

## **The Art of Dining: Inspired Menus and Inviting Spaces.**

The following piece draws inspiration from articles found in the International Journal of Hospitality Management as well as others from The Journal of Interior Design.

### **Abstract**

This article explores the intersection of art and dining in order to argue that restaurant design is an underappreciated art form with the power to shift the way we think about food. The restaurants FOOD, The Fat Duck, and The Alchemist are used to support this argument. By analysing two key design elements of each restaurant, the interior and the menu, this article demonstrates their ability to create an engaging artistic experience for diners. The Fat Duck and The Alchemist are used as important examples of contemporary restaurants which succeed in creating multi-sensory dining experiences. It is argued that they are able to do so through their incorporation of elements of performance and visual artistry. These restaurants both build on the legacy of artist-run restaurants like FOOD, which is used as an example of a pioneering restaurant that transcended the functional needs of a space. Ultimately, this article encourages recognition of the artistic value of restaurant design by highlighting the intersection of art and dining within the culinary industry. Effectively, this fusion of disciplines has created new opportunities for artistic expression and engagement by urging chefs and customers to think differently about the role of food and dining in our lives.

### **FOOD, SoHo**

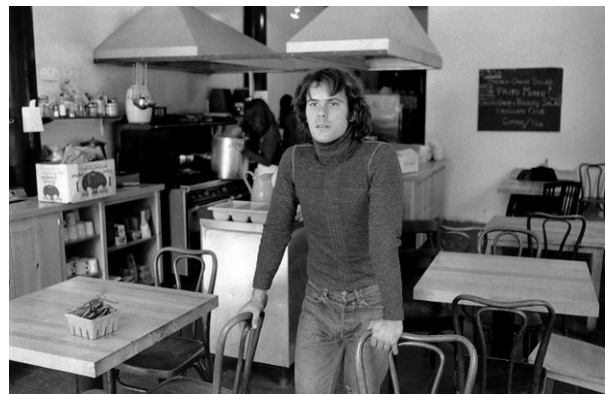
‘Since the early sixties, the area south of Houston Street [known as ‘SoHo’] had attracted a steady flow of artists lured by its cheap, sizable, and increasingly deserted loft spaces,’ (Waxman, 2008, p. 24). This meant that by the 70s, SoHo was home to a

community of artists, living and working in an area previously occupied by little more than manufacturing facilities for those working blue-collar jobs. There were few restaurants in the area, and the ones in operation closed their doors in the afternoon. It was this that inspired artists Gordon Matta-Clark, Caroline Gooden, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris and Rachel Lew to open FOOD, the revolutionary artist-run restaurant, in October 1971. Largely financed by Gooden's inheritance, FOOD operated at a loss under its five initial founders until interest dissipated in 1973. Whilst not a profitable business, the restaurant succeeded in its aim of bringing local creatives together to share ideas and affordable meals. Through advertising in SoHo based magazine *Avalanche*, word spread and FOOD quickly became a hub of collaboration and creativity. FOOD not only served local artists but employed a large number of them too. Employees were able to work as little or often as they liked, and it was ensured that those who took a break in order to put on a show always had a job to return to. Ultimately, despite failing to generate profit, FOOD was more than just a business venture. The restaurant played a pivotal role in supporting the emerging SoHo art scene, and has inspired subsequent generations of artists and chefs to explore the intersection of food and art.

### Interior Design at FOOD



*Gordon Matta-Clark filming at FOOD.*



*Gordon Matta-Clark inside FOOD restaurant.*

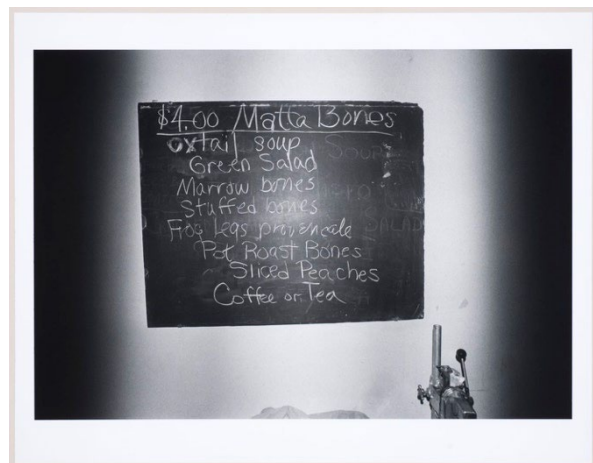
Gooden purchased what was to become FOOD in the summer of 1971. Before undergoing renovation, the building was home to *Comidas Criollas*, a struggling 'Puerto Rican lunch counter at the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets' (Waxman, 2008, p. 26). Matta-Clark had previously studied architecture and so was responsible for designing the space. He spent the summer demolishing and rebuilding the site alongside Girouard,

