the Communal Table

A Wholistic Perspective on Food and Social Development

By Sarah Cook
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Project
Department of Studio and Digital Arts
School of Communication and The Arts

Liberty University

Final Signatures

Master of Fine Arts | Department of Studio & Digital Arts
School of Communication & the Arts | Liberty University

_____

David Meyer, MFA, Chair

_____

Adara Wright, MFA, First Reader

_____

Joshua Wilson, MFA, MFA, Second Reader, Thesis Advisor

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Abstract

In order to address issues of isolation in the wake of a global pandemic, this thesis examines the nature of the connection between food and community through commensality. "Commensality" is defined as the practice of eating together, which has demonstrable health benefits on personal, interpersonal, and psychological levels. Research reveals that, while commensality has been a foundational tenet of society since civilization's beginnings, instances of commensality appear to be at an all time low for modern Americans. The results are diminished mental health, undeveloped support networks, and missed opportunities for emotional connection. All of these may be thought of as symptoms of a larger issue: a lack of social sustainability.

Through analysis of various relevant studies, firsthand accounts, and food-related media, this thesis establishes several observations: first, that today's young adults struggle with social sustainability, second, that food is instinctually tied to social development, and third, that commensality can serve as a viable means to combat isolation and cultivate community. With this data as a basis, the thesis argues for a holistic perspective of food that encompasses its vital roles as a sustainer and social catalyst, suggesting a strategic use of commensality to promote healthy community.
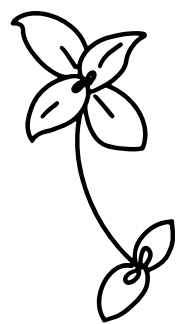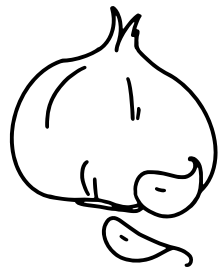
Chapter One:

Introduction

Summary of Introduction

Overview

As one of the core needs for survival, food has been a central focus of human civilization for as long as we have existed. It only makes sense, then, that food is also central to community — one of the very things that makes us human. Over the thousands of years that civilization has existed as we recognize it, food has always been deeply ingrained in our social lives, never straying far from the heart of our communal gatherings — at least, until today.

In our modern societal culture, particularly that of the United States of America, food has taken a different standing in our priorities and our sense of community. An entire generation of adults, especially younger adults, perhaps living on their own for the first time, may consume each meal of their day without seeing another human face. In this social framework (or lack thereof), food can be a means to an end, entirely severed from its rich history as a centerpiece of daily communal interaction.

The state of modern American culture is one where food has taken a backseat to convenience and community is often left to happenstance. This has, over time, proven detrimental to our social structure and mental health, and its effects have only skyrocketed in recent years. In the wake of a global pandemic, where social distancing and intentional isolation became the status quo for multiple years in a row, the American public is still reeling from the effects. Recent studies have shown that mental illness, particularly related to loneliness, is at a record high for recent memory.

Observed Problem

Young adults in modern society struggle with social sustainability in a post-Covid world, resulting in diminished mental health, underdeveloped support networks, and missed opportunities for emotional connection.

Research Problem

Despite our digital advancements, our society is more disconnected than ever. Lockdowns and social distancing have only exacerbated the issue, driving individuals towards isolation and antisocial tendencies. I believe these challenges can be addressed by going back to social basics, using food as a leading example. The solution must be something accessible to people of all social standings.

The purpose of my research is to identify the community-based challenges that young adults today face, and look into how food has served to combat them over time. My goal is to present a holistic perspective on the factors that contribute to these problems and provide informed insights into possible solutions through a culinary lens.

In the grand scheme of things, this research represents a crucial milestone in the journey towards recovering resilient, interconnected, culturally vibrant communities that have been lost or damaged in recent years. Through the study of these issues, my research will develop a practical solution that empower young adults

with social sustainability in a society that drives people apart. Some research questions are:

1. **What is social sustainability?**
2. **What challenges do young adults face with social sustainability, and why?**
3. **Is there a relationship between shared mealtimes and social development?**
4. **What is the historical significance of commensality?**
5. **Can commensality be a practical means to develop social sustainability?**

Knowledge Gap

While research on food and sustainability is nothing new, the study of food as a means to achieve personal social goals is fairly new ground. Most of the cited articles offer research that ranges from the 90s to the modern day. Some of the information could be considered outdated, while some is too new to have much corroboration. If the research shows anything, it is that the historical role of food still has a practical application for modern audiences.

Still, perhaps due to the fact that discourse on the subject is a relatively new conversation, there remains a lack of tangible tools for approaching this task. While learning to cook has always been an obstacle for younger demographics, in 2023, a cooking experience survey of 135 members of Gen Z reported that, while roughly 50% lived alone or semi-alone, less than half considered cooking a regular ritual for themselves. Less than 12% saw their cooking as a means of emotional connection. When asked about sharing food online with peers, more than 35% of participants reported frustration at the lack of real-time interaction (Yuan). One study cited in the National Library of Medicine notes that: "The prevalence of severe loneliness was 21% during COVID-19 compared with 6% prior to COVID-19," (OSullivan). This culinary illiteracy remains a major obstacle for those most in need

of commensality, and there are not yet many resources designed specifically for this purpose. The field of study, and perhaps our culture as a whole, may stand to benefit from a set of practical tools and tutorials for engaging in communal food preparation.

Significance

The primary target audience for this research comprises individuals and families facing social isolation and disengagement. Specifically, the research aims to benefit those struggling with limited social interactions, including young adults living alone, the elderly, single-parent households, and individuals living in impoverished communities. Furthermore, the focus extends to adolescents and young adults who may be experiencing emotional and psychological challenges due to a lack of social connections. The research may also assist educators, mental health professionals, and community workers who engage with these vulnerable individuals, providing them with valuable insights and strategies to combat social challenges and unhealthy eating habits.

Personal Motivation

Growing up, I never liked food in general. I had no motivation for nourishment or health, and it was not until becoming a Christian that I found food to be an incredibly humbling experience of community and healthy intimacy. "Breaking the Bread" became my personal way of connection, and I sought to learn how to cook whatever I could just to find new ways to learn about others. The more I learned about the culture and community that surrounded food, the more I became enamored with bringing people together through it. Learning to cook enhanced my social skills, but also taught me mutual respect and trust. I want to share those lessons with others who still struggle like I did.
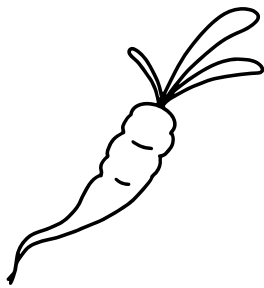
Chapter Two:

Research

Young adults in modern society struggle with social sustainability in a post-Covid world, resulting in diminished mental health, underdeveloped support networks, and missed opportunities for emotional connection.

Literature Review

Introduction

As one of the core needs for survival, food has been a central focus of human civilization for as long as we have existed. It only makes sense, then, that food is also central to community — one of the very things that makes us human. Human beings are distinctly social creatures, banning together in community not just for survival, but for mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing (Purnell).

Food is likewise essential to life, and it is far easier to cultivate with group efforts. Food and community are inextricably tied; one makes the other possible, and vice versa. Over the thousands of years that civilization has existed as we recognize it, food has always been deeply ingrained in our social lives, never straying far from the heart of our communal gatherings — at least, until today.

In our modern societal culture, particularly that of the United States of America, food has taken a different standing in our priorities and our sense of community. There are, of course, still remnants of our historical relationship with food. Superbowl parties, for example, are never complete without chips, dip, and chicken wings. Still, there are just as many cases, if not more, where food has come to be seen simply as fuel rather than an essential element of social wellbeing.

Today, single-serving microwave dinners and leave-on-the-doormat deliveries have become a staple of the American working class. An entire generation of adults, especially younger adults, perhaps living on their own for the first time, may consume each meal of their day without seeing another human face. In this social framework (or lack thereof), food is only a means to an end, entirely severed from its rich history as a centerpiece of daily communal interaction.

If there is any single instance of food's social component that is still recognized by our culture, it may be that of the "family dinner" (Larson). While many of us grow up with this ritual a handful of times per week, it is something most of us lose sight of as we transition into our adult lives. This is especially true for those who have begun to live on their own. Still, there is no reason this practice needs to be tied only to the traditional family unit.

Some institutions, notably the Baptist Church, have adopted this practice on a communal scale. Southern Baptist potlucks are perhaps one of our best examples of food's power to cultivate community. And, as the research shows, this communal effort may be far closer to the way things have typically been throughout human history than our modern American culture might lead us to believe (Delwen).

In an effort to understand the and adress these issues, this research will aim to examine and answer the following research questions:

1. **What is social sustainability?**
2. **What challenges do young adults face**

with social sustainability, and why?
3. **Is there a relationship between shared mealtimes and social development?**
4. **What is the historical significance of commensality?**
5. **Can commensality be a practical means to develop social sustainability?**

The state of modern American culture is one where food has taken a backseat to convenience and community is often left to happenstance.

The Problem

The state of modern American culture is one where food has taken a backseat to convenience and community is often left to happenstance. This has, over time, proven detrimental to our social structure and mental health, and its effects have only skyrocketed in recent years. In the wake of a global pandemic, where social distancing and intentional isolation became the status quo for multiple years in a row, the American public is still reeling from the effects. Recent studies have shown that mental illness, particularly related to loneliness, is at a record high for recent memory.

Prominent research shows that, while our shared experience of "social distancing" may have mitigated some of the perceived isolation, many of us, especially those with preexisting conditions or unresolved grief, have not been spared the negative effects. Though our society is more connected than ever before in a technical sense, research shows that the increased reliance on social networking may have had a detrimental impact on our mental states (Saltzman).

Similar studies have shown that various demographics, and particularly various age groups, tend to experience this loneliness in different ways. Today, loneliness seems to hit its peak for individuals in their twenties — right at the age where many of us begin to work and live alone for the first time (Nguyen). Many researchers cite the COVID-19 pandemic as a major contributor to this phenomenon; A comparative analysis by the National Institutes of Health notes "Recent studies indicate that the mental health of Gen Zs has been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic" (Harari).

Across all age groups, however, loneliness could be tied back to a smaller community and a lack of "prosocial behaviors" (Nguyen). It stands to reason, then, that an improved communal mindset could benefit individuals across all age demographics, and possibly even help to bridge divides between living generations with little to relate on.

The fact is, despite our digital networks and day-to-day work lives, people seem to be more disconnected than ever. The dangers of isolation are numerous. Beyond the obvious effects of weakened mental health and loneliness, a lack of community often results in a lack of resources: a looming danger where a social safety net should be. Food (resources) and community (protection) are both central elements of social sustainability, a framework for societal wellbeing based on interpersonal cooperation.

Research has shown that a lack of sustainable resources (i.e., poverty) can be a reliable predictor not just for mental health and socioeconomic standing, but for academic performance and reading comprehension as well (Ransdell). This means that, through social sustainability, we stand to gain psychological benefit as well as physical safety. Our framework suggests that this can be achieved through commensality, or the meaningful sharing of food (Ochs).

Theoretical Framework

A historically-informed view of food as something more than nourishment is essential to a rising framework for addressing the problem. Many outlets in modern American culture market food as either a source of fuel or a commodity for personal enjoyment. This view allows little to no room for the greater significance food can hold for interpersonal connection.

Throughout the vast majority of human history, healthy survival has revolved around a central truth: if you do not have community, you probably do not have food either. Communal effort allowed for the rise of agriculture and farming, which made food accessible on a larger scale beyond hunting and gathering. This is reflected across many cultures through the social nature of mealtimes. Biblical accounts show food as something of both social and symbolic importance; there was heavy cultural significance to where (and with whom) Jesus chose to eat.

Likewise, preparation of food has also been a social occasion for much of history. Even as far back as ancient Egypt, we see evidence of shared food preparation efforts not just between family members, but between households (Delwen). In terms of survival, a social approach to food presented greater results compared to the total effort spent. Because of this, food has shaped culture just as much as culture has shaped food (Motta).

Beyond a basic need for survival, food also serves as a means of deeper communication, or "code," as some authors have referred to it. The sharing of food communicates social dynamics, hierarchy, and inclusion. People find personal identification in social groups with which they eat (Counihan). Food carries indicators of culture, background, family, and even socioeconomic standing. For all of these reasons, food can and should be viewed as an object of greater significance beyond its nutritional value.

