

Eating As Experience: Connecting Gastronomy to Visual Art Through the Philosophy of John Dewey

by

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Abstract

The motivation for this capstone paper came from a recent internship at the James Beard Foundation, a culinary arts foundation in New York, NY. In this environment it was quite apparent that food and eating were regarded as intellectually stimulating and aesthetically inclined. The chef was admired as an artist, and the food, examples of his craftsmanship, was appreciated and enjoyed according to its sensory appeal. Through an extensive literature review of the aesthetic attitudes present in the fields of sociology, philosophy, and the fine arts it was understood that, according to many scholars, gastronomy and gastronomic experiences were not seen as aesthetically significant to the human environment, and, in some cases, were even documented as insignificant aspects. My approach to confront this gap in the research and to better understand the reverence observed in New York, involves the connection between the act of eating and the act of viewing art. The bridge was discovered through the writings of John Dewey (1934), a philosopher and education theorist whose seminal text, *Art as Experience*, expands the definition of art and aesthetic experience. The two questions that guided my process were the following: Can gastronomy be considered an aesthetic experience as Dewey proposes?; and are analytical methods used to evaluate museum experience transferrable to the aesthetic experience of gastronomy and, specifically, how can these tools be implemented to evaluate culinary events?

Through close reading of Dewey's definition of the terms "aesthetic," "experience," and "perception," it was found that gastronomy could be connected to visual art through the shared relationship between the doer and the perceiver. It is by this affiliation that the perspective of the diner is augmented and the importance of sensory engagement enhanced. Despite the difference in their constituent parts, the experience of eating and the experience of viewing art can both be described as creating an aesthetic unity that brings participants closer to what they are experiencing, whether in a museum or restaurant setting. The last section strove to make practical the newfound alignment between eating and visual art. It was proposed that several museum theories used to analyze visitor experience be applied to diner experience. Specifically, the Model of Contextual Learning by Falk and Dierking (1992) was incorporated as a way to deconstruct the nebulous perceptual process of enjoyment.

Keywords

gastronomy, aesthetic, experience, aesthetic attitude, thick and thin senses, perception

Eating as Experience: Connecting Gastronomy to Art Through the Philosophy of John Dewey

The boisterous din has subsided into a steady hum of contented sighs. Once taut, the linen tablecloths are now rumpled and askew, stained with the palate of the night's feast. Wine colors, meat colors, cheese colors, all create a blotchy kaleidoscope of scented pigments that speak the story of tonight's menu. I sit, less than erect, among my fellow gluttonous diners. Like them, I recall the many sights, sounds, and tastes I greedily indulged in over the *courses* of the last three hours.

I feel fuller, not merely in terms of satiety but with friendship, memory, and self-knowledge.

(Journal Entry, July 22, 2009 - First Dinner at James Beard House)

Compiled during my summer spent at the James Beard Foundation, this journal entry excerpt illustrates my personal connection to dining. Dining, for me, is completely sensual. It is a space where pleasure reigns and messiness is all part of the process. For my internship, I was fortunate to participate as diner, employee, and student researcher which made me adept at analyzing the multiple layers of culinary events. I began to notice that over the course of the evening's feasting, knowledge was transferred, friendships were formed, and a new understanding of the self would emerge. I began to wonder how to describe this process.

Undoubtedly, we all can recall moments from our childhood that revolved around food: the dinner table was the place where problems were discussed, milestones were celebrated, and ideas were shared. Food choices were a way for me, as a young girl, to learn about the world and the people that inhabit it. When I was in elementary school, I had a bus driver named Dawn. I don't recall her last name, she was "Dawn Bus Driver" to me. Everyday when all the other kids had been dropped off, I would carefully move up from my seat in the back, to the seat closest to Dawn. We probably would exchange mutual "hellos" which were soon followed by my eternal query, "Dawn, what did you have for dinner last night?" She would reply with something canned, microwaved, or involving a drive-through window -- all delicacies in my health-

conscious house. I would then share my “beige counterpart” and the conversation would carry on from there. We became friends just based around our relationship to food.

Although my memories and particular culinary histories may be uniquely my own, the experiences themselves are universal. As the literature reports, all of us, from every background, ethnicity, and geographic locale understand, firsthand, the power that stems from the transformative nature of gastronomic experiences.

