

Mind the (food) gap

by Eduardo Dami



Mind the gap. During the time I had been in the UK for my internship, I heard this phrase daily. The mantra, endlessly said on the subway station, only meant to pay attention to the short space between the train and the platform to avoid injuries and accidents. But after some time this phrase rooted in my mind and made me pay attention to other gaps, more related to the reason I moved from my home country (Brazil) and came to Europe: Gaps related to food and the way we eat.

I used to have my breakfast at home and then walked for one block, passing in front of a small convenience store and by a coffee shop before finally arriving in the train station. What do all these entirely different places have in common? Food. Snacks. Beverages. On my table. At the store. At the train station. Three completely different places, present in a three-minute walk invisibly connected by the presence of food.

This reality is not rare in big cities, we are surrounded by food - of every kind - everywhere, and it is not exaggerated to say that never before in the human history we have had so much food available. If it seems that every gap possible has been filled, sorry, definitely they are not.

While this omnipresence of food is becoming a mountain of opportunities for food professionals, it also reveals a void in the middle that is not a reason to smile: the excess of food may be a symptom that the general relationship with food is becoming frivolous or unmeaningful, to be polite.

**With food everywhere maybe its cultural meaning is being continuously diluted:
It's normal to eat a whatever-sandwich and having a something-like-coffee while going to work
without thinking about its flavours or trying to figure out nuance flavours that make mayo
different from yoghurt**

Even though the trembled or shallow relationship with food is not a brand new discovery - obesity rates, bulimia rates, fear of gluten, dietary fads or even made up allergies are hard examples that this relationship is not so solid anymore - the solution for reestablishing our connection to what we eat looks distant. Even with many intelligent people working hard to get the best answers:

Scientists struggle very hard to study and prove the lack of positive correlation between eggs and cholesterol. While their colleagues from other universities try to show the opposite. Lots of good intentions - and some bad too.

Every year new theses and food discussions are published, some of them become content for the masses: Hundreds of books about ethical food production, documentaries on Netflix about sugar or fat, GMOs issues, rain forests destroyed to be replaced by thousands of grass-eating cattle... Everything dedicated to understand big issues and open our eyes towards what is in the food we eat.

But if this competition for seeing who has the ultimate reason attracts foodies and specialists, when the content finally burst our bubble, it generally keeps on putting more weight on the back of common people:

90% of Americans say that they don't like to cook.

(50% HATE to cook!) - source: Harvard Business School

Specialist's recommendation?

Know the ingredients! Cook more!

Spend more time in the kitchen!

Sure, people will buy organic ingredients to make the 4 hours bolognese sauce just because some expert has told them to do it!

There is a lot of disconnection among food studies and scientific findings, but worse than this is their failure of connecting new findings to popular needs and consequently enhance the food culture. They may keep on discussing forever while people are still lost counting the calories of untasteful sandwiches.

And what is the Food Design role in the middle of all this?

Picking sides in the food battlefield, would certainly show some bravery but maybe it wouldn't be the most useful strategy for such a new discipline. If we are bringing a new term to the table such as "food design" we also must be very precise in creating the sharpest meaning and value for it.

After my experience at Scuola Politecnica di Design learning with different thinkers and designers, among teachers and students who have their own opinion about food, design and that have their own tools to put thoughts in practice, I have tried to establish what Food Design means to me and how I believe my work can be more useful:

I must access and navigate different areas of food knowledge, comprehend what they have to offer and create bridges between them, aiming to develop products or services capable of taking the weight out of the back of consumers.

It means that I have to connect different food disciplines (nutrition, food science, food studies, food history) and design disciplines such as service design, product design, and graphic design with one single goal: **Establish a better relationship between people and the food they eat.**

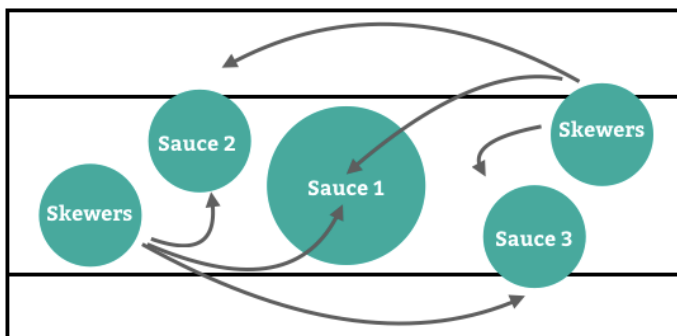
Of course, I need to think big - all the social and environmental macro food subjects matter - but besides the big picture, I need to comprehend the gaps in people's routines and the claim for simpler solutions.

That's where I believe I can find the most valuable space to work as food designer, not competing with highly specialised chefs, nutritionists or scientists but using design tools to connect their thoughts and fill the gaps in people's daily lives.

How does it work?

Looking back to what I have been doing this year at Scuola Politecnica di Design through these lenses, I can see two projects that symbolise my conception of Food Design:

1 - We the table: An intimacy gap



This project was born from an insight about obstacles in a first date. You know! That awkward situation which you are comfortable enough to have dinner with another person but, you still struggle to find an interesting subject to talk about, your hands are shaking, you don't know where to put them. It's not easy to interact.