Though our culture's current view of food may not be the root cause of the historical lows for mental health and interpersonal connection, much of the research supports the idea that a communal approach to food may be used as an effective tool to combat these issues. The lack of community, resources, and healthy personal connections may be thought of as a lack of social sustainability — a concept which, though rooted in national and corporate initiatives, can be helpfully applied to interpersonal dynamics as well (Eizenberg). Young adults without communal mealtimes are missing more than opportunities to explore alternative cuisines; they are also missing the means to comfortably pass through life's challenges, from the physical to the psychological to the financial (Dunbar).

This research effort's approach to food is built on a few research-driven suppositions: First, that food, the preparation of food, and the sharing of meals, are effective conduits for interpersonal connection and identification with a community; Second, that through the sharing of food, or commensality, young adults can achieve greater levels of social sustainability; And thirdly, that through social sustainability, these individuals may see improvements in mental health, academic performance, nutritional needs, and the unhealthy social dynamics common to our modern American culture.

Social Capital and Sustainability

Sustainability has been a common term thrown around in corporate initiatives for decades now. The idea is simple: that investing in healthy patterns of resource procurement without depleting the source will pay off in the long run. This has proven attractive to businesses

and institutions from a corporate level all the way down to a family-owned level. In short, sustainability creates safety, which is desirable not just for businesses, but for individuals as well.

Typically, the idea of sustainability has been tied to the environment. After all, the natural world is where all of our resources come from on some level. Preserving these resources for long term use is the responsible choice. Businesses have found that, in addition to occasionally saving money on traditional energy expenses, they often attract environmentally conscious partners and customers as well. In short, sustainability pays off, and research shows that applying these same mindsets on an interpersonal level may help to benefit us as individuals as well (Eizenberg).

Sustainability has long been discussed in terms of three core principles or "pillars." These pillars include Social, Economic and Environmental. Where exactly the discourse on these three pillars began, however, is a matter of debate. The literature (and other literature reviews) reveal a gap in the history of these terms (Purvis). While the social element has been a nominal part of sustainability for years, it seems to have often taken a backseat to the other two pillars, environmental and economic, in terms of practical application. In fact, the term "social sustainability" did not come around until fairly recently.

As opposed to the more traditional, broader approach to sustainability, social sustainability seeks to focus on our social and societal reliance on one another for the benefit of the individual in need rather than the preservation of the environment or economic savings of a corporation (Eizenberg).

For the purposes of addressing the issues in American adults regarding communal identification and mental health, social sustainability is the topic of interest. The research shows that food, like community, is intrinsically tied to social sustainability. Social sustainability functions primarily through the interchange of what is often called "social capital." If capital can be defined as one's own collective resources in terms of money and assets, then social capital can be thought of as one's available resources accessible through their social network.

This concept has been studied and implemented in a variety of social sustainability efforts, notably in terms of poverty intervention. When an individual lacks the necessary resources to get by on their own, social capital is the means by which we can raise each other up and help the individual in need. The state of the American public in the wake of a devastating pandemic could be framed as a wide lack of social capital. Though many of us have the financial resources to get by, money cannot buy happiness, much less mental health. People thrive in community, and a lack of community means a lack of social capital, which detriments our efforts toward social sustainability.

Many modern researchers and experts are now beginning to challenge what is being called "the myth of individualism" that has gripped our society for so long: the idea that every person, regardless of social standing, succeeds or fails based solely on his or her own merits and abilities. The reality, certain experts argue, is that the vast majority of individuals succeed as a direct result of their social capital. In short, our personal network, engagement with our community, and ability to receive help when we need it, plays a far more pivotal role in our success and satisfaction than our personal abilities alone (Smith).

In the same way, social capital has been shown in research to be a central ingredient for what is referred to as "change efforts." While this terminology often finds its home in more businesslike spheres, modern researchers and

psychologists have begun to test its applications on an individual level rather than corporate, and found notable results. As one expert puts it, "Our relationships offer context for understanding our progress in our learning and change efforts and for realizing the usefulness of what we are learning" (Smith).

What this means is, our efforts at personal growth are often in vain when conducted in a vacuum. The old adage "no man is an island" still holds real weight in our modern day. People are social animals, and therefore cannot adequately grow or thrive without personal connection and some semblance of community. This seems to be the heart of the problem many young adults are now experiencing. Despite our digital efforts to "see and be seen" across social media, there are some senses in which people are more disconnected than ever. This is especially true when it comes to food.

In fact, many researchers are now challenging the long held perception of food in the United States, especially on the level of national social initiatives. Despite national, and even international, attempts to address rising trends in obesity and unhealthy eating habits, the majority of these initiatives have fallen short of their projected goals. Some experts argue this is a direct result of a blatant misunderstanding of the public's relationship to food: people are less likely to respond to nutritional appeals when a more pressing social need is not being met or acknowledged (Delormier).

When food is only considered fuel or commodity, pushing for healthier choices and smaller portions simply will not stick. Instead, these experts argue, we must treat the consumption of food as a social practice if we are to see any change in the public's unhealthy relationship with it (Delormier). This is where food reveals its true capacity to be a central element for personal change efforts. Through

analysis of international cultural and historical contexts, researchers Renata Motta and Eloísa Martín argue that food is an essential part of the broader change efforts that have shown success.

Meanwhile, studies by anthropologists Elinor Ochs and Merav Shohet demonstrate the necessity of mealtimes as a cornerstone of emotional development. What these studies share is an identification of food as a fundamental change agent, both personally and socially. As a necessary daily event that ties us on an instinctual level to the other members of our community, however big or small, food has the potential to connect us in ways that make personal development, healthy change, and improvements in social and mental health possible.

The Role of Community

Now that the concept of social sustainability, and therefore social capital, has been identified as an essential need for individuals struggling with health and connection, we may begin to examine the underlying relationship these concepts have with community. One core element of social capital is often known as communal or group identification. Though less concrete than other benefits such as physical or financial support, this element is no less important or essential to social sustainability as a whole. Identification with a group helps to inform our identity as individuals; we learn who we are and how we are valued based on our relation to those around us (McNamara).

Researchers note how group identification comes with its own host of potential benefits, including social support, collective efficacy, and even combating loneliness (McNamara). These are needs that people have on an instinctual, social level, oftentimes without even realizing it. This subtle nature can make it difficult to tell

what is wrong when it feels as though something is missing from our lives.

So, if connection is the key to seeing these needs addressed, how can we begin to foster that connection? First, we must examine the factors that tend to bring people together in a community. One researcher notes how "neighborhood context" is a recurring factor in close-knit communities (Swaroop). People living in proximity is typically not enough. Apartment buildings, for example, typically only appear as a series of closed doors. Many of the individuals who reside there, though close in physical proximity, have never really met their so-called neighbors. In fact, a study for one community of residents revealed that 70% of inhabitants had never shared a meal with their neighbor (Dunbar). Evidently, simply being neighbors is not enough.

Neighborhood context is built around visibility, interaction, and above all, participation. One research article states "A long tradition of work in urban sociology suggests that resident participation in neighborhood life is a cornerstone of successful communities," (Swaroop). This same researcher also theorized that there are two distinct motivations for participation in a community such as this: instrumental and expressive motivations.

Instrumental participation is driven by need, where an individual relies on his or her community for health, wellbeing, and the meeting of physical needs. The second motivation, however, implies a less obvious set of potential advantages to community participation. Expressive participation reveals our desire, and perhaps our need, to express ourselves as social creatures, to identify with a group in a way that defines our personal identities (Swaroop). Community, then, can be clearly demonstrated to offer both physical and emotional advantages to the individuals who choose to participate.

Further research reveals an intrinsic connection between community identification and food. This applies to a variety of aspects of food, from the cultivation of crops to the preparation of food, and finally to the sharing of meals. One study noted the particular effects of a cultivated "community garden" project for a particular neighborhood and school. Using this example, the author calls us to reevaluate the dated academic perspectives on food in favor of a more comprehensive cultural and social understanding which reveals its fuller potential (Richardson). Richardson then argues how the prevalent conception of food misses the conclusions we can draw about the larger societal impact. The cited example of a school-community partnership for a gardening initiative acts as a microcosm of the greater effects of social participation in food with surprising and encouraging results:

"With the help of volunteers from the school and larger school community, where thirty percent of the students speak English as a second language, Mahler built a raised bed school garden. Robinson notes how the Kemp Mill garden is one instance of a larger movement where the effort is not simply "to improve diets," but "build community, and become more connected to their food supplies and the environment"" (Richardson).

By focusing on shared participation among the students and community rather than merely demanding dietary restrictions, this community saw improvements in such a way that large-scale health food initiatives seem to always miss the mark on. In addition to education on how the garden is cultivated and how the food they consume is produced, the students also saw improvements in healthy eating habits and even cross-cultural sharing and understanding. The research even notes how, out of sight from the teachers and authority figures, the children were "actively negotiating, debating and reconstructing identities and cultural difference in the context of food exchange" (Richardson).

Even something as simple as sharing food around a lunch table became an occasion for education, identification, and growth in community. These children were not taught to value these things. Instead, this practice seemed to simply emerge from a healthy environment which gave their social nature an outlet for expression. Food and community, like education and culture, are tied together on an instinctual level for participants in these efforts.

Another important factor to consider in a food-based approach to social sustainability is the scalability of these methods. Sustainability has been shown to be beneficial on a corporate and even national level. The study mentioned above showcases how social sustainability, especially in relation to food, can be beneficial on a school-community level. So the question remains, is there similar evidence to support the idea that these methods are still applicable at an even smaller, almost familial level?

For a tool such as this to be useful for the average individual, it must be accessible and practical for the average individual to implement. In the case of young adults, particularly those already in a state of partial social isolation, building a community garden may not be the most realistic or effective approach. Instead, the research demonstrates how food can operate on an interpersonal level, even between as little as two people. The essential element of it is in the participation, and participation between two people may have the potential to see growth in numbers.

One study demonstrates how the size of one's social network seems to have a direct impact on that person's overall happiness, satisfaction, and health:
"There is now considerable evidence, for example, to suggest that the size and quality of one's social network has very significant consequences for one's health, susceptibility to illness (and even

death), wellbeing and happiness... Hence, people who eat often with others might be expected to have larger social networks and be happier and more satisfied with their lives, as well as being more engaged with their communities" (Dunbar).

This same study corroborates the idea that shared meals or "feasting" can have significant benefits for those who participate in the practice regularly with a common group. This researcher notes three distinct levels on which these benefits can take place: the communal level, which refers to the benefits to the overall community as a whole, networking, which refers to the improvements in relationships between the members of that community, and personal, which refers to the benefits to each individual member in terms of physical and emotional health (Dunbar).

In addition to examining the historical precedent for shared group meals, this particular researcher also conducted a survey of individuals from the local community, revealing some numbers we might expect. About 70% of those surveyed admitted they had never shared a meal with a neighbor, even those they had known for a very long time. About 15% said they had never shared a meal with a coworker, and even more said they had never shared a meal with a superior. 37% claimed they had never shared a meal with a community group of any kind (Dunbar).

To cap this off, the author noted how "As many as 65% felt there was someone they should make more effort to see or spend time with, and 75% thought this was best done by sharing a meal" (Dunbar). Clearly, there is an intrinsic desire for connection, even among those of us who

Beyond a basic need for survival, food also serves as a means of deeper communication.

are distinctly disconnected from their local community and even personal friends. Likewise, there seems to be an inborn understanding of food as a practical way to approach this desired connection.

Importantly, the author notes that, while the causality seems to be that shared meals result in stronger communities and healthier lives, there is a possibility that there is some influence the other way around. The broader research seems to imply that, just as our approach to food can influence our lifestyle, our lifestyle can influence our approach to food, for good or for ill. In the same way that food has always influenced culture and vice versa, it seems that a similar cycle exists even on the individual level. Individuals, therefore, must take hold of their own lifestyles and pursue connection to see improvements. Research suggests that an intentional approach to food may be a helpful tool for this.

Food and Commensality

As previously noted, there is a long history of failures among institutional food and health initiatives, and this has been theorized to result from a mistaken perspective of food. The missing social component means that these initiatives are often doomed to fail from the very beginning (Delormier). Food, as countless researchers have noted, carries deeper meaning beyond its practical, physical use. While the significance of these meanings may vary across cultures — for example, wine and bread meant something different to the Hebrews than it does to modern Americans — the fact of food as communication remains the same.