Clearly, gastronomy, or the art and science of delicate eating, is an experience that should be fully studied and analyzed for its aesthetic and intellectual merit. Although many have discussed multiple reasons for why it has yet to be fully examined, one reason that has particular resonance for me is Edward Bullough’s distinction between the “sensual” and “aesthetic” senses:

It has been an old problem why the ‘arts of the eye and the arts of the ear’ should have reached the practically exclusive predominance over arts of the other senses. Attempts to raise ‘culinary art’ to the level of a Fine Art have failed in spite of all propaganda, as completely as the creation of scent or liquor symphonies (Bullough, 1914, p. 87).

Bullough corroborates these words through his concept of “psychical distance,” a term he devised to explain the physical and mental separation he feels is needed for aesthetic experiences to come into being. He conjectures that the senses of taste and smell, so integral to gastronomic experience, are inadequate to intellectual inquiry as they focus our attentions on our bodies and therefore do not afford us the detachment necessary for true aesthetic experience creation. Santayana (1896) similarly makes this point through his concept of “transparent organs” that comprise aesthetic pleasure and differentiate it from sensual pleasure:

There is here, a very marked distinction between physical and aesthetic pleasure; the organs of the latter must be transparent, they must not intercept our attention but carry it directly to some external object (Santayana, 1896, p.36).

Both theorists describe aesthetic experiences as being essentially created by the participants involved through what has become known as the “aesthetic attitude.” Like Bullough’s psychical distance, this attitude or disposition “fosters aesthetic appreciation by inclining one to isolate an object from its practical relevance to notice the qualities it displays in and of itself” (Korsmeyer, 1977, p.46).

It is obvious that Bullough (1914) and Santayana (1896) regard visual art and the process of viewing art objects as the ultimate aesthetic, focus. Their arguments related to sense perception are undoubtedly relevant and are quite suitable to this particular practice, yet, may not be substantial enough to account for the perceptual process of other kinds of experiences that inherently involve more senses to fully grasp. Their “aesthetic attitude” requires the selective turning off of senses that, in their minds, do not lead to the construction of aesthetic or, more to the point, artistic judgment. The adoption of these aesthetic attitudes threatens to color the entire perceptual field: “it is the attitude we take which determines how we perceive the world” (Stolnitz, 1960, p. 5). Santayana (1896) would describe this selective attention as “focusing” to avoid “interception.” This selection process is further a result of the tension that exists in aesthetics between discernment and pleasure: fine discernment is accomplished by means of the pleasure, yet the pleasure itself is too sensuous [and personal] to count as intellectual (Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 7).

Presently, many contemporary art experiences involve multi-sensory engagement. Might these “interceptions” be the elements that expand our minds and therefore make us better aestheticians? Should we limit the perception of art experience to encompass only that which we see and hear? Berleant (1992), a champion of Environmental Aesthetics explains that multiple senses are necessary to develop our “perceptual awareness” of all aesthetic environments:

The physical senses play an active part, not as passive channels for receiving data from external stimuli but as an integrated sensorium, which equally accepts and shapes sense qualities as part of the matrix of perceptual awareness. This is not just a neural or psychological phenomenon but a direct engagement of the conscious body as part of an environmental complex (Berleant, 1992, p.15).

Moreover, Berleant (1992) states that we act and respond to our worlds “through [not only] color, texture, and shape, but with the breath, by smell, with our skin, [and] through our musculature” (Berleant, 1992, p.19). In this way, the process of viewing art could be described as not only aesthetic, but also sensual. Additionally, as Beardsley states (1969), our physiological arousal in addition to our mental appreciation of the object or experience would become intimately tied to our discernment of its intellectual value:

I propose to say that a person is having an aesthetic experience during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concerned (Beardsley, 1969, p. 1).

This “aesthetic satisfaction” is a crucial element that I believe clearly serves to connect gastronomic experience to the aesthetic experience akin to enjoying art. In this sense, as Dewey suggests, “the word aesthetic refers to experience as appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying” (Dewey, 1934, p. 49). Is Dewey suggesting that gastronomy be considered an aesthetic experience? And, furthermore, are analytical methods used to evaluate museum experience transferrable to the aesthetic experience of gastronomy and, specifically, how can these tools be implemented to evaluate culinary events? The remainder of this study will concentrate on my responses to these questions.

Eating as Experience

John Dewey was a philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer who was and continues to be instrumental in defining and expanding human experience and its relationship to man, nature and art. One work, from his extensive canon, that will be discussed in this exploration of aesthetics and gastronomy is *Art as Experience* (1934). Supplementary material is provided from a later collection of selected works titled *John Dewey On Experience, Nature, and Freedom*.