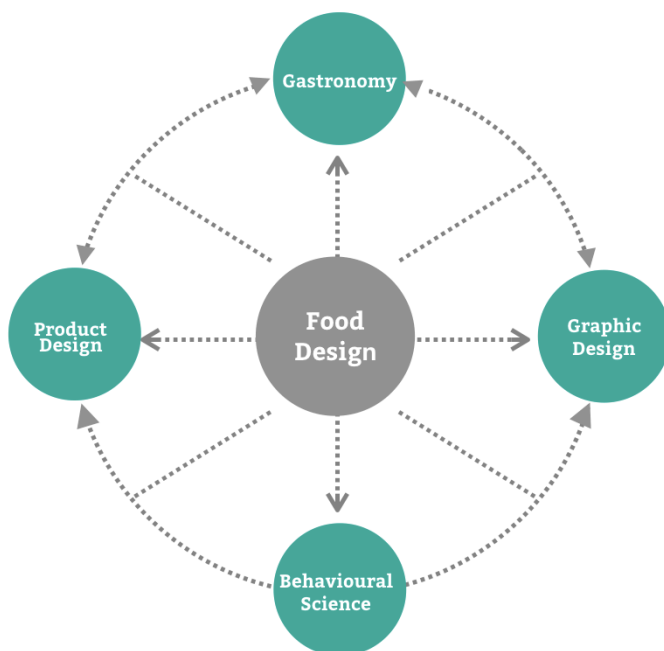
Developing intimacy is a tough job. So, we have decided to create a table that connected people. Literally.

Evolving the insight and connecting product design (to define shapes and materials), behavioural science (to get insights and explore actions at the table) and gastronomy (to identify the best dishes, cutlery types, and its arrangements) we created a table that doesn't have any other support other than the people eating on it.

The Chinese-skewers with different kinds of meat and different sauces distributed on the table, oblige users to access the opposite side of the table)

The object that had been first imagined to solve one gap has found other gaps to fill: It is a table to make people stay closer that can be used

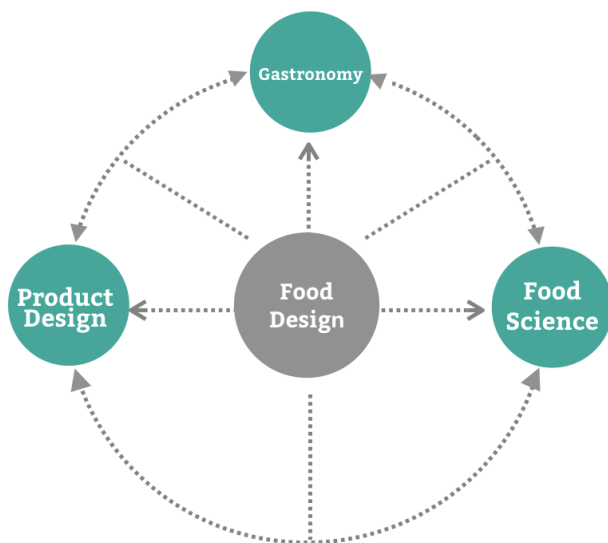
by couples and friends. But it is also useful for bars with huge waiting lines, for campings parks with no table



available and it's also a tool for companies that want to strengthen bonds between workers during team building workshops and meetings.

The table could have been born from a product designer. The texture and materials combining a graphic designer and artists. The food could be imagined by a chef. **But mixing all techniques created a space for a new mindset that I believe it to be a food designer's mindset.**

2 - BeerNuts: Gap in the beer production



Every day tons of barley used in the production of beer are thrown away after the fermentation process. They are still nutritious and tasteful. But still thrown away. BeerNuts is a project that converts the used barley into nut-shaped snacks that harmonizes perfectly with a fresh beer at a bar or in a music festival using a special package that combines the two products.

In this project, we connected beer producers, gastronomy to define a recipe and balance the flavours (the barley gets very acidic and sour after the fermentation), product design (defining the shape of the nuts and the structure of the packaging).

The re-utilisation of fermented barley - after the beer process - for animal feeding, chemical studies or even for manufacturing bricks is becoming a trend.

Although, these usages are creative, with BeerNuts we comprehended the process of beer production and created another edible product. The mix of food disciplines to create a snack, its packaging and the desired consumption moments is what I believe as being a good example of Food Design.

Mind, find, design, solve.

More than 7 billion people around the globe.
Each one of these individuals need to eat.

It's not hard to conclude that there will always be lots of food-related gaps asking for solutions: If people don't know how to cook, it is possible to teach them. If they don't have time to learn, we must fit their schedules. If they don't want to learn, we have to create services to supply them with good meals. If they can't afford it, we need to find sponsors.

Knowledge gap. Time gap. The gap of will. Money gap...

The list is endless and the world doesn't need more specialists or opinions to enlarge these gaps, **but professionals to fill these gaps, building bridges and platforms between different disciplines to trespass the existent space from what people need to what they have available.**

Now, the voice in the subway that used to warn me to mind the gap between the train and the platform has been replaced for my own voice saying:

Mind the food gap. Because food gaps exist and they matter a lot.