In many ways, food is a mode of communication: a "code," in a certain sense. Providing it can indicate love, while withholding it can indicate indifference. The visual appeal of the food can convey social standing, cost, and even

artistic expression. The taste of food conveys a rich history of culture, chosen ingredients, and carefully crafted recipes over multiple generations. Food means protection, safety, and sometimes, it characterizes the place we think of as home (Counihan).

There have been numerous studies into our deeper perception of food as a thing which carries social meaning. One study found that, when asked to recall a memory of great significance regarding food, most participants would communicate a story where the actual food item itself was only a secondary aspect. Instead, these memories were almost always recounted with special attention to the relationships, often familial, that gave it context (Lupton).

Many of these memories described a time from childhood, when a participant's mother or father insisted they finish a serving of a meal they did not like, such as peas or similar vegetables. Meanwhile, some of these stories recalled memories of special meals prepared by a loved one, such as a grandparent. It was almost never the actual food itself that the participants described in detail. Instead, nearly all of these stories revolved around some emotional connection, whether positive or negative, to the other people present. Many of these could be considered formative memories to the early lives of these participants (Lupton).

It is possible these results should not be as surprising as they may sound, as many experts in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and even culinary sciences, agree that our food is central to our development as social human beings. Most of us were brought up with at least a semi-regular "family mealtime." Whether daily or weakly, traditional or nontraditional, these mealtimes (or lack of mealtimes) with family shape who we are (Larson).

There is a long-held belief, especially among traditionalists, that "families who eat together stay together." While this may be influenced by some level of wishful thinking or conjecture, the research shows at least some level of truth to this. In fact, studies reveal the practice of family mealtime to be a powerful, double-edged sword. As the memory-based study suggested, social experiences surrounding food can be positive or negative, healthy or unhealthy. This suggests that, when it comes to measuring the practical value of these family mealtimes, the simple fact of their existence is not enough. The actual developmental value is in the quality of these occasions, particularly the socializing aspect (Larson).

This information illustrates how family mealtimes are not a moral process on their own, but a chance to affirm and identify with certain behaviors and beliefs, for good or ill. The author describes how "In depending on women to cook, eating specific foods, or conversing in a particular language, families reaffirm cultural identities, values, and ideals. In encouraging children to be quiet or speak up, for example, they may reinforce cultural notions of hierarchy and child deference, or the idea that children have equal status" (Larson).

This clearly demonstrates the accuracy of the perception of food as a form of social code, rich in communication far beyond the bare-bones, fuel-centric commodity that is often marketed to us. Food in a vacuum may simply serve as fuel for survival. On the other hand, food that engages us with our community, from its preparation to its consumption, has the potential to provide so much more.

These insights on family mealtimes are derived mostly from the research of experts in the field of child psychology, interested in exploring the developmental side of family dynamics. These ideas are corroborated, however, by anthropologists with a specialization on food and social eating. One anthropologist refers to these mealtimes as "cultural sites" where we can examine the impact of cultural context on these occasions and, in turn, hypothesize about their potential impact on the culture in which they take place (Ochs).

This idea can be summed up by the author's assertion that: "Mealtimes are both vehicles for and end points of culture" (Ochs). The article takes the broader anthropological importance of food in culture and narrows in to examine the socialization impacts it can have on individual children. Central to this perspective on social meals is the concept of commensality:

"Commensality is the practice of sharing food and eating together in a social group such as a family. Universally, commensality is central to defining and sustaining the family as a social unit" (Ochs).

In shorter terms, commensality can simply be defined as the practice of eating together. The research shows how commensality is essential to our social, moral, and emotional development, with especially high potential to impact us during our formative years. Still, the larger body of research shows how commensality does not lose its value as we grow; it seems that, at least in today's American society, we simply seem to lose our habit of commensality as we move into adulthood.

Picking this habit up again with special intention for self-development and community growth

can offer exceptional benefits to both the individual and the group which forms around it. As previously noted, one researcher sorts the potential benefits into three categories: communal, networking, and personal (Dunbar). There is evidence to suggest that these benefits are just as authentic in microcosm as they are in larger-scale community initiatives. Individual participants can expect to see improvements in their own health, their relationship with others, and the benefit of their group of participants as a whole, regardless of how small.

The immense value of these theories is demonstrated through the observations and research of a communications expert named Dr. David F. Purnell in both his dissertation and his book, Building Communities Through Food. Purnell recounts his long experience of "family dinners" with his local community of neighbors, which began more than a decade before when he and his neighbors agreed to meet once a week for a shared meal (Purnell).

The author draws conclusions from his own experience with commensality to draw conclusions about the nature of food as a social event. Food is an opportunity for connection, rich with cultural context and shared meaning. Unfortunately, many people today are disconnected from their neighbors, families, and communities in ways that were not an issue in the past. Purnell notes:
"[Previous] authors state, in various ways, that people have been separated from their families and placed in locations without many close connections, causing a weakening of individual attachment to not only family, but also community."

As a result, new efforts are necessary. Purnell describes how communal engagement over food presents us with a chance to overcome these obstacles and rediscover the benefits that

may have been lost to us:
"Food offers a glimpse into the lives of others, and how others view us; it is the center of social interaction. While we do eat to sustain our bodies and minds, we also eat to demonstrate our belonging to particular social groups" (Purnell).

This statement echoes our need for communal identification as a core element of social capital, which in turn provides us with social sustainability. This demonstrates the viability of commensality to address the aching need of our culture. The author's experience also corroborates the view of food as an opportunity for intercultural connection, providing a glimpse into the background and experience of people with different lifestyles and upbringings: "The interaction of sharing food becomes an avenue for social and communal introduction; people attending the weekly family dinners can share something about themselves through the food they bring" (Purnell).

Purnell's research and firsthand experience clearly demonstrate the viability of personal efforts to use food as a tool for building social sustainability through community. The research shows that these efforts are not only possible, but sustainable, and can provide long-term benefits that spread out from their point of origin to affect a larger community.

Conclusions

As mentioned previously, the practicality of this theoretical framework is dependent on our ability to embrace a more comprehensive view of food beyond a simple commodity or a form of fuel for survival. Though much of the research on this topic is relatively new, the examples are numerous and the arguments are sound.

Based on the research, a healthy, practical, and comprehensive view of food as a community-builder may be summarized with the following qualities:

- **Food is a historically social event we recognize on an instinctual level.**

- **Food is a form of communication, carrying with it personal and cultural significance as well as indicators of social dynamics.**

- **Commensality fosters community through the provision of physical and emotional needs.**

- **Identification with a food-based community can offer personal, interpersonal, and even communal benefits.**

- **Food prepared in community provides an opportunity to explore other cultural cuisines as well as healthier eating habits.**

- **A community formed in commensality provides a social and nutritional safety net for times of personal need.**

In his book, Building Communities Through Food, David Purnell states that "The preparation, presentation, and ingredients of meals reflect a concrete representation of our individual identities and offer others an opportunity to share and take part in those identities." In this regard, the sharing of meals, or commensality, holds immense potential for our involvement in healthy community, and therefore our personal development.

Research on social sustainability supports the theory that our capacity for health, satisfaction, and personal growth are dependent on our social connections. Research on community, likewise, shows that these social connections can be fostered through a shared approach to common needs, especially food. The growth of social capital produces a stable community, which in turn produces a healthier environment for everyone involved. All of this is possible through a practical and intentionally social approach to food.

Still, perhaps due to the fact that discourse on the subject is a relatively new conversation, there remains a lack of tangible tools for approaching this task. Many people, and even especially young adults, may not consider themselves skilled enough to be participating in food preparation. In fact, one of the major selling points of the modern food market is convenience. Single-serving microwave dinners require no skill, no risk, and no help. This only reinforces the false perception of food as simple fuel.

As a result of our culture's unhealthy relationship with food, many adults have grown to view themselves as incapable of cooking beyond their own basic needs. This culinary illiteracy remains a challenging obstacle for those most in need of commensality, and there are not yet many resources designed specifically for this purpose. The field of study, and perhaps our culture as a whole, may stand to benefit from a set of practical tools and tutorials for engaging in communal food preparation. With more accessible means to do so, we may soon see the growth of food-based communities and improvements in social sustainability across the nation.
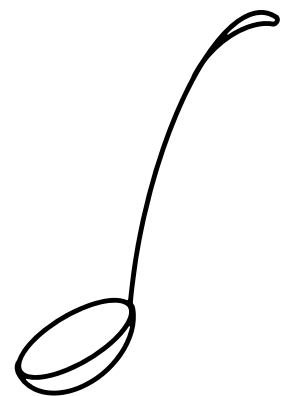
Research Methods

This research effort uses a variety of sources, including academic articles, case studies, and firsthand accounts, to develop a theoretical framework for food as a means of developing social sustainability through community. The research breaks down this task into three categories by which to synthesize a comprehensive perspective: First, it examines the nature of social sustainability to establish its capacity to benefit the individual with social capital; Second, it examines the role of community to establish its benefits for a healthier social lifestyle; And thirdly, it examines various studies and accounts to establish commensality as a viable means of growing community. Through the intersection of these topics, this thesis arrives at a research-driven approach to using social mealtimes for personal and communal benefit.

Visual Research

Visual analysis is looking at pictures, forms, and objects from the realms of visual and material culture. The variety of information and designs experienced on a daily basis in the context of this project emphasizes the need for visual analysis. This analytical approach is critical in guiding the visual solution to an aesthetic that effectively targets the intended audience. Notably, the three case study campaigns will serve as the focal points for the visual analysis. The following are potential points of interest for analysis:

1. What does the selection depict?
2. Who is the audience?
3. How do people consume the visual solution?
4. How is this project embedded in a wider cultural context?
5. What is the interrelation between the image, the form, or object, and the accompanying text?
6. Compositional Interpretation
7. Content Analysis
8. Semiotics
9. Iconography
10. What aesthetic choices led to the success or failure of the visual solution?
11. How do the aesthetic choices connect back to the identified problem?

Case Studies

Case studies are valuable tools in Exploratory Research for examining concepts in art, such as the social elements of food. They allow us to comprehend and evaluate different visual depictions and sources of inspiration that already exist. This study methodology centers on obtaining a comprehensive understanding of single occurrences or groups of occurrences, with a specific emphasis on communal dining experiences. The insights obtained from these case studies entail a thorough examination, investigating prompts such as:

1. Define who initiated and is responsible for the project.
2. Identify the motivation of the project.
3. Summarize the project.
4. Identify challenges they faced.
5. Project outcome.
6. Identify and connect relevant elements back to your identified problem.
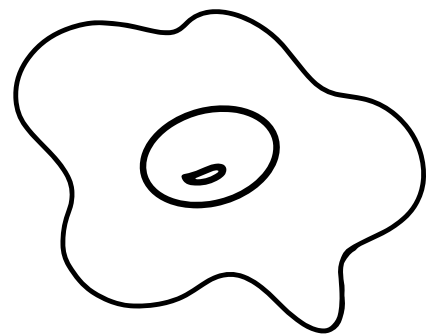
Summary of Findings

Case Study One

"Commensality 2021" by Kexin Liu

Summary:
In 2021, with social distancing and multinational lockdowns in full swing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese artist Kexin Liu found herself intrigued by the ways in which she observed people still looking for innovative ways to eat together in spite of the intense obstacles and regulations. With the help of many participants, she staged large shared meals over Zoom, which had become a popular means of achieving commensality from a distance. During the meal, she prompted participants to create silverware using either modeling clay or 3D software, using their feelings regarding quarantine conditions as creative inspiration. She then fed the results into a AI generative software that created from them a series of warped silverware models that she could edit and mold into a cohesive image, representative of the participant's collective feelings about the challenges of commensality during lockdown.

Visual Analysis:
Looking at the project as a cohesive whole, involving all process images as well as the final renderings, it is plain to see that there is extensive variety among the many interpretations of cutlery. This makes sense, considering more than 50 individuals were creatively involved in the process. There are some notable styles and visual motifs that occur again and again throughout the featured variations (see Figure 1).

The many renderings and clay sculptures of the project's participants seem to represent a complex blend of beauty and frustration. While many entries feature the choppy, angular, distorted structures one might expect from an expression of emotion after long weeks of confinement, there are just as many with delicate curves and curling shapes evocative of natural, plant-like forms. Others still showcase a direct representation of floral imagery, conveying beauty in spite of the frustration.

