

Playing with food: Museum Experience in an Israeli Gourmet

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Comparing a restaurant dish to a museum exhibit is not an obvious comparison. You visit a restaurant for a gastronomic experience. Observing contemporary art initiates an emotional or intellectual experience, whereas eating at a restaurant provides a combination of tastes, resulting, at best, in a feeling of satiety and an esthetic experience. But recently, it seems the boundaries between art and gastronomy have been somewhat blurred.

The campaign of Tnuva's brand yogurt "Yoplait" in 2001 was probably the first to append "human" adjectives to yogurt: "Naughty Strawberry," "Peach in Love" and more. Eyal Shani, an Israeli celebrity chef, also known as "the poetic chef," typically provides elaborate descriptions of various dishes and foods. Shani has enjoyed rising popularity thanks to the TV competition *Master Chef*, where he serves as judge. In the menu of his restaurant, he describes dishes in passionate terms: "a whole head of cauliflower, baby gold on hot stones, melted in itself" or "a piece of golden eggplant in the wind, resting on desert tomato foam dizzy with tahini [sesame paste]." One of his many phrases from *Master Chef* is: "Wouldn't the mushrooms be angry if sweet potatoes lived inside them?" Sagi Cohen, restaurant critic of the *Ha'aretz* daily newspaper, wrote critically about the Shuka restaurant: "It's the result of the plague of cooking programs on television: a beautifully styled menu, dishes are beautiful, but taste and smell are lacking" ("To see them only," *Ha'aretz*, Galeria section, August 4, 2011).

Food, emerging from trends described above, is not what it used to be. Into the plate enter emotion, passion and a total experience that will rock the diner or viewer, from the moment he or she enters the restaurant until the dish is eaten. "The plague of cooking on television" (in Sagi Cohen's words) has added new values to the experience of eating in a restaurant: the visitor awaits an experience that is both poetic (a detailed, poetically phrased menu) and visual (not only the dishes themselves, but also the restaurant décor), while the gastronomic experience itself—tasting the food—is pushed aside.

Visiting a museum or gallery of contemporary art in recent years is not limited to observing a statue or picture, but rather amounts to a total experience. The back cover of *Contemporary Art: I Speak to You*, written by curator and art critic, Ruth Director (2005), states:

Art has never been so attentive to the viewer, so needy, wooing him and groping him—while challenging him, stimulating the senses, embarrassing him and demanding a partnership that is consistent and attuned to its moves. Contemporary art follows unpaved roads, refusing to be absorbed easily, requiring a sharp and open state of anticipation.

Thus, in the current era, experience—gastronomic and artistic alike—must be total, meaningful and comprehensive; otherwise, it's just not enough. Yossi, the owner-chef of a Tel Aviv gourmet restaurant, is a former artist in photography who also engages in installations and performances. His restaurant is a fine example of the evolution of culinary experience to an esthetic, almost museum-like experience, one where taste may be much less important than before.

At the restaurant entrance, a huge piece of burlap projects video art depicting the preparation of food in the restaurant. Seating in the restaurant is around a long bar overlooking an open kitchen, where you can see the dish arranged on its plate “as part of the visitor’s total experience, without concealing [anything] from him,” says Yossi.

The initial reason I came to that restaurant was the designed china: the restaurant has about 20 different plates for about 30 servings. The rule is simple: when the chef designs a new dish, he immediately asks the tableware designer to complete the piece with a matching container. There is almost no new dish without a bowl, plate or other tableware designed specifically for it. While the idea of designing a new container for a specific dish is not unique to this restaurant, here it is done with special care, offering a different sculptural gastronomical object for each dish and viewer/visitor/diner.



Figure 1: At the last spoonful of beet soup, the bowl resembled a work of art.

The most amazing dish was the beet soup. In a cedar ceramic bowl, the chef at the bar opposite us placed elongated strips of purple beets, dark green puree of Swiss chard, beet ice cream and a few bright and dark elements that gave off intense color. Alongside the bowl, the waitress served a tiny pot of beet soup. She made sure we noticed the spectacularly designed dish and colored plate, then poured the purple soup into the bowl until it was impossible to discern anything more. We gave in and plunged our palates into the vortex of refined tastes, noticing traces of the elements that constituted the dish before the warm soup was poured in. At our last spoonful, the bowl resembled a work of art: mixed green and purple brushstrokes, in a style similar to painter Jackson Pollock, complemented the bright color of the bowl. With every sweep of the spoon, the sauce slightly altered the work of art formed in our minds. When we finished eating, we were sorry the waitress took away our “five-minute piece of art.” We wished she could hang it on the restaurant wall for display.

