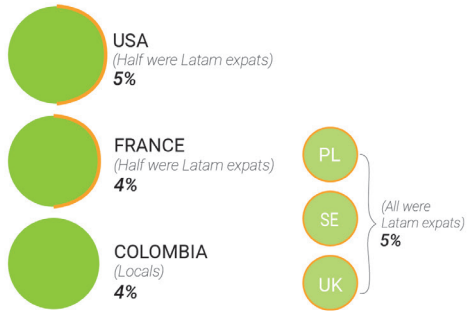
**MEALTIMES ZONE**  
(GMT table match)



**QUARANTINED SOBREMESA**  
(Global tables, guests and hosts)



**REGISTERED**  
(engaged with the topic)  
255



**TABLE GEOLOCATIONS**  
(intimate global group)

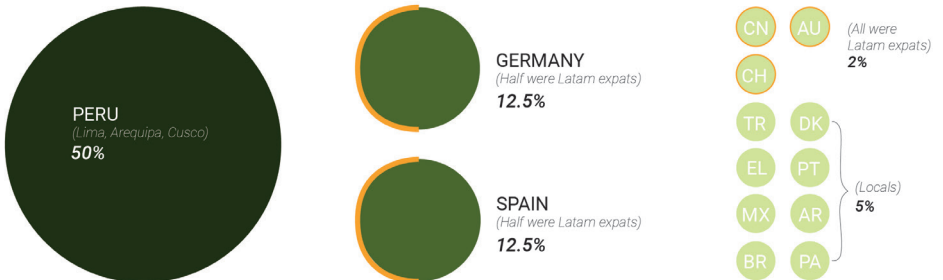


Figure 1. [OS] Tables and mealtimes geolocation. Source: Designer archive, 2020.

# QUARANTINED SOBREMESA

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**Gabriela Aquije Zegarra**

This paper looks into the challenge of adapting a Sobremesa (familiar eating ritual from Latin American culture) into a digital platform. Along the design process, Quarantined Sobremesa [QS], weaves the methodological approach of Speculative design and the interdisciplinary research of Food Systems. In the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic, this digital mealtime provided an interactive platform for different actors and commensality backgrounds across the lockdown globe. Overall, this experience suggested how a meal could be a joyful and critical medium to allocate our everyday eating habits in the bioregional food systems. Consequently, the narrative of this text will articulate a theoretical research review, qualitative data and participant observant notes from [QS], as well as news and journalist information.

food systems / speculative design / foodways / digital medium / bioregion



Figure. 2 [QS] Digital sobremesa invitation answers. Source: Designer archive, 2020

## HACKING A SOBREMESA, DISCONNECTING TO CONNECT

Quarantined Sobremesa [QS] project started in the second week of March 2020, during global lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The world began to slow down, as daily habits and tasks squeeze inside households across the globe. This context triggered that two designers<sup>1</sup> in two different countries, Peru and Germany, started sharing lunch (Latin America) and dinner (Europe) breaks “digitally together” (Washington Post 2020). As a matter of fact, this idea emerged in different cities and geographies simultaneously, as a way to replicate the eventful eating gatherings that the quarantine had taken away (EAT 2020).

When we (creators and designers) named the project Quarantined Sobremesa [QS], we mistakenly assumed that everyone had experienced a Sobremesa. Whereas there are similar commensality practices around the globe, the sobremesa ritual is still rooted in Hispanic and Latinos communities as part of our everyday food culture and spoken language. In the case of Peruvian culinary culture, even the greatest chefs aim to emulate a food experience that “feels like home”, for the act of hosting with care family and friends, set the table and serve the “especialidad de la casa” (household special dish) that is typical of a “sobremesa peruana” (Myopia 2017). This intimate eating tradition sets the stage for “the time after a meal where the family [and friends] may sit around a table and discuss with each other. It is a

time for reflection and discussion and a time to simply be immersed [...]" (Perez 2010, p. 28). Thereupon, with hunger in the heart, we set this eating ritual re-enactment as a design challenge. (Fig. 2)