While many of the channeled emotions were negative, some of the entries (especially those made from modeling clay) exhibit imagery commonly associated with love and joy. Some of these include flowers, while others include hearts, each of which are typical symbols of affection. Perhaps this represents affection towards the other people involved in the project during a time when face-to-face connection was hard to find.

Conclusions:
Isolation was a prominent emotional challenge throughout the world during quarantine, and its lasting consequences can still be felt today. From that challenge, many citizens found frustration and withdrew into antisocial tendencies, while others recognized an intrinsic need for connection and strove to find new ways to fulfill it. The resulting imagery of "Commensality 2021" represents that need for connection and the distorting effects that isolation can have on our lives and our health. My thesis may find success with the use of imagery that emphasizes a desire for heartfelt connection and its intrinsic ties to the world of food.

Case Study Two

Basics with Babish by Andrew Rea

Summary:
Andrew "Babish" Rea is a professional chef, filmmaker, and content creator based out of Brooklyn, New

Figure 1 - Commensality 2021 by Kexin Liu

York. This cookbook represents his second venture into the realm of printed publications, and by far his more personal of the two.

Inspired by the positive response to his willingness to include his mistakes in his popular YouTube series, Andrew decided to compile his second cookbook with the specific goal to encourage experimentation, mistakes, and multiple attempts when learning to cook. In it, he allows his past mistakes in the kitchen to take center stage with personal anecdotes for every recipe. The pages themselves are designed to celebrate failure in the name of experimentation and trying again.

Visual Analysis:
In terms of visuals, *Basics with Babish* falls in line with the basic form of a traditional cookbook: splash pages, colorful macro shots of fully-prepared food, and some action images of food being cut, brushed, served, or handled. While these things are typical of what we expect in a cookbook, *Basics* elevates this with the stylistic leanings of its video source material.

As is the case with the associated web series, the human element is ever-present throughout the cookbook. This is true of both the written content and the visual inclusion. Most of the images of food feature some sort of interaction with the cook, whether that is Andrew Rea smiling as he bakes pizza or hands serving a slice of cheesecake (See Figures 2.1 and 2.2). The images are rarely stagnant, instead emphasizing the fun, interactive aspects of cooking that make this book so appealing to its audience.

True to its name and its central message, *Basics with Babish* is more concerned with simple elegance than complexity, and this is clear to see in its choice of imagery. The vast majority of the recipe-accompanying images opt for simple compositions that earn their visual appeal with color rather than complexity.

Conclusions:
Though few if any recipes in the book make a direct point of community or shared meal preparations, the elements of commensality are still peppered throughout. Chef Rea by no means works alone in his kitchen. He has a number of assistant cooks who regularly make the meals happen with him. Likewise, this book represents a shared effort of multiple contributors, notably Susan Choung and Kendall Beach.

It is worth noting that Andrew's personal favorite of the many recipes in the book is the "Master Cookie

Dough," which originated from his early years in the kitchen when learning to cook with his mother — a common throughline for many food-related projects. This stands as evidence that some degree of commensality is at the heart of most, if not all, food-related works of art.

People tend to not make an effort toward things that seem too difficult. As a result, opportunities are missed for collaborative culinary projects. By presenting food preparation as not only attainable, but also fun, Basics with Babish poses an experimental artform to share with others.

Elegance Over Complexity: Use the design, layout, typography, and imagery to emphasize accessibility. An audience must believe the craft is attainable in order to want to try it.

The Human Element: Avoid stagnant imagery throughout the visual content. The presence of human hands not only emphasizes the interactive nature of cooking, but its capacity to bring people together in a shared effort.

Make It Personal: There is a unique charm to personal anecdotes and associated memories. Allow these personal elements to shine through in the design and selected recipes.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 - Basics with Babish by Andrew Rea

Figure 3 - Mama Rose Kitchen by Adrienne Dominick

Case Study Three

"Mama Rose Kitchen" by Adrienne Dominick

Summary:
Adrienne Dominick is an African American painter and visual artist based in Mississippi. A lifelong Jackson native, she was approached by the city government to participate in a public art project called Fertile Ground to communicate issues of food equity and commensality. She grew up under the culinary instruction of her grandmother, who she considered her best friend.

The city of Jackson, Mississippi, initiated the Fertile Ground project to bring public awareness to local issues of food accessibility. The city tapped a number of artists to contribute a total of twenty paintings to be spaced throughout the city in public spaces, one of whom was Adrienne Dominick. Chosen for her local citizenship, cultural experience, and culinary family background, Dominick contributed the painting "Mama Rose Kitchen," based on her memories in the kitchen with her mother and grandmother.

Visual Analysis:
For Dominick, "Mama Rose Kitchen" is just as much an exercise in nostalgia as it is a message on the merits of sticking together, helping one another, and celebrating culture through food. Her lifelong personal and familial ties to the city of Jackson only serve to broaden the painting's potential scope of meaning. The artist mentions leaving the faces in the painting blank as an intentional choice so "anyone could see themselves" in the scene. By addressing issues of food equity in a personal context, "Mama Rose Kitchen" may serve as a reminder of what family, culture, and commensality mean not just for personal health, but for survival.

Adrienne Dominick's painting represents a unique blend of styles, both classic and novel, culminating in a meaningful depiction of nostalgia, multi-generational connection, and cultural experience.

The shapes of the human figures, though simplified, are still extremely organic, especially when juxtaposed with the geometric, angular elements that make up the rest of the image. The background of the painting showcases a set of orange cabinets, abstracted to a series of alternating rectangles, decorated only enough to evoke the image of a kitchen (See Figure 3).

Making up the wall behind the cabinetry is a still more complex pattern: a bright orange canvas covered with dynamic, angular shapes. The impression is something like animal print, and, coupled with the color scheme of the surrounding background elements, it becomes evocative of African textiles.

Conclusions:
Minimalism may be strategically used to broaden the potential interpretations of art and allow a wider audience to identify with the figures in it. Accessibility is key to connection, especially in the realm of food preparation. Simplicity lends itself well to inviting the novice into the realm of food preparation.

"Mama Rose Kitchen" serves as a reminder of food's intrinsic connection with culture and the ability of commensality to bridge cultural divides. A cookbook based around cultivating community could benefit from cultural context and illustrations that evoke an ethnic meal's rich history.

In Short...

In light of everything the research uncovered, the main goal of the resulting thesis project will need to be two-fold: first, to establish food as a viable means to cultivate community, and second, to encourage its implementation in the reader's own life.

If the research shows anything, it is the vital importance of community, its intrinsic connection to our food, and the essential nature of both to our health. The case studies suggest a few distinct ways to approach this message in the design of the deliverables:

Fostering Connection

The design must include ways to foster collaboration and participation in the kitchen. This may be achieved through the kind of recipes provided, suggesting different group sizes and roles, and incorporating imagery that showcases the communal nature of the meals.

Cookbook Styles

Other cookbooks, such as Basics with Babish, have found success with audiences through specific design styles, such as strategic minimalism, vibrant food photography, and an emphasis on the human element. Likewise, multiple contributors can help to produce a more desirable variety of recipes.

Personal Meaning

Across virtually all of the studied products, an element of personal meaning is present in the discussion of food. In a new cookbook, this may be achieved by incorporating personal narratives when applicable to certain recipes, or notes of cultural significance. A personable tone of voice can help to emphasize the familial nature of the subject matter and its capacity to develop shared experience and interpersonal relationships.

While the specific visual representations will need to be decided and adjusted throughout the creative process, the lessons of the research provide a clear course of action for the work to come.

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shows anything,
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its intrinsic
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our food, and the
essential nature of
both to our health.
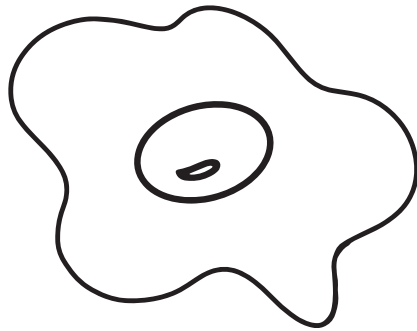
Chapter Three:

Methodology

THE STORY OF CREATION

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Methodology

Introduction

With the research illuminating a connection through food and community, I had a challenge of how to execute a piece that helped to equip others with the knowledge and tools of fostering their own connection. It was not as simple as encouraging and educating individuals on how to make friends. Instead, I needed to help them practice self-efficacy to grow their own interpersonal networks in a sustainable way. With commensality set as the endgoal, I found that the research strongly demanded the creation of a tool that would be familiar enough to use, but also novel enough to express the importance of communal eating in a nostalgic and relatable way while providing practical means to do so.

I understood from the beginning that a cookbook would need to be widely accessible. Not only would it need to help facilitate new skill in the kitchen, but it would also help to bridge the gap between the concepts of community and food in the minds of readers. Cookbooks share a wealth of knowledge and personal experience, something that creates a bond between reader and author. It needed to have a well-developed visual concept that would emphasize the overall message rather than distract from it, and include recipes focused on building a shared ritual of communal eating. This cookbook would also need to be personal, relatable, and express the themes of community in a way that readers could connect with and want to pursue. Everything needed to enhance the message, with the illustrations being innately tied to communal eating, the photographs displaying people experiencing interpersonal connection, and the resulting layout being as distinctly tuned as possible to serve the purpose of collaborative food preparation and enjoyment. The words, pictures, and design could not be the only way to convey the message — the recipes themselves would need to have significance, conveying that the shared experience was the final goal rather than simply cooking.

Visual Concept

From my research, I found that the theme and style of the cookbook needed to resonate in a nostalgic style and showcase communal warmth. In the Case Study "Mama Rose Kitchen," the artist uses the bold tones and

visual themes of warmth to evoke positive emotions in the viewer. I also took to learning from the "Basics with Babish" Case Study to see what a food-focused layout really looked like. Each of these case studies had vastly different styles, with the "Mama Rose Kitchen" Case Study being very warm and bold with distinct ties back to family and culture, while the "Basics with Babish" Case Study was more minimalist in both a personal and professional style. The professional look helped to establish Chef Andrew Rea as a source of knowledge in his field, while the human-centric images helped connect him with the reader.

Mind Map:

With the research fresh on my mind, I took to creating a mind map of the more important elements and how they could benefit this project (See Figure 5). From this mindmap, I brainstormed the ideal visual direction based off of the cumulative advice of the case studies, and found that I needed to communicate variety, nostalgia, and culture, with a colorful yet elegant combination of visuals and content.

Likewise, I brainstormed the ideal audience for a publication like this, and decided I wanted to especially reach young, hungry, lonely individuals living on their own for the first time. I wanted to focus primarily on a young adult demographic, whether they had attended a college education or not. It would also be best to target readers with some level of preexisting interest in cooking, though a basic desire for human conenction would do just as well.

For the content, I decided I also needed to give some attention to multi-generational connection; that it needed to connect the past with the present and be readily accessible to both. In short, it would need to be understandable for virtually everyone, even those beyond the scope of my specific target demographic. In the same

way, it would need to offer helpful suggestions for dietary substitutions in order to offer maximum flexibility for both the reader and those they hoped to connect with. I wanted it to transcend cultural and generational divides and use food to build a lasting bridge.

On top of all this, I also wanted to include distinct features that would set it apart from other cookbooks, so I drew up ideas for ways to take advantage of opportunities I had seen other books ignore. Some of these ideas included placemats that kids could color on, recommended roles and supplies, and helpful estimates of group capacity and level of effort required to cook.

Finally, with this mindmap fully filled out, I took to figuring out how I was going to complete a project of this scale. I was going to have to write all the content (both practical and personal), cook all the recipes featured in the book, photograph all the recipes in states of progress and completion with a carefully curated group of models, design the layout to incorporate all the visual content, and finally, get the entire book printed to a professional standard.

Figure 5 -Mind Map for Brainstorming during Ideation

Audience
- young
- hungry
- post-college (18-30)
- Both genders
- not rich but not entirely broke
- lonely
- interest in cooking?