Dewey (1934) states that “sensory satisfaction, when aesthetic, is so because it does not stand by itself but is linked to the activity of which it is the consequence” (Dewey, 1934, p.49). Essentially, what makes the act of eating aesthetic and the sense of taste valuable, is the inherent connection between a completed dish, its perception by diners, and the act of preparing it. “As production must absorb into itself qualities of the product as perceived, and be regulated by them, seeing, hearing, tasting, become aesthetic when relation to a distinct manner of activity

qualifies what is perceived” (p. 49). These ideas set up the relationship of “doing” and “undergoing” that Dewey distinguishes as the constituent elements of aesthetic experiences. “The doing may be energetic and the undergoing may be acute and intense, but unless they are related to each other to form a whole in perception, the [experience] is not fully aesthetic” (Dewey, 1960, p. 168).

In order to more fully understand the acts that make up Dewey’s notion of aesthetic experience, “doing” and undergoing,” it is necessary to explore the way in which he characterizes their sum. Dewey (1960) defines an experience as “a consummation or fulfillment where the pervading or aesthetic quality binds the constituents into an integral whole” (Dewey, 1960, p. 150). He goes on to state that “this aesthetic quality is characteristic of anything which is distinctively *an* experience” (p.150). Dewey’s use of italics to highlight the word “an” differentiates the process of undergoing *an* experience, something that occurs sporadically, from merely experiencing, a process that occurs continuously:

We have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation (Dewey, 1934, p. 35).

This idea of “consummation” is particularly connected to the experience of eating, as a meal is consumed, it’s aesthetic qualities are embodied by the participant. Moreover, because the diner is

the key instrument in this consuming process, his agency is heightened -- receptivity is not passivity:

The word aesthetic refers to experience as appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying. It denotes the consumer's rather than the producer's standpoint. It is *Gusto*, taste; and with cooking, overt skillful action is on the side of the cook who prepares, while taste is on the side of the consumer (Dewey, 1934, p. 47).

The diner's role as receiver and perceiver is as integral to the experience as the chef's role of creator. We too often make the mistake of praising only the creator or maker and not acknowledging the individuals whose perception and reception of the piece give it life beyond certain contexts or situations.

Sometimes the effect is to separate the two from each other, to regard art as something superimposed upon aesthetic material, or, upon the other side, to an assumption that since art is a process of creation, perception and enjoyment of it have nothing in common with the creative act (Dewey, 1960, p. 163).

It is the connection of creation to perception and enjoyment that Dewey proposes creates value. As Dewey states, "perfection in execution cannot be measured or defined in terms of execution alone; it implies those who perceive and enjoy the product that is executed" (Dewey, 1960, p. 164) The chef creates dishes for the diner and the measure of the value of what was prepared is discovered through the diner's consumptive enjoyment. "Mere perfection in execution, judged in its own terms in isolation can probably be attained better by a machine than by human art" (p. 164). This idea elucidates the maker's intention to create something that will be perceived and enjoyed. As Dewey states, "the [must] artist embody in himself the attitude of

the perceiver while he works” (p.165). Without this embodiment, the “unity” of the meal would not exist.

Aesthetic lies within two limits: between cessation and mechanical connection. The enemies of the aesthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure....Experience is limited by all the causes which interfere with perception of the relations between doing and undergoing in relationship. Unbalance on either side blurs the perception of relations and leaves the experience partial and distorted, with scant or false meaning (Dewey, 1960, p. 161).

Although there are many pieces and elements that make up aesthetic experiences, the unity of the experience gives it its overall character and connects creator to perceiver, chef to diner. As Dewey states, “the unity gives the experience its name” (Dewey, 1960, p. 151).

The need for unity is similarly present when viewing visual art work. “In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so” (Dewey, 1960, p. 152). The experience of viewing art, Dewey (1960) would call “an experience of thinking,” but goes on to qualify that this type of aesthetic experience is different from others only in its materials: “The existence of this unity is constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience, in spite of the variation of its constituent parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual...” (p. 153). The overall union of maker and perceiver, the balance between doing and undergoing, remains present in both the aesthetic experience of viewing visual art and the experience of eating.

Dewey's dissection of the meanings of the terms "aesthetic" and "experience" have led to a more expanded definition of art as well as a better acceptance that art exists in everyday life, or moreover, as discussed by author Van Meter Ames in his piece *John Dewey as Aesthetician*, that "art is life intensified" (Ames, 1953, p. 4). This treatment of art is rather prevalent in the field of environmental aesthetics, where the human environment becomes a canvas for artful experience and sensory engagement. Dewey's valuing of how experience is perceived, amplifies the importance of the senses in aesthetic understanding and discounts the idea of psychical distance as a critical element of this process.