Gooden, and numerous other friends. The interior was designed based solely upon his and Gooden's personal tastes, rather than with practicality at the forefront. FOOD was one of the first restaurants to feature the 'open kitchen' concept seen in many contemporary establishments, allowing diners to feel part of the action. Tables were close together and the overall feel of the restaurant was homely, with tiled floors and wooden cabinets. It is clear from these design elements that practicality was never a key factor in FOOD's conception. Matta-Clark designed a space for his community to come together, one in which they would feel comfortable and encouraged to return.

### The Menu at FOOD



*Matta Bones, dish in pots at FOOD.*



*Matta Bones, dish on the menu at FOOD.*

The boundary pushing menu at FOOD is what solidifies its place in history. With fresh local produce being transformed into a different menu daily, during a time in which 'the latest restaurant technology called for bringing in pre-cooked frozen dishes,' (Waxman, 2008, p. 27), diners had no choice but to eat what was served. All dishes were affordable and prepared by an ever-changing team of artists and chefs. On Sunday nights guest chefs were invited to serve anything they wished, a tradition initiated by Matta-Clark. Dishes served on Sundays ranged from edible to experimental and were influenced massively by each artists' practice. One of the most famous examples of a Sunday night dinner at FOOD was the Matta Bones meal, created and served by Matta-Clark himself. The dish consisted of 'oxtail soup, marrow bones, stuffed bones, frog legs Provençale, and pot roast bones,' (Waxman, 2008, p. 29) and cost only \$4. Once guests had finished the meal, the bones were given to artist Hisachika Takahashi who would drill holes in

them, thread them together, and return them to diners as a wearable souvenir. This practice truly embodied FOOD's collaborative nature and highlights its pioneering experimentation within the culinary arts scene. Matta-Clark's fascination with the science of food was likely at the forefront of such experimentation. Prior to FOOD's opening, Matta-Clark made what he called 'Incendiary Wafers' by mixing water and agar with various food elements such as sugar, oil, and yeast before leaving this to dry into large sheets (The Art Assignment, 2017). Food was not only a part of his life, but also integral to his practice. It is this spirit of innovation that permeated FOOD's operation and ensures the restaurant is still relevant today. The experimental concept behind FOOD is a source of inspiration for many chefs looking to explore the relationship between food and art.

### **The Fat Duck, Bray**

Building on the idea that dining is about more than just food, is Heston Blumenthal's restaurant The Fat Duck. Similar to Matta-Clark, Blumenthal has a strong interest in the science of food, and this is the driving force behind the ground-breaking menu at The Fat Duck. Experimentation across all aspects of the dining experience is a key part of the restaurant's success, as not only are the dishes unique but their presentation is also often theatrical. Blumenthal opened The Fat Duck in 1995 and by 2004 the largely self-taught chef had earned the restaurant three Michelin stars. In 2005 it was 'voted no 1 in the World's 50 Best Restaurants awards' (Rayner, 2015) where it remained in the top 10 for eight years. Eating at The Fat Duck is arguably a performance in itself, with 'storytellers' instead of waitstaff and themed dishes drawing from childhood memories, Blumenthal has created a restaurant unlike any other. Diners are encouraged to approach each course with curiosity and given a magnifying glass to help them do so. Blumenthal promises 'an adventure for the mouth and the mind' (The Fat Duck, n.d.), and those eating at The Fat Duck are sure to be impressed. Every aspect of the restaurant has been carefully designed to provide a multi-sensory experience for guests. Blumenthal successfully highlights the intersection between art and food and demonstrates that a restaurant can be far more than just a functional space.