Mama Rose Kitchen Case Study:
- nostalgia
- culture
- anyone can see themselves
- multi-generational
- saturated
- organic
- boldness
- patterns
- dynamic
- broad interpretation
- accessibility
- ethnic meals visually

Visual Direction

Steps to finish
- Cook everything
- photograph everything
- design everything
- write everything
- try everything?
- get it printed

The Communal Table MIND MAP

Commensality Case Study:
- Variety
- floral/plant like imagery
- beauty & frustration
- delicate
- affection
- human element
- connection
- food

Babish Case Study:
- humor
- failure-centric
- splash pages
- colorful macro shots of food
- action images
- minimalist typography
- simple elegance
- color over complexity
- vibrant
- people-interaction
- avoid stagnant imagery

but what else?
- activity placemats for kids
- index
- shopping lists
- recommended supplies
- recommended roles
- introduction & conclusion
- time & effort estimates

Content
- multi-generational kid friendly
- helpful tips
- short cuts
- accessibility (less technicality)
- substitutions & alternative suggestions
- Communal Recipes
- personal touch & experience
- transcending cultural divides
- broadened perspectives

Food Photography Mood Board (Fig 6.1):
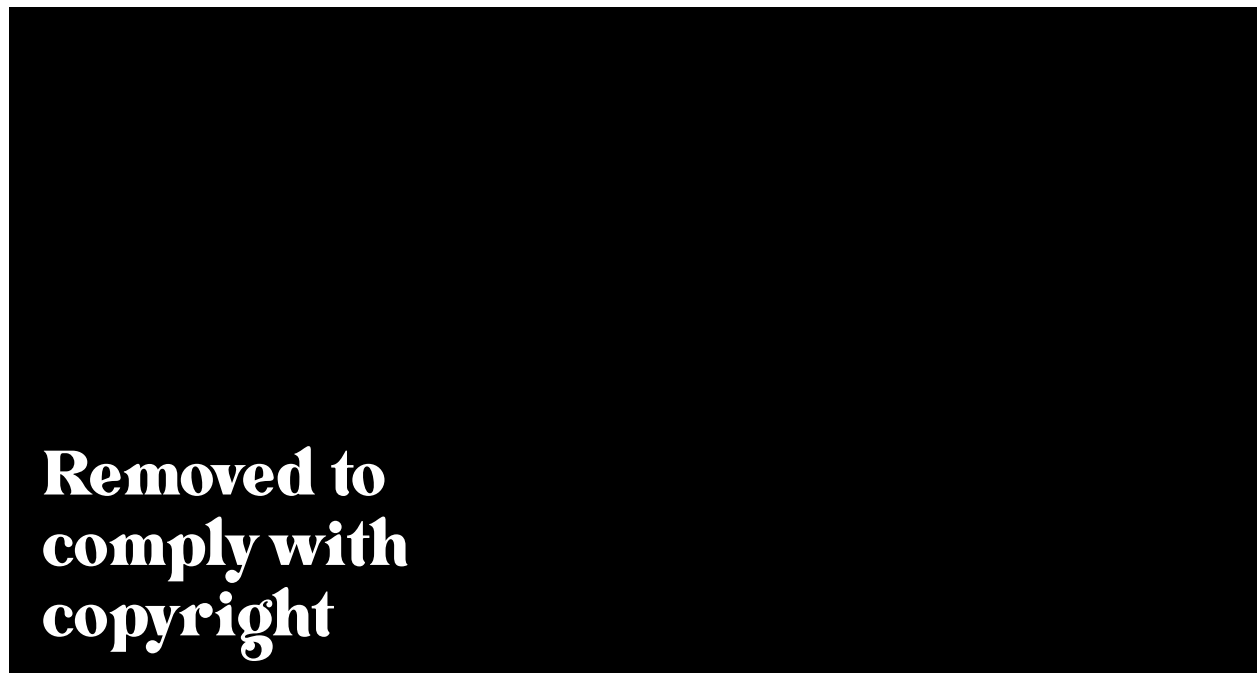
Publication Design Mood Board (Fig 6.2):
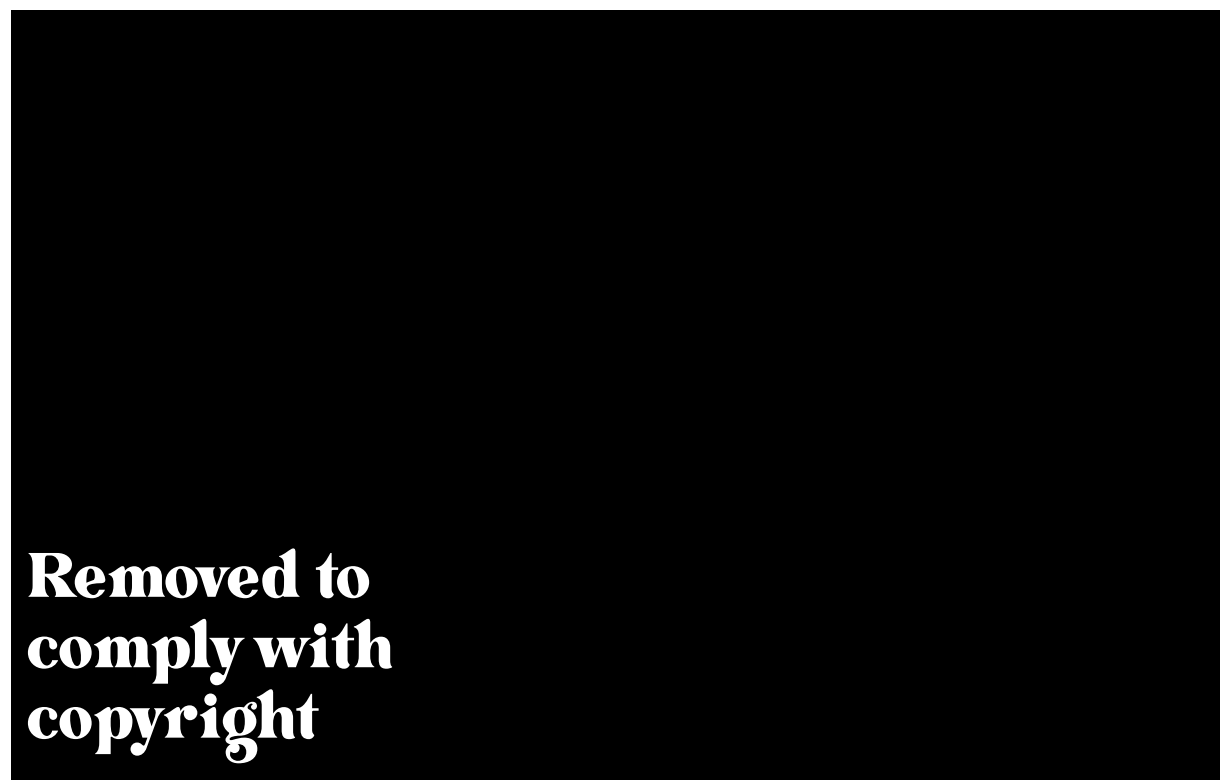
Mood Boards:

Next, I looked into different options for visual direction and gathered large quantities of related visuals for inspiration. Using these, I began to develop Mood Boards to help set the right tone. I went to Pinterest to garner as much visual input as I could, as a larger selection could help me see my options and narrow down more on ideas that suited the project. I broke up the board into three separate pieces, Food Photography, Publication Design, and Kodachrome — a specific style of photography known for evoking a nostalgic, vintage, and homely atmosphere (see Figures 7.1-7.3).

For the Food Photography section (see Figure 6.1), I knew I wanted to focus on inspiration with a strong emphasis on people in the imagery. From my research, I determined that human-centric images would be one of the best tools to create and foster connection with the material. After all, people tend to empathize most strongly with other people. Among the other useful inspiration, the colors tended to be both warm and vibrant, further emphasizing the appetizing nature of food photography. All of this photography inspiration eventually helped me determine the equipment I would need to procure so that I could recreate some of the visuals with limited light and limited models. However, I found that across the Photography section of my board, there was a distinct lack of racial and cultural diversity, something that I felt was essential to both the reception of my message and the success of my final product.

For the Publication Design Section (see Figure 6.2), I immediately started searching for direct inspiration from other cookbooks, both new and old. I needed strong feelings of nostalgia and community to be conveyed at the forefront, so I looked to inspiration that would create the sense of familiarity I needed while still maintaining a simple and clean look. Overall,

Fig. 7.1,7.2,7.3 Kodachrome Mood Board:

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Final Palette

if the design was familiar, but inaccessible, the message would not be conveyed, so I needed to have a variety of inspiration to pull from.

As for the Kodachrome section, I was recommended to look into this specific photographic style for visual inspiration, as it features trong leanings toward both nostalgia and rich cultural history. The images I collected for inspiration featured warm candor with human-focused subject matter. I wanted to ensure the same for my project, and that helped me decide how I was going to execute the photoshoot and later editing of the images. The Kodachrome style lends itself perfectly to the familiar and accessible tone I wanted to capture in the layout and content, so it was fitting for inspiration.

"I needed strong feelings of nostalgia and community at the forefront."

Color:

Keeping my Pinterest Boards up in the background for reference, I began to develop a split-complimentary color palette to evoke specific emotions and an implied context of food. Through brainstorming and careful consideration of color psychology, I determined that I wanted a food-evocative color palette that helped the viewer make the connection between happiness, mealtimes, and delicious food. The associated words I came up with to guide this ideation were: Egg Yolks, Sunflowers, Basil/Herbs, Onions, Cream, Kitchen. I developed this list on a larger Notion Board where I was able to plan out and organize my process (see Figure 8.1).

I started with a basic initial color palette that would undergo several revisions. I wanted the colors to work together, and I found that my initial attempts, while bold, were often too harsh and disjointed. Some of them were so bold that it resembled the flags of other nations, and while I did want to illustrate cultural bridges, I wanted to do so in an approachable

Figure 9 - A progress shot from the Focaccia Recipe

Figure 10 - Showcase of Typefaces

the **Communal Table**

Fonts:

Olive Village

Mr Eaves Mod OT
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh euismod tincidunt ut laoreet dolore magna aliquam erat volutpat.

Olive Village Italic otf (400)

The Communal Table

Olive Village Regular otf (400)

The Communal Table

and accessible way that was not harsh on the eyes. I came up with a near-perfect color palette and, with much practicing and testing, eventually fine-tuned it to suit my project's needs perfectly (see Figure 8.2).

I knew I wanted to have a kitchen-focused theme that could adapt to different contexts and cultures. The green I chose was inspired by herbs and will be used for a pleasing accent in the body copy as shown in the case studies, while the egg-yolk yellow will be used to draw attention with a bright pop of color. The muted tones will work well for snippets, visual tags, and full-page color differentiation. The cream tone is meant to act as a less saturated yellow, while still maintaining the food theme. The darker brick red is to give ample contrast while evoking images of meat, sauce, and heat. I ended up with a palette that showcases strong cultural, culinary, and vintage themes.

Upon further experimentation, I eventually had to revise the palette here and there to be more unified and user-friendly. I still kept the general ideas of the colors I used, but I tweaked the palette to be more approachable, taking care to consider readers who may have visual impairments as well.

Fonts:

Unlike the colors, I found the ideal fonts for my project almost immediately. With the inspiration I had gathered from the Publication Design board, I was able to source fonts that had the familiar and nostalgic feel without sacrificing readability and accessibility (see Figure 10). It was more difficult to find a body font, but inspired by the healthy use of contrast and the minimalist style that "Basics with Babish" portrayed, I was able to find one that matched well with the content.

Visual Guide, Illustrations, and Patterns:

Over the course of completing the Mind-Map, Mood Boards, Color Selection, and Font ideation, I was able to compile together a small working brand guide for myself to use when making design decisions. It acted as my metric and litmus test for whether or not the designs I made held up to the values and direction I had already decided on. With this guide, I was able to cultivate a specific image that would deliver on all the elements I wanted to include, such as the nostalgia, familiarity, warmth, and accessibility. In developing this, I took illustrations that I drew during the initial research phase of this project and compiled them into brand icons and patterns. These images represented things that could be associated both with culinary practice and collaborative work. I created illustrations in Procreate using a monoline brush so that it would translate easily over to Adobe Illustrator. These illustrations featured an olive branch, a rosemary sprig, a sunny-side-up egg, a bag of flour, a whisk, a carrot, a rolling pin, chopsticks holding a noodle, a head of garlic, and a stem of basil. These illustrations also fit nicely with the brand colors I developed, and I was able to arrange them into an aesthetic pattern.

"I could not make and incorporate every single communal recipe from every single culture."

Process:

Throughout all these developments, guided by my research, I was able to fine-tune a visual concept that connected deeply with the ideas of food and community. From here, I was able to move on to one of the biggest pieces of this puzzle: writing the cookbook itself.