Hence, during the course of three months and five editions, [QS] evolved from a support system, between friends overseas during early quarantine days, to a digital mealtime format, which mediated a horizontal conversation between international strangers. In other words, we hacked a real *sobremesa* to exchange food and topics with a global community online. By engaging with over 200 people (Fig. 1), the experience passed through several adaptations, although the core structure remained as follows:

- A shared mealtime: the scheduled gatherings had to fit, overall, Latin America and Europe typical meal hours (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) and time zones. Appealing to food as an empathy tool, for one hour you 'set the table' to eat together during the digital encounter. Although, along the process, we learn that having a plate of food for the session was optional.

- A topic: after the first couple of sessions, we noticed that participants with a common interest had a smoother table talk (*sobremesa*) and even continued the conversation after [QS]. Thus, often the host suggested a topic and a certain mealtime schedule, which was communicated one week in advance at the registration form and the Instagram social media account of the [QS] project. It is crucial to mention that the topic acted as a conversation trigger that could open up a horizontal dialogue. This talk could derive into a rich debate but did not aim for a webinar-type of exchange.

- An intimate global group: as any good gathering, there is someone who takes care that everyone has a good time. At first, we (designers) filled that role, but as the community grew, former participants assumed this caring duty. The group size depended on the quorum of the topic proposed during registration week, as well as the language available for conversation. On average, we would have one to three hosts, around three to seven guests and at least two different nationalities/geographies sitting in one table (mealtime and topic).

- A digital medium<sup>2</sup>: an element that is the convergence of technological and creative tools to carry out a digital *Sobremesa*. The hardware was a stable Internet connection, an email account, and a virtual chat room (Google Meets). The software was a restaurant/hosting use of language in all our communication canals (email, Instagram, Google forms, WhatsApp) to the point of even creating a reception space where a greeter welcomed you to the experience and promptly redirected you to the selected table. Also, we adapted analogue