Sensory experience is indeed central in aesthetic perception, and it receives even greater emphasis when we engage with environment. We not only see our living world; we move within it, we act upon and in response to it. We grasp places not just through color, texture, and shape, but with the breath, by smell, with our skin, through our musculature..." (Berleant, 1992, p. 19).

This regard for sensory involvement discussed by Berleant relates to the idea of the "thick sense" versus the "thin sense" of the aesthetic discussed by D.W. Prall and following him, Hospers:

The thin sense is relevant when we aesthetically appreciate value objects primarily in virtue of their physical appearances, while the thick sense involves not merely the appearances of objects, but also certain qualities that objects express or convey to the viewer. Prall calls this 'expressive beauty' of objects, while Hospers speaks of objects expressing life values (Carlson, 2007, p. 57).

The idea of “thick” and “thin” senses are relevant for both visual art and gastronomy and serve to reevaluate sensual acts like eating. Traditionally, museums have been regarded as repositories of art historical achievement. They have been stigmatized as representing the expert’s point of view and providing the knowledge necessary to refine the novice public. This convention has spurred exhibitions of primarily didactic methods of engagement. Through this disregard for the visitor’s perception and enjoyment of the art on display, the act of viewing coerces viewers to not go beyond their “thin sense” of the aesthetic. Similarly, aesthetics in gastronomy have come to account for merely food styling and dish composition. In this way, the chef is solely responsible for aesthetic understanding and the diner’s appreciation is relegated to a byproduct. Prall’s “thick” and “thin” senses, rather than the more limiting “aesthetic attitude,” may be a more effective method to describe the ways in which we understand and experience the aesthetic.

Dewey’s view of aesthetic experience has influenced museum theory in analyzing visitor experience and learning. His idea of participant agency and the value of perception have come to effect the move to more experience-based art exhibitions that focus on a visitor-centered paradigm. An example of this can be found in the study developed by Eva Van Moer, Tom De Mette, and Willem Elias (2008). The authors of this study assert that museums’ educational philosophies are insufficient in their primary focus on information-based experience. This reliance on text-based educational tools prevents visitors from coming to a broader understanding or engagement with the art. Experiential learning, by contrast, has been shown to “stimulate, deepen, and improve visitors engagement in the inquiry cycle” (Van Moer, De Mette & Elias, 2008, p.43). The authors test this theory by incorporating Deweyian philosophy in the museum environment. His concept of Inquiry-Based Experience rests on the notion that deep

learning arises from the visitors' interaction with art environments. The authors tested these ideas by studying how 68 individuals discussed their aesthetic experiences in a contemporary art museum in Belgium. They found that visitors shape their experience through perception, thoughts, feelings, and actions, a broad spectrum. The study concluded that museums need to allow visitors to think from various positions by providing educational tools to encourage many different reactions to the art environment, for, this is the kind of education that leads to enriched aesthetic experiences.