Designing and tuning the visuals was a large part of my expertise, but the research showed that the process would require more personal involvement, and I began to write accordingly.

Culinary Inspiration

As with any cookbook, I knew there would need to be clearly-defined recipes, thorough lists of ingredients, and basic culinary concepts. In order for me to develop those, I needed to make decisions based on what resources I had available, my personal experience in the kitchen, and what I thought would best communicate my message to my desired audience. I could not make, take pictures of, and incorporate every single communal recipe from every single culture — especially not in the timeframe of a single semester — so I needed to narrow things down.

I started broad, making a long list of recipes I knew, enjoyed, and had experienced previous success with. Many of the meals I cook or bake on my own time are for sharing with friends, so I knew many of my personal favorite recipes would already lend themselves to a community experience. Capacity for sharing was not the only factor I had to consider, however. Based on my research into food, connection, and isolation, I knew I wanted culture to be a central factor within my work.

As such, I needed to ensure my pool of potential recipes had a wide variety of ethnic inspiration and style to pull from, such as Asian, Mexican, and Italian foods. I came up with a decent variety of recipes, some of which included personal staples for my home and kitchen. Some of these included spicy ramen bowls, pork szechuan bowls, and blackened adobo steak salad. Meanwhile, there were some less typical options that I had still found good experiences with, such as Connecticut-style lobster rolls and hot pot. Other options, which included some modern American foods, seemed like no-brainers to include in a beginner-friendly cookbook, such as burgers and pancakes.

Before I decided on the recipes that were going to make it into the final cookbook, I decided I would need to sort them somehow. So, taking careful consideration of the recipes I had already thought of, I began to brainstorm categories by which I could group them in my book. One of the first sorting systems to occur to me was mealtimes, such as breakfast, lunch, and dinner. However, I noticed that some meals did not fall squarely within any of those categories, such as breads and pepperoni rolls.

I thought about adding a "snacks" category to the three basic mealtimes, but then I noticed that certain categories (mostly breakfast) simply did not have enough entries to justify their own category. With that in mind, I began to explore other options, and eventually landed on the following three categories: Snacks, Dinners, and Buffets. Knowing I had already decided to feature no more than twelve recipes (based on time constraints and project scope), I decided three categories would be ideal, leaving four meal slots to fill in each. Later on, as I began to narrow down my recipes, I decided to deviate from this plan slightly, opting for one less "snack" recipe in favor of one extra "buffet" recipe, considering their individual relevences to my message. The result was three snack recipes, four dinner recipes, and five total buffets.

> **"I found a way to have my cake and eat it too."**

Figure 11 - Progress Shot from Spaghetti Recipe

Recipe Curation:

Finally, with my categories decided and a deep pool of recipes to choose from, it came time to narrow down the list to the twelve recipes that would be featured in my cookbook. It was relatively easy to get my list down to sixteen, but it became progressively more difficult to part with any from there. I had to carefully think about the merits of each idea: their ease of cooking, their scalability, their maximum realistic group sizes, and their price ranges.

Because a main priority for my book was accessibility, it made sense to part with recipes that were difficult for beginners to get right (such as creme brulee) or more pricey for large groups (like lobster rolls). At the same time, community-centric meals would have to take a priority, so many recipes that fell into the buffet category had a guaranteed place. I even moved my spaghetti recipe into the buffet category, realizing that many people tend to prefer varying amounts of sauce, different toppings, and varied cheeses. Meanwhile, those which were less group-friendly had to go.

After I had said goodbye to lobster rolls and creme brulee, I was left with fifteen total recipes. One of my absolute favorite things to make for my friends is monkey bread — I have a sweet cinnamon version and a savory garlic version, and both plates go entirely every time I bake them. Still, I realized that there were other, more applicable recipes that filled the same role in the snack category, so I was forced to let the monkey bread go. With fourteen total recipes, I needed to remove two more, and after a few days of deliberation, I found a way to have my cake and eat it too. Two of my recipes, I realized, were closely associated with (and even built on) other recipes. For example, my "best sandwich ever" called for my focaccia recipe to make the bread. It felt like a shame to remove such a great recipe, but removing the focaccia instead would prevent readers from enjoying either one.

Instead, I decided to include the sandwich (which is little more than an assembly of ingredients) as a "recommended upscale" to be included in the focaccia recipe, which was far more in-depth and demanded a complete recipe. This way, I could provide readers with an even greater capacity for personalization and scaling while still maintaining focus on the twelve recipes that really mattered. I did the same thing elsewhere, relegating the Italian-inspired antipasto to an upgrade of the basic charcuterie board recipe. Finally, with my twelve recipes decided on, and with multiple optional upscale features, I had my twelve recipes:

Figure 12 - Progress Shot from Charcuterie Recipe

Snacks:

Charcuterie Board with Optional Antipasto Upscale — Both French and Italian-inspired, this recipe is easy to pull off and difficult to master. Because no actual cooking is involved, it is easy for others to participate and make a creative group activity out of it.

Pepperoni Rolls — Easy and extremely scalable, these snacks are the perfect addition to any movie night or game day. Plus, they are portable, and can be easily brought along for hikes or picnics with friends.

Homemade Focaccia with Optional Sandwich

Upscale — Baking is an essential skill for anyone who enjoys cooking for others. A No-Knead Focaccia offers an excellent entry point for this with an optional meal-centric upscale for those looking for a challenge.

> **"I could provide readers with an even greater capacity for personalization and scaling while still maintaining focus on the twelve recipes that really mattered."**

Dinners:

Szechuan Rice Bowls — Representing Chinese culture in the kitchen, the szechuan bowl is one of my favorite scalable meals. It is easy, it is delicious, and it can feed a lot of people at an affordable price point.

Blackened Steak Bowls — These bowls represent a crucial Mexican-inspired entry in the dinner category, providing a healthy, scalable, customizable option for those who love meat and veggies.

Spicy Ramen Noodles — Representing Japanese cooking, the ramen bowl is an easy, effective, and extremely personalizable option for the beginner chef. Virtually everyone enjoys ramen, and with a bit of guidance, this meal can be easily elevated to something truly special.

Homemade Buttered Chicken — The only example of Indian cooking on this list, the buttered chicken offers a worthwhile challenge for those looking to create something more exotic and interesting than they would usually find in American home cooking.

Figure 13 - Completion Shot of Spicy Ramen Recipe

"I knew from the beginning that recipes alone would not be enough to make my point, regardless of how carefully they were chosen for a community mindset."

Buffets:

Breakfast Pancake Bar — The only breakfast-focused meal on this list, it made sense to include pancakes (among some other easy items) for those brunch occasions when your friends have crashed overnight on the couch or in the guest room.

Saucy Spaghetti — Spaghetti sundays are a time-honored tradition in my home, and this meal has proven invaluable for its scalability when more friends than I expect come over after church. Here, I include my very own meat sauce recipe.

Everything Hot Pot — Though less common than many of the items on the list, this Asian fusion dish was a major inspiration for my project and a necessary inclusion from the very beginning due to its intrinsic communal nature.

Quesadilla Bar — The second of my Mexican-inspired meals, quesadillas are one of those easy-to-customize meals for a large, varied, or picky crowd of participants. This recipe offers ways to account for dietary restrictions, size constraints, and preferences.

Backyard Burger Bar — The quintessential American celebration meal, it only made sense to include burgers as my final recipe in a communal cookbook. Learning to cook burgers opens a wide range of possibilities for those who like to celebrate with food.

Writing Style and Relatability:

I knew from the beginning that recipes alone would not be enough to make my point, regardless of how carefully they were chosen for a community mindset. The research showed that, in order to reach my intended audience and convince them of my message, I would have to present these recipes in such a way that readers felt it was really possible. Other pieces of media, such as Andrew Rea's "Basics with Babish" and the community painting "Mama Rose Kitchen" found success in this way by

Figure 14 - Assembly shot of quesadilla recipe

leaning into elements of nostalgia, homeliness, and personal connection. Based on this information and the similarities between my target audience and the fanbase of Chef Rea, I opted for a writing style inspired by the content in his "Basics" cookbook.

Using my own voice and personal experience with these recipes, I intentionally set out to write something that readers of my target demographic could relate to, empathize with, and feel emotionally invested in. I approached this by sharing my own experiences in the introductory paragraphs of each recipe and maintaining a more conversational, less professional voice throughout the recipes themselves, even going so far as to scatter occasional jokes where applicable. Likewise, I took this same approach with the contextual content of the book, including the introduction and conclusion. From the moment the reader opened the book, I wanted them to feel like they were already in the company of friends and eager to try a task they could confidently accomplish.

Figure 15 - Visual Brand Guide for Colors and Themes

Layout and Design:

For the design of this cookbook, my first goal was authenticity. I had to make choices that reflected a communal eating experience, and I did that through my photography and layout.

Photoshoot:

For the photos, I knew I had to create an environment that both catered to the research, but also served my needs of getting authentic photos of individuals participating in Commensality. I booked an Airbnb that had the best lighting, kitchen, and setup for a week, and prepared to make 3-4 recipes every day.

I had to draft up photo waivers for the different models who came in, but all of them were friends who were eager to help (and eat). After photographing people creating and eating each recipe, I would take the images and quickly edit, putting them into sorted galleries depending on the food and individuals involved.

In preparation for the shoot, I procured a small 50-mm lens with a large aperture for the best lighting given my indoor, natural light-focused setting. The changing weather did create some issues of varied lighting, but I was able to use Lightroom Classic to adjust different settings such as color, exposure, and apply presets for a more nostalgic style. I did this by editing the colors to reflect my palette, adding in vintage grain, and not being afraid to shoot with a higher ISO. My focus for all the images was to capture people interacting with each other and the food, and I worked hard to ensure that each image of food had a human element, such as hands, faces, or bodies.

The biggest hurdle to overcome was scheduling different people to show up at different times and for different meals. Some even asked for prompts on what to wear, and I made a small moodboard that produced some amazing results. I drafted a form where individuals could sign up for their preferred meals and times while noting any allergens I would have to be aware of. This