There is increasing use of installations and performances in contemporary art, where the viewer does not look at an object, like a statue or picture, but rather follows the esthetic process in which the artist and sometimes the observer

participates. The ritual of receiving and eating beetroot soup described above—from the clean empty bowl at the beginning to the dirty empty bowl at the end—seemed like a performance involving various players: the chef, the ingredients, the waitress and me, the consumer, who witnessed the images created and then changed them constantly by eating. This ritual was repeated at almost every table in the restaurant.



Figure 2: *Shakshuka*: touches of red sauce resembling tomato sauce and yellow sauce resembling an egg.

A dish called *shakshuka* is normally an egg cooked in tomato sauce and eaten with pita bread or a slice of bread. For this dish, a bagel shaped plate was designed, made of clay with a hole in its center, on which pine needles rested. Placed on top of the pine needles were crackers that seemed like tree trunks. Touches of red sauce resembling tomato sauce and yellow sauce resembling an egg decorated the crackers, with thin slices of hot pepper and one coriander leaf. Miniature pita bread filled with tahini were scattered around. Now that's *shakshuka*!

My initial encounter with the connection between food and design occurred when I intended to go to an exhibition that promoted this idea. I became acquainted

with the restaurant because a significant part of the exhibition was devoted to tableware borrowed from that restaurant, as it was the first to make a pronounced connection between food and serving, between the museum-like esthetic experience and the culinary experience. Feeling that an exhibition would not fully convey the creator's intention or represent the idea properly without a dish inside or taste to accompany it, I chose to visit the restaurant itself and see the exhibit in its complete version.

I asked Yossi if he perceives the diner as someone whose spoon ruins the sculpture that he creates, or as an integral part of the work of art. He answered that he believes in the process, not the finished product. The act of eating is part of the work and does not corrupt it. Yossi added that, after all, this is a restaurant and people need to eat.

The idea presented at the beginning of this piece, of this restaurant as a museum, ignores the assumption that when one visits a museum, one is driven by esthetic hunger, perhaps an esthetic curiosity, whereas when one goes to a restaurant, one is basically driven by hunger or by the desire to be satiated, which might interfere with this artistic-esthetic motivation. "X" refutes this rule by uniting these two motivations.

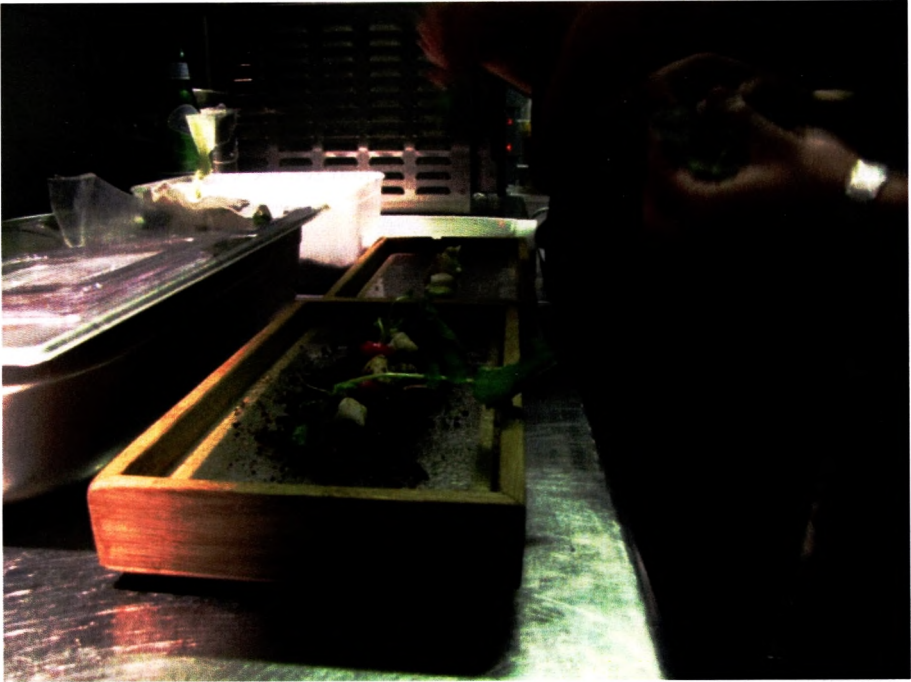


Figure 3: A sheaf of plants placed in a flowerpot with a little mud.

Let's proceed with our dinner. A refreshment was just served: a sheaf of plants laid in a flowerpot with a little mud. Not real mud, but rather a mixture of malt, chickpeas and nuts that strongly resembles the original model—a plant inside a flowerpot. Here, as in a museum, appears a mimesis that characterizes the world of art, the visual imitation of the real object, but goes a step further to imitate the taste that a muddy flowerbed might have.



Figure 4: The cooked onions were sitting in a work of art that imitated them.