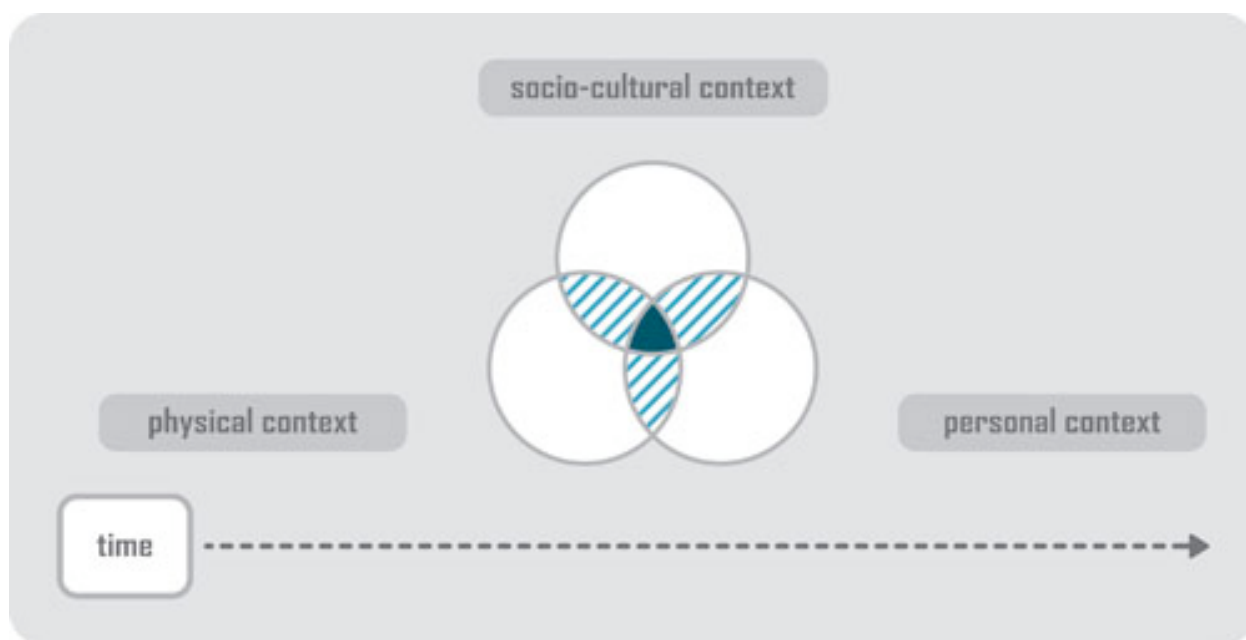
Dewey's (1934) definition of aesthetic experiences connects gastronomy to visual art by augmenting the perspective of the perceiver and heightening the importance of sensory engagement in the process of understanding our human environment. Despite the difference in their constituent parts, the experience of eating and the experience of viewing art can both be described as creating an aesthetic unity that brings participants closer to what they're undergoing. In order to test this relationship it is important to determine whether or not analytical tools used primarily to assess museum learning could be adopted to evaluate learning in the context of culinary events. Theorists Robert Falk and Lynn Dierking (1992), Lisa Roberts (1997), and Jan Packer (2005) will help determine the validity of this connection.

Connecting Gastronomy to Visual Art

The Falk and Dierking Model (1992) will act as the primary tool, as the others are clearly detailed versions of two of its divisions. Falk and Dierking's model of visitor learning and meaning-making was chosen for its visitor-centered approach and easy conformability to the philosophy of John Dewey. It also provides a bridge to experience construction and evaluation as

it seeks to understand the elements that comprise the perception that, as Dewey states, is integral to the unity of the aesthetic experience. As discussed in the forward to *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Falk and Dierking, 2000), “organizing the learning experience is no longer the exclusive responsibility of the museum, [or institution], it has to be shared with the viewer” (p. viii).

The Falk and Dierking (2000) Model, shown in the following figure, is a visual representation of the way the public uses the museum space.



Falk and Dierking intended the model to extend to educational environments beyond the museum, such as institutions of history, natural science, botanical gardens, historic homes, and zoos. This adaptability is what will prove most useful for the purpose of this analysis. Falk and Dierking have conceptualized the visit to involve an overlapping of three contexts: The personal context; The social context; and the physical context (Falk and Dierking, 1992, p.2). “All museum visits involve these three contexts; they are the windows through which we can view the visitor’s perspective” (p.2).

The *personal context* is undoubtedly the most unique aspect of the Model, but also the most individual and difficult to grasp.

The personal context includes the visitors' interests, motivations, and concerns. Such characteristics help to mold what an individual enjoys and appreciates, how he wishes to spend his time, and what experiences he seeks for self-fulfillment. [...] It is a personal agenda - a set of expectations and anticipated outcomes for the visit (Falk and Dierking, 1992, p.2)

We all bring our different experiences, associations, and emotions to a space, and these personal aspects involuntarily affect our behavior, understanding, and learning of our environs. We will never know what our friends and fellow participants are thinking, but the understanding that everyone brings their own "personal agenda" to an aesthetic experience, helps creators of aesthetic experience to conceive of highly relatable and resonating experiences.

Roberts (1997) provides further insight on the concept of Falk and Dierking's personal context with her discussion of narrative construction in museums. She discusses the shift in thinking that has occurred, where "conventional views of knowledge as objective and absolute, are challenged by the notion that knowledge is socially constructed, shaped by the interests and values of the knower" (Robert, 1997, p. 2). This heightening of participant agency has changed the job of the curator from that of primarily representing knowledge to interpreting perception. Roberts' view of meaning-making relates back to Dewey's important relationship between "doing" and "undergoing," a critical aspect of creating unity in aesthetic experience.