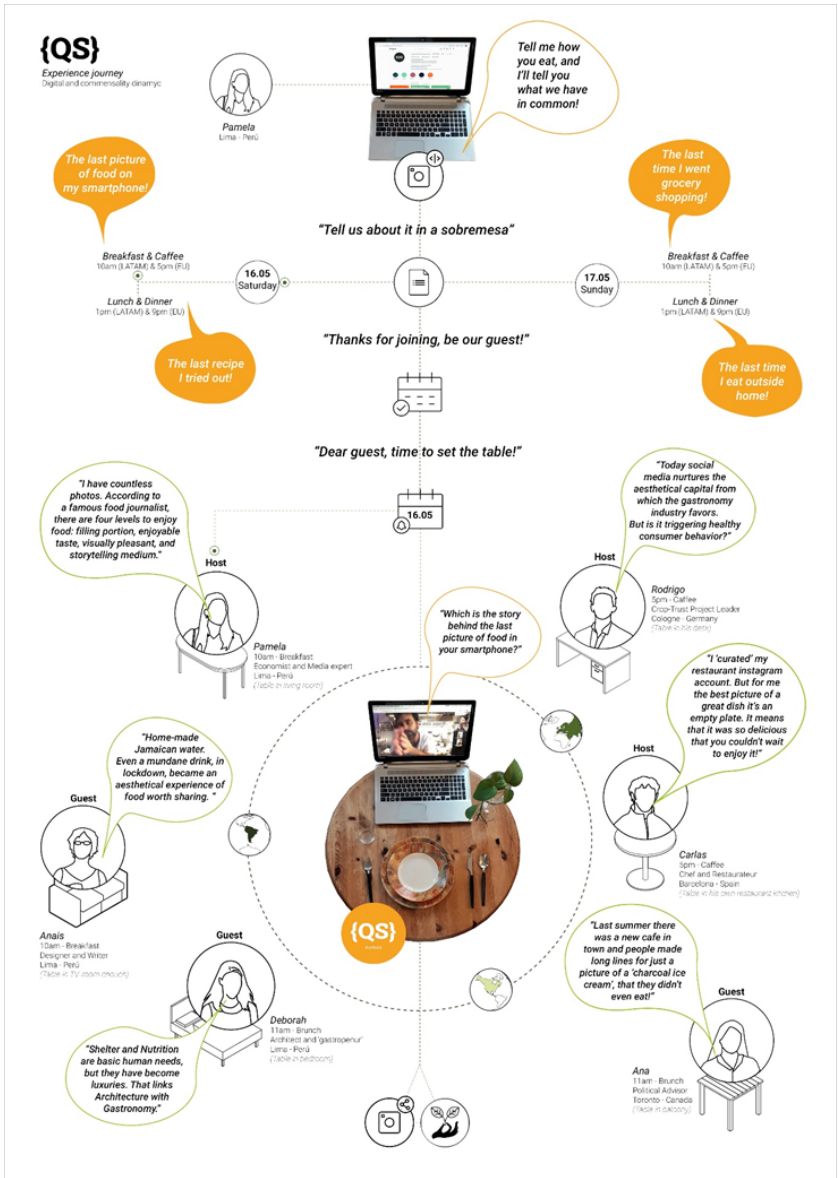


Figure 3. {QS} Experience journey. Source: Designer archive, 2020<sup>5</sup>

elements of the dining environment to a careful set of indications such as table setting or register the host's meal preparation to communicate "how to prepare for a Sobremesa". (User Insight Workshops 2020)

## DESIGNING A TABLE IN THE QUARANTINED FOOD SYSTEMS

We need to situate the [QS] team and project at the intersection between the research realms of Speculative Design and Food Systems<sup>3</sup>. The first realm enables designers to evaluate and generate debate around new objects or technologies. According to Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl when "inviting participants to engage in issues that emerge when things are already in use" we apply speculative design as a method for "designerly public engagement". Thus we foster the participant agency "to [an] inventive problem making in their own everyday life" and encourage them "to shift the parameters of an issue or a concern". (Lindström, Ståhl 2016, p. 187)

In the means of adapting a dining cultural ritual to a digital platform, we understood that we would need to readapt hardware and software of [QS] to respond to our users' concerns and geographical backgrounds. In most of the cases, this digital mealtime became an "out of the quarantine-ordinary moment" in which a conversation with a global stranger refrained their perspective on a certain topic. In others, the topic brought together long-distance friends for a "digital reconnection to their country of origin through table memories" (User Insight Workshops 2020). As in a real-life Sobremesa, the household (designers) only has control over the table setting, not on the guest's behaviour or spontaneous interactions.

The second research realm emerged as we became more familiar with the pandemic context, its impact in our everyday life eating habits, and even more acquaintance with the digital versions of public engagements (Nielsen 2020). Onward with this new lockdown environment and due to the empathetic nature of the interaction we were able to build a global network of commensality. Whereby we touch upon, direct and indirectly, the subject of Food Systems by looking into eating habits and cultural "foodways"<sup>4</sup>. According to the Food System Dashboard there is "a large body of nuanced research on consumer behaviour", and among the key elements to understand it are forms of food exchange (FSD 2020). Consequently, by the fifth edition of [QS], we wanted to reflect on food as our medium and make it our main topic. By inviting specialists and enthusiasts to a sobremesa we approached the Food systems discussion through an affective—nonetheless critical—human connection.

