

## The New York Times

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# Museums With Such Good Taste (Meaning the Restaurant, Dear)

By **Kim Severson**

March 14, 2017

As food becomes increasingly valuable cultural currency, American museums are using cooking to help visitors better connect to the art on the walls.

When the Metropolitan Museum of Art was casting around last year for new ways to showcase its exhibition “Jerusalem 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven,” it paired the Israeli chef and food writer Yotam Ottolenghi with the authors of “The Gaza Kitchen” for a 13-course medieval feast that took six months to plan.

Laura McDermit, the manager of social experiences at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, took a similar approach with a program called Feast, which the museum began last year.

A dinner prepared by Michael Gulotta, a New Orleans chef who draws from the cooking traditions of both Southeast Asia and Southeast Louisiana, was the debut event. The food underscored themes in “The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music,” the Propeller Group’s visual and musical exploration of South Vietnam’s funerary tradition, which echo rituals in New Orleans.

In November, Ms. McDermit recruited the Brazilian chef Ana Luiza Trajano to cook eight courses inspired by the work of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, whose first comprehensive retrospective in the United States hung at the museum from October through Jan. 2.

Each event, which cost \$250 a head and seated 150 people, sold out in a snap.

“We see food becoming more important as museums try to create a complete experience for people,” Ms. McDermit said. “Food, at its base level, is this way to sustain ourselves. Art is a way we sustain the higher levels of our needs.”

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Programs that bring people together over food and art are on the rise, she and others said. The evidence, both large and small, is everywhere.

A menu at the new cafe at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, S.C., draws on the region’s antebellum rice-belt culture with dishes partly inspired by a current exhibition of Jacob Lawrence prints.

In Manhattan, curators at the Museum of Chinese in America are exploring Chinese food and immigrant identity through the stories of 33 home cooks and chefs in “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America,” an exhibition that mixes videos with an oversize dinner table. The table holds artifacts from the cooks’ kitchens and vessels that link regional cooking traditions. The show has been so popular that the museum has extended its run through September.

In Cincinnati, the Contemporary Arts Center last year published a cookbook titled “Cuisine, Art, Cocktails: Celebrating Contemporary Cincinnati.” Chefs were asked to create dishes inspired by an artist whose work had been featured at the center. David Cook used Robert Mapplethorpe’s photograph “Calla Lily” as the basis for a dessert based on meringues, vanilla custard and a soup made from passion fruit and saffron.

“What we’re seeing across the board is a desire for experiences over things, so we are seeing gastronomy being used as a way to round out the experience and create a deeper, richer engagement,” said Ari Wiseman, the deputy director of the

Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Although Guggenheim museums are focused on visual art, everything from coffee bars to programming is designed to create places for dialogue that can be social, educational and gastronomic, he said.

As food reaches increasingly into exhibitions, art is moving into museum restaurants as well.

When the restaurateur Danny Meyer opened the Modern in the Museum of Modern Art in 2005, the notion of a destination American restaurant inside a major art museum seemed groundbreaking.

For decades, museum directors hadn't seemed to think that food had a place in museums. When the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its first large cafeteria in 1954, it did so grudgingly. Now museum restaurants have blossomed into destinations and showplaces, with notable chefs who have been recognized with Michelin stars and James Beard Foundation awards.

Their menus are often inspired by collections, and restaurant walls have become gallery space. In January, the Guggenheim's Wright restaurant in New York unveiled four pieces by the American abstract artist Sarah Crowner, who produced both paintings and tile works for the space.

At the Brooklyn Museum, diners at the Norm are surrounded by paintings and the shipping crates they came in.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has taken things a step further with In Situ, a restaurant that opened in its lobby in June. The chef Corey Lee uses the menu as a way to interpret the best dishes from the world's greatest chefs. Managers encourage visitors to think of the restaurant as an art installation, with the food serving as both the medium and the inspiration for global cultural exploration.

Two Washington museums run by the Smithsonian Institution have forged an even deeper connection between menu and mission. At both the Mitsitam Cafe in the National Museum of the American Indian, which opened in 2004, and at the

Sweet Home Café inside the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened last summer, food is an extension of the collection.

At the African-American museum, five stations in the cafe have been designed to tell the story of the African diaspora in the United States. Dishes like catfish po' boys and a Caribbean pepper pot help define the culture of Creole coastal communities. The story of the Underground Railroad is illuminated through a traditional New York City oyster pan roast inspired by Thomas Downing, the son of freed slaves who opened a popular oyster restaurant on Broad Street in Manhattan in the early 1800s. He also hid escaped slaves in its basement.

It is what Dr. Jessica Harris, whose research provided the intellectual architecture for the cafe's food, called "a gustatory continuation of the lessons learned."

Art and food have been linked forever, said Susan H. Edwards, the executive director of the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, which began culinary programming three years ago as a way to add more multisensory experiences for visitors.

"It's a changing view of what museums have to offer," she said. "People want more of a social encounter with art now than an academic experience. Food is another way we are thinking differently about engagement, about how we make cultural connections."

A version of this article appears in print on March 15, 2017, on Page F14 of the New York edition with the headline: Such Good Taste