## Interior Design at The Fat Duck



*The Fat Duck, interior, kitchen.*



*The Fat Duck, interior, dining space.*

In 2015 The Fat Duck underwent a renovation that resulted in its current configuration. Blumenthal commissioned London based design company Ab Rogers Design to complete the interior redesign, with the request of a simple yet functional space. During the redesign, covers were reduced to just 42, thus creating a more intimate dining environment. This allows the kitchen and waitstaff to attend to guests promptly and effectively, ensuring everyone is well taken care of. Visitor satisfaction is a top priority at The Fat Duck and this is highly reflected in the design. Ab Rogers Design state that they ‘designed two bespoke interventions’ (Ab Rogers Design, n.d.) for the space in order to optimise the comfort of diners. Each chair was custom made to support guests throughout the 4-hour meal, and individual colour and temperature changing light systems were fitted above the tables. Additionally, every wall was intentionally ‘left free of art and all other visual distractions so that diners are able to focus fully on enjoyment of the taste, smells and appearance [of the food],’ (Ab Rogers Design, n.d.). Overall, the simplistic, cosy, interior of The Fat Duck serves to enhance the experience of those dining there. By providing a comfortable, distraction-free space to dine in, Blumenthal invites his guests to immerse themselves in the world he has created for them through culinary experimentation. Ab Rogers Design crafted the perfect place for Blumenthal’s show to commence, visitors need only to relax and enjoy his performance.

## The Menu at The Fat Duck



*Sound of the Sea, dish at The Fat Duck.*



*Mock Turtle Soup, dish at The Fat Duck.*

The Fat Duck is widely regarded as one of the most influential and innovative restaurants in the world. Blumenthal has received this accolade as a result of his visionary menu. Everything served at The Fat Duck challenges perceptions of traditional cuisine and pushes diners to think about food in new ways. The experience begins weeks before guests even set foot in the venue, with a call from a member of the restaurant team. During this call you can expect to answer questions and provide details about memories from your life. Answering these questions allows the team at The Fat Duck to tailor your visit, ensuring that every guest has a slightly different dining experience. Whether this be by incorporating a favourite childhood sweet, or a postcard from your favourite holiday destination, personal touches are added throughout the meal (Shingler, 2017). Few restaurants offer truly personalised dining such as this. However, it is not just the emotional aspect to dining at The Fat Duck that sets it apart, as Blumenthal is able to engage all of the senses to provide guests with an entertaining, artistic experience. For example, one of the most famous dishes on the menu, titled Sound of the Sea, is a visual and technical masterpiece. The dish consists of 'sashimi, octopus, caviar and tapioca sand' (Alexander The Guest, 2023, 00:06:16) and is served alongside a seashell which plays wave sounds through earphones diners can wear. This is just one of 11 imaginative courses served to diners who opt for 'The Full Sensorium' tasting menu at £295. Also included in this is the Mock Turtle Soup course which is presented as a pocket watch that when swirled in warm water transforms into a teapot full of soup. The experimental nature of Blumenthal's menu not only harkens back to dishes like Matta Bones served at FOOD



but also encourages future generations to take a more experimental approach to cuisine.

### **Alchemist, Copenhagen**

One restaurant which goes a step beyond The Fat Duck in order to create immersive dining experiences is Alchemist. Opened in Copenhagen in 2019 by chef Rasmus Munk, Alchemist now currently has two Michelin stars and is ranked at number 5 in the World's 50 Best Restaurants. Munk's rapid success is arguably due to his unparalleled creativity within the culinary arts. The 50-course menu at Alchemist seamlessly blends food and art, representing the culmination of decades of experimentation within the field. Stating that they 'aim to transform and transcend the nature of food and dining,' (Alchemist, n.d.) the team at Alchemist have carefully considered every element of their diner's experience. From the moment guests arrive they are welcomed into a world of immersive artistry. Munk collaborates with local and international creatives, providing them with space to share their work inside the restaurant, and this is the first thing visitors see upon arrival. Over the course of the meal, everything within the constructed environment at Alchemist 'from the chairs to the plates to the attitude of the servers, [is] arranged like props in an extravagant play' (Modlin, 2023). Thus, alongside The Fat Duck, Alchemist is one of the strongest examples of a contemporary restaurant which explores the relationship between food and art. By creating a multi-sensory dining experience for guests, Munk encourages those lucky enough to dine with him to think about food in new and challenging ways.