Taking on Lindström and Ståhl, “[...] invitations have always been important as a way of articulating an area of curiosity, and a proposal of how to engage with it.” (Lindström, Ståhl 2016, p. 190) Therefore, we named the edition: “Tell me how you eat and I will tell you...”, and complemented it with four storytelling abrebecas (trigger topics): “... the last picture of a meal in my smartphone”, “...the last recipe I tried out”, “...the last time I went grocery shopping”, “...the last time I eat outside home. Each abrebeca had a global table and mealtime, which debated each quotidian material and space dimension of the food systems and the effect that the pandemic had on it. (Fig. 3) First, the picture opened up a discussion on food, communication aesthetics, and globalised eating practices. Then, the recipe led to childhood ‘doing cooking’ memories, food waste-conscious, and pantry cooking. Later, grocery shopping developed a debate on gastro politics, food access, and market informality. Finally, addressing eating outside turned out into an open debate, about the restrictions and changes in public behaviour. (Sobremesa Dynamic 2020)

Food was the thread that connected, not only hosts and guests that interact in it but also their food network and cultural behaviour. (Fig. 3) There were many moments in which “the collective debate intuitively touched upon an ecological reflection of their eating habits, and that was truly meaningful” (User Insight Workshops, 2020). Accordingly, the journalist and designer John Thackara introduces this ecological thinking as “bioregioning”, which re-connects our every day with the living systems that support it. He also urged designers to take up the role to connect diverse groups of actors inside the bioregion by designing for system change, creating platforms that give priority to human-nature knowledge exchange, for “[...] the practice of ecology is the forging of relationships.” (Thackara 2019, p. 21)

## **SOBREMESA CONCLUSION**

In this short essay, we have presented the design challenge of Quarantined Sobremesa and how it reunites the cultural and caring cohesion of the household dining format with the ‘foodways’ of a global community, along a digital medium. Based on our experience, we can conclude that digital platforms helped us bridge huge physical distances, and—although its limitations—can quickly open a window into other global realities and become a space for dialogue. Also, that by linking our ‘digital tables’ we could understand how the cultural and ecological networks of our meal connect to each other. Consequently, we believe that a cohesive local and global community is crucial to reinforce ecological thinking inside the post-COVID Food Systems.

Thus looking ahead, could this project that started as a digital meal-time exchange bring awareness on the link between our tables and bioregional Food Systems? We certainly learned during the prototype phase of [QS] as much as from the cultural background and everyday hacks of our food-savvy digital community. So moving forward we would like to develop a co-creative 'digital commensality' incubator for critical food design projects. Thus continue to set the table for creative knowledge-exchange between transdisciplinary actors inside the local and global Food System.



## FOOTNOTES

- 1 [QS]Project Co-creators: Gabriela Aquije, Anais Freitas Eléspuru, and Diego Polo Chávez.
- 2 Food and digital mediums have a variety of ways of interacting, some beneficial and other adverse. One that can relate to the [QS] platform is 'digital commensality', which includes "[...] a number of scenarios, from physically eating together with someone as a result of some digital technology-based intervention [...] while eating, [...] as well as more elaborate tele dining installations that allow for some element of interactivity with those whom we may be dining with remotely [...]." (Spence et al. 2019, p. 2).
- 3 Within the Design Research realm there is also a specific—and rather young—niche of practice-based theory named 'Food Design', by the Italian design scholar Francesca Zampollo, which relates design with transversal concerns from the realms of Food Studies and Food System research (Zampollo 2017, p. 3). The subcategory of 'Critical Food Design' (Ibid. 2016, p. 7) uses speculative design strategies and explores inside (but not exclusively) the problematics of Food Production Systems. Nevertheless, the design-thinking methodologies of Food Design, according to the mentioned author, are often applied to food product or service development, which are not main concerns of the presented [QS] experience.
- 4 "In fact, human foodways are a complex result of the interaction of human nutritional needs, ecology, human logic or lack of it, and historical accident. [...] They construct their foodways within limits set by biology, economics, and psychology." (Anderson, 2005, p. 2)
- 5 The vectorised icons were designed by Lluisa Iborra from the Noun Project [open source platform]. Available at: <https://thenounproject.com/marialuisa.iborra/>

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