Figure 17 - Progressive
Variations towards Final Logo
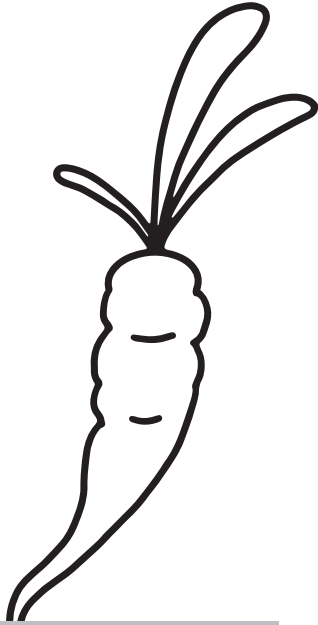
Figures 16.1, 16.2, & 16.3 -
Examples of monoline spot
illustrations
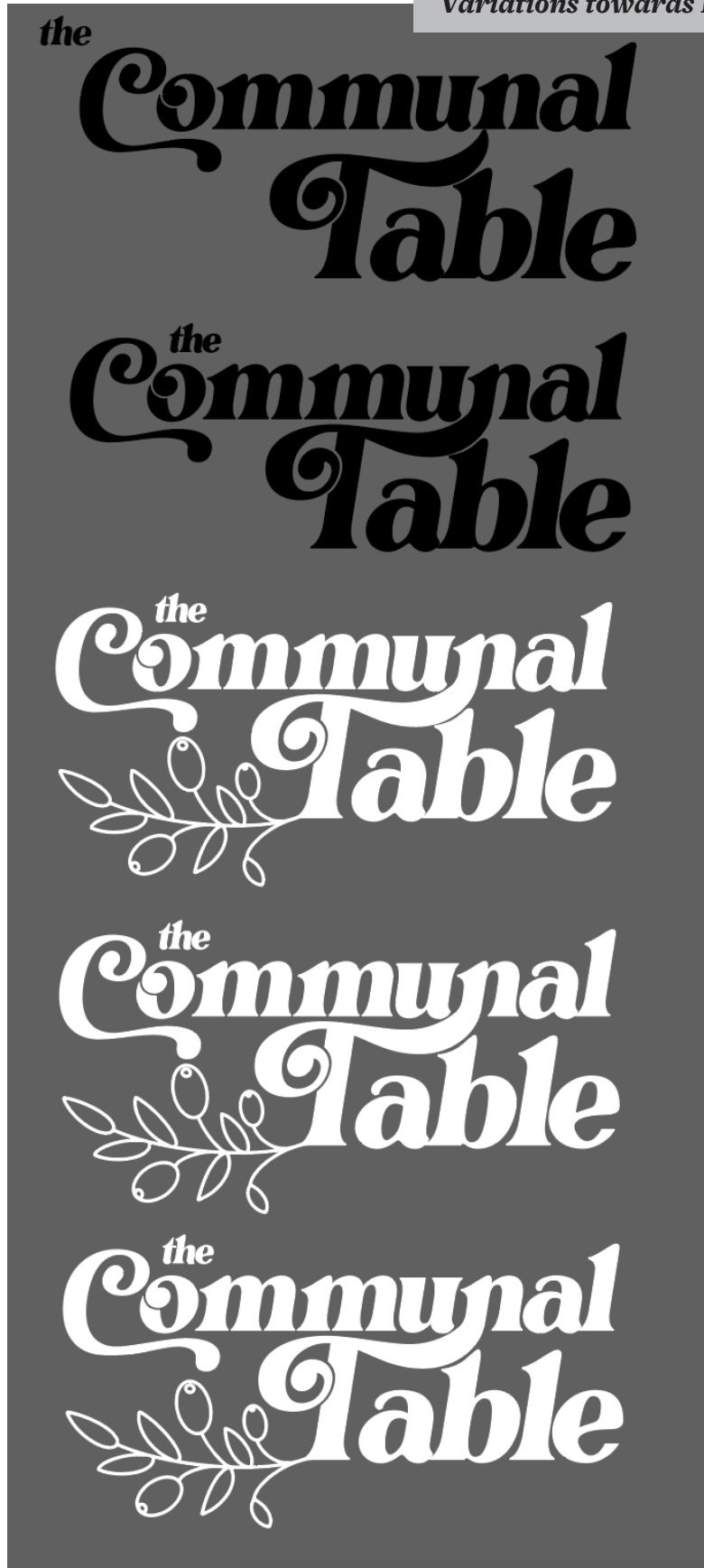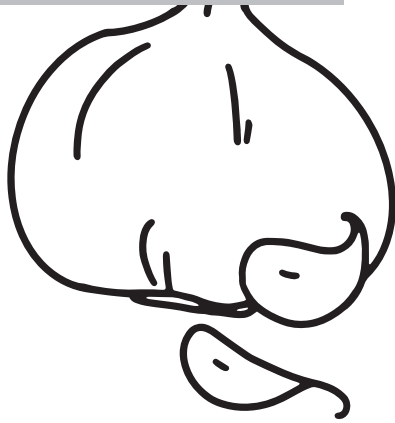
created very diverse groups that came through at different times and brought a lot of variety in models for the book.

The layout of the book needed to have nostalgia at its core, and I wanted to model most of my pages off of the style of old recipe cards (see Figure 18.2). They have clear lines and dividers, and my monoline illustrations fit right in with the design.

Taking the colors, fonts, recipes, and photos, I compiled an easy-to-navigate layout that featured clear labels, consistent hierarchy, vibrant imagery, and compelling illustrations. Based on the "Basics with Babish" book, I was able to find inspiration for proportion, line, and scale that I carried through my designs as well (see Figure 18.1).

Figure 18.1 - The cover of "Basics with Babish" by Andrew Rea

Figure 18.2 - Example of old recipe card style used for inspiration

Figures 19.1, 19.2, & 19.3 - Behind the scenes of the Photoshoot

Figure 20 - Completion Shot of Hot Pot Recipe

Conclusion

In the end, *The Communal Table,* through hard work and effort, became an accessible, informative, nostalgic, and enjoyable cookbook that truly encapsulates the journey of commensality. It is built from the efforts of communal bond and food, creating a dependable foundation of social sustainability. The initial goal was to create a work for individuals to have communal eating become more accessible in their lives, but the formation of the book was a definitive proof of concept. Dozens of people came together to help me succeed with this research, eating food, sharing anecdotes, and providing their likenesses so that this book could come to fruition.

Many cookbooks focus on achieving the best tasting food and creating the most unique meals. This book, however, serves community as the main dish and equips individuals with the tools they need to succeed with cultivating healthy relationships.
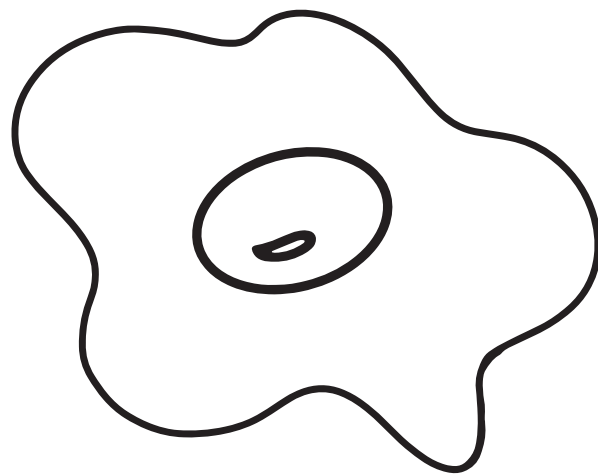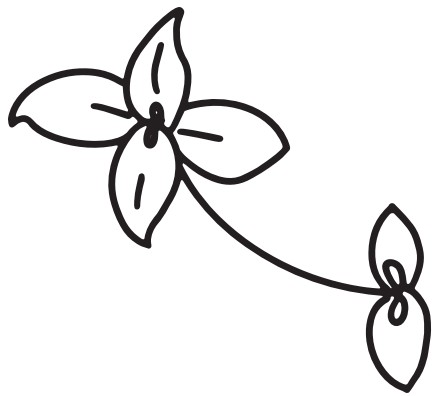
Chapter Four:

The Communal Table

THE CULMINATION OF EFFORTS

Figure 21 - The Cookbook's Final Cover
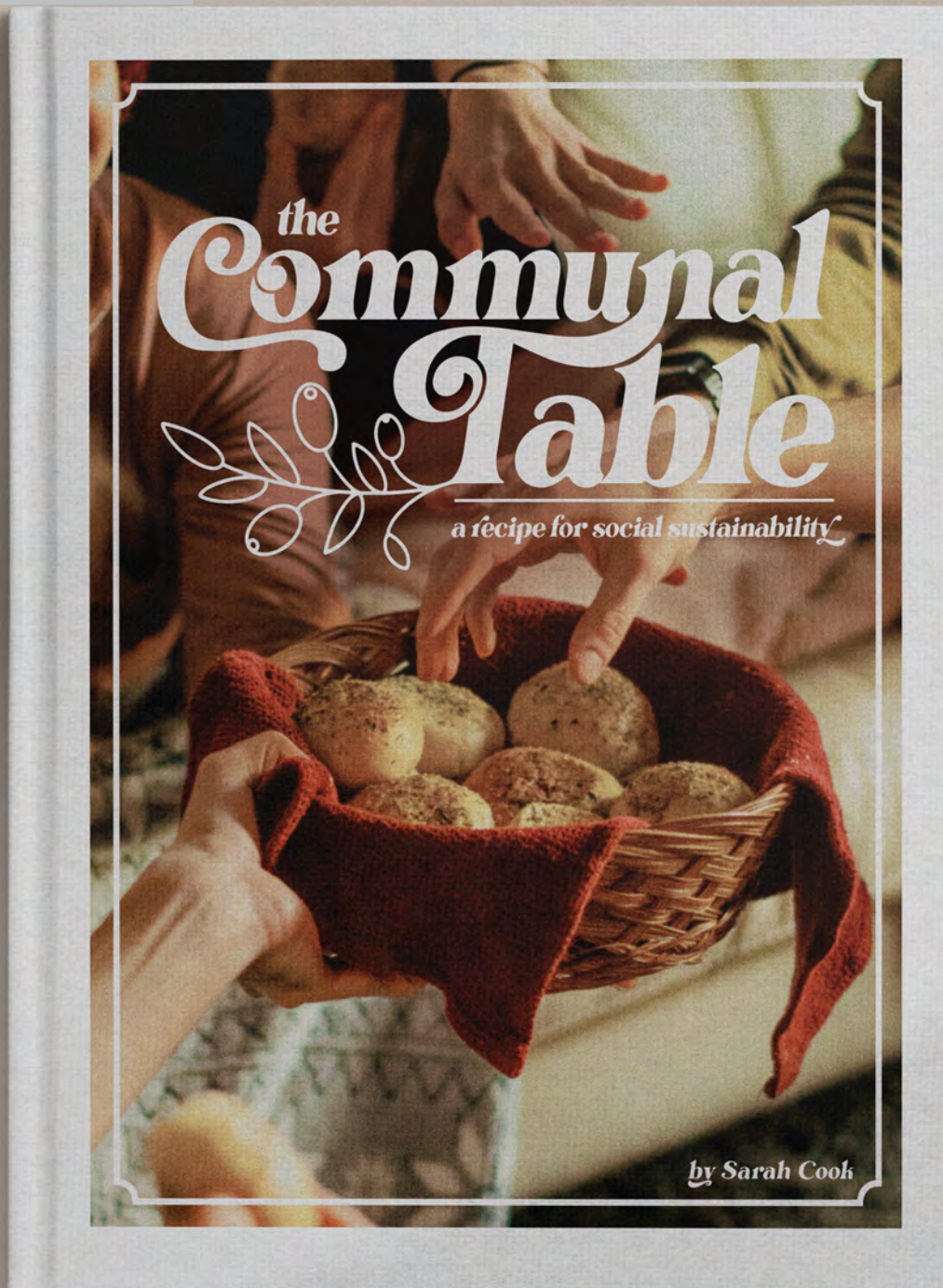
The Communal Table

Overview

Food, a fundamental element of human civilization, has historically served as a cornerstone of communal life, providing sustenance, enabling cultural expression, and forming connections between people across families and generations. For young adults within our modern society, communal dining — a tradition deeply ingrained in our social nature — has become uniquely uncommon. The drivers of convenience and utility often supersede the rich history of food as a central part of daily interactions, resulting in long-term consequences that may be hard to notice at first.

Research suggests that this shift away from communal values could be associated with a notable increase in mental health problems, greatly exacerbated by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic, where social distancing took isolation levels to an all-time high. Though quarantine is no longer in practice, many of the resulting social deficits still remain. This has led to a noticeable gap in social sustainability, resulting in underdeveloped support systems and preventing many individuals from cultivating the genuine emotional connections they rely on.

The repercussions of this societal shift are at the forefront of my research, focusing on young adults, especially those living on their own, trying to navigate social sustainability in a post-COVID world. The negative effects often manifest as diminished mental health, limited support systems, and a scarcity of opportunities for meaningful emotional bonds. In an era dominated by digital connections, it seems that our society is becoming increasingly disconnected in the ways that matter to our health.

According to my research, food is a cornerstone of human history, understood to be an intrinsic part of our social nature. It transcends mere sustenance, serving instead as a shared experience that has bound communities together across time. As a

form of communication, food carries both personal and cultural significance, offering subtle indication and recinforcement of social dynamics. Beyond its nutritional value, the act of sharing a meal becomes a medium through which individuals express their identity and establish connections within a community.

Figure 22 - The cookbook's concluding message, a call for commensality

Commensality, as revealed by the research, plays a vital role in fostering community by addressing both physical and emotional needs at once. Beyond the act of eating, communal dining becomes a conduit for shared experiences, reinforcing bonds and creating a sense of belonging and healthy interdependence. The identification with a food-based community extends beyond the personal to offer further benefits on the interpersonal and communal levels. By associating with a culinary community, individuals may find not only a shared passion but also a network that supports personal growth and community development.

When food is prepared in a collaborative setting, it can open avenues to explore diverse cultural cuisines and even promote healthier eating habits. The act of communal cooking then becomes an educational experience, encouraging individuals to broaden their culinary horizons and make more intentional choices about their diet. A community formed through commensality serves as both a social and nutritional safety net during times of personal need. This shared reliance ensures that individuals within the community have access to support, both emotionally nutritionally, creating a resilient and interconnected social network.

"Communal dining becomes a conduit for shared experiences."

Proposed Solution

In hopes of addressing the detrimental effects of a societal shift away from shared meals, I present *The Communal Table*, an acceccible cookbook for social sustainability. Rooted in the belief that food can be a conduit for connection, this cookbook aims to revive the communal spirit that has gradually slipped away from our modern lives. The contents are not just culinary instructions; they are invitations to forge bonds, spark conversations, and build communities around the shared experience of preparing and enjoying meals together (See Figure 22).