Next came “an onion in several variations” served on a plate of glass perched atop a felt circle and a larger base circle of clay: the cooked onions were sitting in a work of art that imitated them. A lamb dish was served in a plate that resembles a hill, “to give the lamb the feeling it’s grazing in the meadow”: the food awaits the customer in an imitation of its natural environment. A dish of crabs was placed in a glass plate resembling an iceberg, and the bread was actually tiny puffs inside a bag of felt, like a traveling bag with provisions. The dish was accompanied by a real stone, with a pat of butter on it, an imitation of a food break taken by a man wandering in the forest.

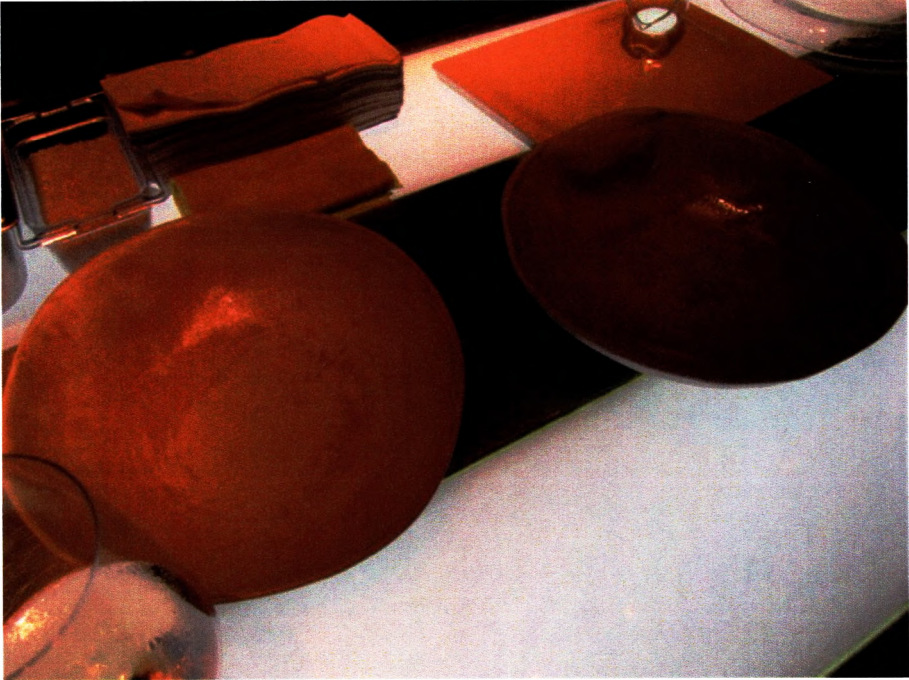


Figure 5: When the chef designs a new dish, he immediately asks the tableware designer to complete the piece with a matching container.

The diners were seated along the long bar in the middle of the open-spaced kitchen. They seemed surprised and amused as they witnessed the whole process. All were facing the kitchen; the main show was there, not in the conversation. Dishes weren't eaten quickly, but rather carefully examined, with careful bites. This is a very expensive restaurant. The high prices were also meant to tell the audience: the reason you are here is not to satisfy your hunger. Enjoy this as if you are at the opera. You have not come to eat, but to experience.

The menu details the nutrients available in the restaurant. If you choose the tasting meal, you will be served the same dishes the chef chooses for that day. Complete dishes are also offered a la carte, but they seem irrelevant. It's a surprise. And, as in a museum, you do not know exactly what you'll experience.

Unlike a museum experience or an experience of the performing arts, it is not possible to reproduce the same experience the next time. The menu changes constantly, as a matter of principle. "The preoccupation with food is fascinating because it's live and temporary," says Yossi, who adds:

There is no similar tomato, and if the beets were bad this year, we will not use them, and this dish won't be served. For my cooks, it is most interesting: the orange of today is not the orange of tomorrow. Every time you create something new. The beauty is in the changing.

The Marcel Duchamp artistic message, conveyed by placing a toilet seat in a museum, is well known. This action began an endless discussion about "what is art," and broke all the forms known to us. Now, why won't the restaurant "X" be considered a museum, providing all consumable art, sensual and esthetic, to its customers? My plate is not a museum, to a certain level of certainty. At least, one will not automatically connect the two. Or maybe one will? In Glenn Kuehn's (2005) article, "How can food be art?" he held discussions with his counterpart Telfer not about food being art, but about whether food is high or low art. Marianne L. Quinet, in "Food as art" (1981), bounds the parameter for an artistic piece as one with no use but the esthetic. But what happens in a restaurant where the audience knows that, in order to enjoy the experience, they shouldn't come hungry?

This essay is just a taste of the wide discussion about food as art. Blurring boundaries between esthetic and culinary experience creates a fascinating area for research and testing, in an age where the pure gastronomic value of food has become far less important.

P.S. The owner of "X" asked me not to divulge his full name or that of the restaurant. He argued that what is written here would harm the restaurant's branding. I think he was afraid I might claim that esthetic joy from a gastronomic experience is only a gimmick that will not last. But writing about it several months later, I can still taste the experience.

REFERENCES

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