### **Interior Design at Alchemist**



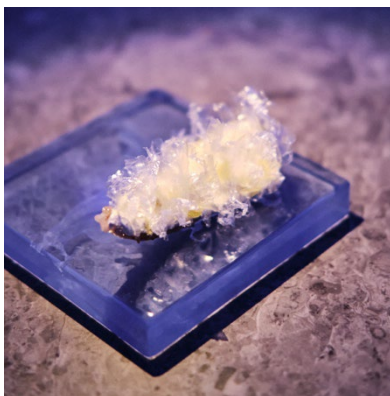
*Alchemist, interior, wine cellar.*



*Alchemist, interior, main dining area.*

Elements of design are present at Alchemist before guests even enter the restaurant. The experience begins with the 4-meter-high custom commissioned doors into the space, these imbue a sense of luxury right from the moment of arrival. Once through the doors, guests will find themselves in an installation space where they will be greeted by either an artwork or performer of Munk's choice. This initial experience sets the precedent for the evening, preparing guests for a truly artistic journey. Following this, the first courses (or 'impressions') are served in the lounge, accompanied by a drink and view of the impressive test kitchen. All diners are then brought up through the wine cellar, one of the most grandiose design features of Alchemist, in order to get to the main dining area. Home to 10,000 bottles of wine and towering 15-meters above the ground floor lounge, the wine cellar boasts the same high-standards as Munk's menu. Upon entering the main dining room, guests will take their counter seats under the dome. Throughout the meal, 10 laser projectors will display different images onto the ceiling, adding to the creative atmosphere. Guests will be transported underwater, watched by eyeballs and caged chickens, and find themselves under the cherry trees of Japan. Munk sought to create a cutting-edge, immersive experience for diners, and it is evident in Alchemist's design that he used everything in his power to do so. As they come towards the end of the meal, guests will be brought through a second exhibition space to the balcony where final impressions are served along with coffee and tea. All throughout the space, guest experience has been prioritised. Alchemist is a prime example of a leading contemporary restaurant which successfully provides space for diners to properly appreciate and enjoy the cuisine being served.

### **The Menu at Alchemist**



*Plastic Fantastic, dish at Alchemist.*



*Burnout Chicken, dish at Alchemist.*



*1984, dish at Alchemist.*



Dining at Alchemist is a six-hour endeavour and with a 50-course tasting menu that costs £538, it certainly is not for everyone. However, for those interested in the one-of-a-kind experience, booking must be made well in advance as reservations are ‘released three months ahead [and] sell out in seconds’ (Hall, 2023). When designing the menu, Munk maintained a strong focus on sustainability, holistic cooking, and ethical sourcing. This ultimately led to many dishes containing ingredients that would not be found in other establishments. The chefs at Alchemist aim to reduce waste in meat dishes by cooking as much of the animal as is possible. Poached lamb brain in a cherry glaze, sustainable foie gras, lamb lungs, and pig trotter crackers are just some of the resulting offal dishes. Through using these often-discarded ingredients, Munk demonstrates the extent of his technical skill and sets a precedent for upcoming generations, calling for a less wasteful future. These are not the only dishes with a message. During the 6-hour experience, Munk uses many of his dishes to provide commentary on varying social issues. One of the most famous examples of this is his dish titled Plastic Fantastic. Made up of grilled cod jaw, smoked bone marrow, and edible plastic made from cod skin, the dish ‘is a comment on microplastics [found] in our oceans, and the creatures that live in the ocean,’ (Michael Ligier, 2022, 00:03:49). Additionally, diners must at one point ‘free’ their dish from a cage in order to enjoy a chicken leg, Munk’s way of drawing attention to the suffering of caged hens. Both dishes are accompanied by visuals which are projected onto the dome, heightening guests’ immersion. There are also additional courses which address issues of data protection, blood donation, and exploitation within the chocolate industry. Whilst diners may feel uncomfortable at certain points, the level of artistry exemplified by the team at Alchemist cannot be denied. Munk’s restaurant showcases a paradigm shift in the way chefs are thinking about and presenting food, one which points towards a future in which the lines between food and art are increasingly more blurred.

## **Conclusion**

Through the examination of three key restaurants, this article has shed light on what is often an over-looked art form within the history of art. Restaurant design has been acknowledged for its essential role in providing diners with a memorable experience. FOOD, The Fat Duck, and Alchemist have all demonstrated the restaurant's ability to transcend mere functional needs of a space. Whilst all unique, these three restaurants exemplify the notion that dining spaces can be viewed as a stage on which the chef's performance takes place. This developing idea of a theatrical approach to restaurant design has and will continue to provide a way for chefs to set their establishments apart. Offering a dining experience that encompasses all senses, rather than focusing solely on the food, will cater to the increasing number of diners seeking unique and exciting experiences. Encouraging more chefs and designers to think about dining in this way, as a multi-sensory experience, will allow for even more new opportunities and advancements within the culinary arts sector.

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