The *social context* is an important aspect to experiences, like museums and restaurants, that inherently bring large groups together. It adds another layer of influence that has large affect

on participant learning. The following quote outlines the different factors that come to bear on the sociality of a space. For the purposes of this discussion, wherever there is the word “museum,” insert “restaurant” and whenever there is the word “exhibit,” insert the words “cuisine” or “menu.”

The museum experience differs depending on whether one walks through a museum with an eighteen-year-old or with an eighty-year-old in tow; whether one is with a parent with two small children; or whether one’s companion is knowledgeable about the exhibits. Whether or not the museum is crowded also strongly influences the museum experience; so do interactions with museum staff and volunteers (Falk and Dierking, 1992, p.3)

Nowadays, more and more restaurants are deepening the social context of eating through communal dining, where guests are placed at longer table besides fellow diners. As was discussed early, the convivial nature of the aesthetic experience of eating, invariably stimulates conversing and sharing at the table.

Packer (2005) elaborates on the significance of sociality through her article *Solitary vs. Shared Learning: Exploring the Social Dimension of Museum Learning*. She discusses, that although solitary experience is particularly meaningful to some participants, shared experience, more often, creates a richer learning experience. Specifically, social interaction reflects “five frames of reference: determining what something is; expressing opinion or judgement; describing what is before you; relating special knowledge about what is before you; and relating personal experience connected to what is before you” (Packer, 2005, p. 2). In effect, Packer’s “frames of reference” in sociality seem to connect all three aspects of Falk and Dierking’s Model, further elucidating how aesthetic experiences more meaningful for all involved.

The final context that Falk and Dierking (1992) discuss is called the *physical context*. It involves “the architecture and feel of the building, as well as the objects and [/or] artifacts contained within” (Falk and Dierking, 1992, p. 3). Sometimes called “materiality,” the physical context also includes smells, textures, lighting, and for restaurants, plating and presentation; all elements that comprise the ambience of a space. The importance of physical context can be evidenced through the rise of Experience Design, a practice where individuals are trained to adjust spaces to encourage positive reaction and joviality. Many restaurants hire experience design consultants to create the most affective backdrop to the food. This manipulation of physical context demonstrates the multilayered reality of aesthetic experience.

As the preceding tools suggest, there are multiple components to analyzing the visitors’ perspective in a museum or restaurant setting. Together these ideas create a language or syntax to describe how diners learn and make meaning through gastronomic experience. Utilizing these tools could be beneficial when evaluating culinary events, such as grand banquets, festivals, and other large food-filled gatherings where more qualitative experience is measured to determine success.

Conclusion

It has been found that gastronomy is indeed considered an aesthetic experience as Dewey proposes and it is valid to connect museum-based analytical tools to better understand the perceptual process of dining. Perceptual processes are quite enigmatic, making them difficult to anticipate and fully comprehend. Perceptual processes for the highly personal appreciation of aesthetic experiences are even more nebulous and difficult to grasp. This is the task facing

museum curators, event coordinators, and restaurateurs today. As is illustrated through the philosophy of Dewey (1934) and museum theory, this task should not solely belong to the creators, but should be shared by visitors and appreciators of both cuisine and visual art. The idea of shared conception and construction is known, in museum studies, as “co-production,” or the “close cooperation between specialized people and laypersons” (Meyer, 2008, p. 1). It is as important for institutions to recognize that diners have agency in constructing their own experiences, as it is for the diners themselves to realize their generative ideas and feelings.

The James Beard Foundation provides gourmet dinners to its members and the public nearly 320 days of the year. Success is solely gleaned through ticket sales and membership increases. As Dewey suggests and museum theorists propose, there are more comprehensive, visitor-centered methods to understand appreciation, enjoyment, and learning. A modified version of Falk and Dierking’s Model of Contextual Learning could be extended to help decipher the perceptual process behind dining. This knowledge could be used to develop new programming that meets the needs of the growing number of food enthusiasts. As of 2007, it was documented by the Travel Industry Association that 60 percent of American leisure travelers engaged in travel related to wine and food events (TIA, 2007). This rising statistic substantiates the need for more diner-centered engagement initiatives.

Specifically, there should be more opportunities for visitors to share their ideas and experiences. Comprehensive surveys, comment boxes, focus groups, planning sessions, and other outreach initiatives could be integrated into the design of seasonal menus and themed events. How can the maker embody the mind of the perceiver if the perceiver does not have a sufficient outlet for which to share thoughts and ideas? These visitor involvement strategies

encourage the public to regard restaurants as organizations seeking involvement from their constituency.

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