Designed with commensality in mind, this book caters to equipping those who want to cook for others with the tools for success. Especially relevant in a post-COVID world, where quarantine has disrupted countless

forms of gathering, this cookbook aims to bridge the social gap preventing young adults from forming meaningful relationships. It emphasizes the enduring role of food in promoting social sustainability and recognizes the potential mental health struggles faced by those lacking social support. Through the practical solutions and delicious recipes offered in this cookbook, I hope to encourage other young individuals to rediscover the transformative power of communal dining in an increasingly disconnected world.

Carefully curated to cater to a diverse audience, *The Communal Table* is designed to be accessible to individuals of all social standings, acknowledging the importance of inclusivity in the pursuit of social sustainability. It is made for those who want to seek connection, and provides helpful tips with a personal touch through intentional design. The contents of the cookbook offer a diverse selection of recipes, drawing inspiration from various enthnic traditions and methods to appeal to a wider range of tastes and preferences (see

Figure 23). It also features insightful ideas and helpful tags to better accommodate different groups and sizes without sacrificing accessibility. Whether the reader is a seasoned home cook or someone taking their first steps into the world of food, they will find a seat for them at *The Communal Table*.

"It is designed with commensality in mind."

How to Use This Cookbook

Intended to be much more than a mere collection of recipes, *The Communal Table* is a guidebook for creating shared experiences. Beyond the basics of collaborative food preparation, each recipe can serve as a catalyst for communal engagement over food. My hope is to see this cookbook become an

Figure 24 - A finishing shot of the pancake recipe

insightful resource of not just recipes but as a companion in the pursuit of meaningful connection. I created it to offer detailed guidance, personable tips, and meaningful visuals, aiming to provide guidance both in and out of the kitchen.

Design Philosophy

More than anything, I wanted my philosophy of design for this project to be both intentional and meaningful. This mission began with the branding itself, which was inspired by the vintage typographies of the Kodachrome era and the illustrative style of classic cookbooks, which I had already begun to emulate in the monoline drawings I had created during the research phase of this thesis (See Figure 23). The logo, and by extension, the typography of the book itself, is characterized by swooping lines, full shapes, and a coca-cola-like shape language crossed with the botanical imagery of an olive branch. This became the basis for the publication's cover.

The resulting cover is an appropriate example of the design philosophy of the whole, showcasing the warmth of happy food-related memories through color, the vintage charm of nostalgia through old-fashioned typography, and the essence of healthy community through imagery (See Figure 21). The image of many hands reaching for the same basket of food speaks perfectly to the nature of commensality. Likewise, it captures the essence of generosity and kindness, reminiscent of communal gatherings such as soup kitchens or church potlucks.

The title itself, "*The Communal Table*," acts as an invitation into the kind of community showcased on the cover and throughout the book. Through the combination of carefully chosen words and imagery, the initial impression the book gives is one of approachable ambiance for members of all ethnic and culinary backgrounds. The food-

"More than
anything, I wanted
my philosophy
of design for this
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intentional and
meaningful."

Figure 25 - The stylized heading of the cookbook's introduction page

Introduction

centric branding, harmonizing with the carefully selected color palette and Olive Village typeface, establishes an atmosphere of accessibility and reliability, fostering a sense of both warm welcome and good-humored guidance.

A series of intricate, miniature illustrations of cooking supplies and ingredients are scattered strategically throughout the pages of the book (see Figure 25), striking a nuanced balance between visual aesthetics and utilitarian functionality. Serving as both visual accents and useful reference points, these illustrations provide a swift and subtle guide to the backgrounds of each recipe. These help to both reinforce visual balance between spreads and on individual page layouts

.

"The initial impression the book gives is one of approachable ambiance."

Content Direction

I broke up the recipe sections within *The Communal Table* very intentionally, focusing on those options that would best lend themselves to groups and gatherings. Categorized into three sections — Snacks, such as charcuterie and pepperoni rolls, Dinners, such as Ramen and Steak Bowls, and Buffets, like a large pancake breakfast or quesadilla bar — all of the recipes have been thoughtfully curated to suit a group setting.

Within these sections, each recipe is accompanied by different tags to help the reader understand its style, demands, and applications. These include things like the nationality of cuisine, what situations that particular food might be ideal for, and suggested group size limits. The writing style, guided by the research's advocacy for a relatable tone and personal anecdotes, maintains a professional yet friendly demeanor, ensuring a seamless transition for readers from the anecdotes to the core content — the delicious recipes.

Figure 26 - An Example of a Recipe Spread

For these recipes, I chose to put the ingredients and step-by-step processes, but decided to omit some of the typical measurements to encourage the reader to "follow their heart," experimenting with a taste-as-you-go approach. One of the unique highlights of these recipes are the 'Divvy it Up!' sections that suggest ideas for collaborating with others during the cooking process (see figure 26). Qualifiers for these rolls are kept to a minimum to encourage cooperation, even between those of different generations. Some even suggest activities to make the recipe more fun and shareable, such as the 'Charcuterie and Antipasto', which encourage the participants to make their own charcuterie boards and share with one another.

Inclusivity is a core principle of this cookbook's method. These recipes are designed with particular attention to adaptability, offering better flexibility for limitations like allergies, preferences, or different dietary restrictions. This philosophy even extends to suggested ingredient swaps, ensuring the dishes can be customized for repeated enjoyment and diverse settings. The recipe pages also provide insightful recommendations for swapping proteins, nuts, and other tricky components. With these features, *The Communal Table* aims to be a more accessible and broadly applicable resource than most cookbooks of its kind. This emphasis on customization empowers readers to begin a personal culinary journey, tailored to their specific tastes and preferences, all while assuring the communal experience remains readily attainable for every meal.

Framing Devices

The publication is divided up and organized with a variety of visual and verbal framing devices, mostly in the form of introductions, conclusions, and interior sectional title pages. After the initial title page, the credits page, and the dedication page, the book features a helpful table of contents, designed to provide the reader easy reference when trying to find a specific recipe or information within. Then finally, the book proper opens with an introduction, the header bolded in the same warm red as the title page.

The first thing the written content does is define commensaility and establish it as a guiding concept of the book, explaining the purpose of everything that follows in detail. Likewise, the book's introduction also establishes its limitations; It cannot, however hard it may try, force the reader to go out and make friends. Likewise, a book cannot convince non-readers to participate

Figure 27 - A Grain Spot Illustration in a Recipe

(or vegetable oil for a vegetarian alternative)
• ~2 Tsp Salt
• 3 Tbsp Baking Powder
• ~1 1/2 Cups Lukewarm Water

in communal activities around food. What it can do, however, is provide the reader with the tools and knowledge to begin forging their own culinary journey and community where they currently are.

Throughout the text, there are numerous other instances of visual and verbal framing devices to guide the reader through the book, including section breaks with large dividing spreads and introductory paragraphs to each category. For example, the Snacks section, which begins on page 9 of the manuscript, opens with a large photographic spread overlaid with the title and a brief paragraph which explains the significance of "snacks" as a recipe category and its significance in forming

a community around shared meals. Then, after three detailed recipes and a number of photographic spreads, the section ends with a dividing spread and a new introduction page that serves the same purpose for the Dinners category.

"Inclusivity is a core principle of this cookbook's method."

Recurring Visual Elements

The design of *The Communal Table* is not just about aesthetics; it is a deliberate effort to evoke emotions and set the stage for meaningful connections, as inspired by case studies like "Mama Rose Kitchen" and Kixen Liu's "Commensality 2021." From the warmth of color choices to the carefully selected typeface, every visual element is intended to resonate with the themes of home, nostalgia, and shared moments (See Figure 28).

Throughout the many spreads, recipe cards, and side columns, there are a variety of recurring design elements in the form of headers, color accents, and spot illustrations. The most obvious of these may be the illustrations, which are featured partially in the logo as well as virtually every interior page with text, and these illustrations vary based on relevance to the accompanying recipe and images (See Figure 27). Many of these monoline illustrations are especially botanical in their design to evoke a feeling of contemplative beauty as seen in the reflective modeling clay creations by the participants of Kexin Liu's "Commensality 2021" project.

More frequently used than the spot illustrations, though somewhat more subtle, are the decorative monoline frames that accentuate photos and divide imagery and blocks of text throughout the recipe card pages. These frames often convey emphasis and provide cohesion across pages by tying in the colors associated with each recipe, which vary based on the visual tones of the food and associated images.

Unsurprisingly, the stylized headings and subheadings are featured throughout the publication, using the same font to provide atmosphere and visual interest while organizing blocks of information with a clear hierarchy for quick and simple navigation. Oftentimes, these headings are accented or underlined by elements similar to the decorative frames, and occasionally by select spot illustrations, to reinforce the title's ties to the subject matter, whatever it may be.

The typeface Olive Village, which is featured in all of the titles and headings, conveniently comes with a variety of customizable style options like flourishes in the descenders of letters like Y and G and the caps of letters like T and F. These variations appear throughout the text to give special character to individual labels. One of the most applicable instances of this typeface can be seen throughout the publication on spread pages with bold spot quotations from the text(See Figure 29).

Practical Choices

While much of the visual design was geared toward aesthetic choices for the purposes of emotional investment and approachability, many of the size and proportion-related choices were dictated by the practical demands of a cookbook. The overall dimensions of the

Figure 29 - Glyphs of the Typeface

Glyphs:

to better accommodate those with visual impairments such as color blindness. The current colors are designed to provide the same level of contrast, legibility, and visual interest for those who may not be able to distinguish the full spectrum of colors.

"It emphasizes the people, the emotions, and the diversity of shared moments."

book measure in at 8.5 by 11 inches, which is marginally larger than most magazine-like publications, which are typically in the neighborhood of 7-8 by 10 inches. The extra size gives the cookbook's information room to breath, making it easier to read when your hands are busy working with food.

Likewise, the bold headings, clearly defined sections of information, and organizational features like the table of contents are designed to maximize usefulness during the cooking process, helping the reader (or readers) to find the information they need to complete the recipe with minimal search time. While many cookbooks achieve this through sheer minimalism and white space, *The Communal Table* seeks to do so in a more aesthetically appealing manner with a delicate balance of minimalism and visual elements.

Finally, because accessibility is a central aspect of this book's mission, the color palette underwent certain practical changes as well. Though the final palette is still very close in tone to the original lineup, the colors were adjusted early on in the design process

Photography

Photography was a crucial aspect of my plan for this book from the very beginning. Capturing the essence of communal dining, the photography in *The Communal Table* goes beyond showcasing dishes. It emphasizes the people, the emotions, and the diversity of shared moments. The deliberate balance between macro shots and scenes aims to create a visual narrative that not only celebrates the culinary journey but also underscores the importance of human connection.

Most successful cookbooks, especially modern ones, are built around the art of food photography, which highlights all the appealing aspects of food, influencing appetites with color psychology and lighting. The typography of these modern cookbooks is often minimalist, sans serif, and monolined. Many older cookbooks, meanwhile, feature minimal photography, or at least photography without much attention to aesthetics. Instead, many of these older books focus on illustrative and typographic elements. *The Communal*

Table seeks to achieve the best of both of these formats by combining them, using modern styles for visual appeal and accessibility and vintage elements for charm and nostalgia.

In particular, I drew visual influence for my food photography from the cookbook "Basics with Babish" by Andrew Rea. Unlike Chef Rea's book, however, the photography throughout *The Communal Table* is displayed in the Kodachrome style, which harkens back to a time when vibrant, warm tones and subtle grain were typical of a popular school of photography. While these images evoke a nostalgic atmosphere, they also embody many of the best things about modern food photography, including strategic use of color psychology and careful framing to accentuate the delicious details of the food.

One of the most important throughlines of the photography throughout the book is the all-important human element: every photo of food (with only minute exceptions) features at least some part of a person or people interacting with the ingredients or meals. All of the major spreads feature people together in community, interacting over preparation or eating. Many of the models reappear throughout the book in different combinations with one another.

Every photo in this book was taken over the course of a single, multi-day photoshoot in Forest, Virginia. I bought a grill and booked an Airbnb with a large kitchen and lots of natural light to create the perfect set for my photography, then contacted, enlisted, and scheduled the help of as many of my friends and family as I could, many of whom came in from out of town to cook, participate, and model for my images.

One of the main advantages of drawing from such a wide group of people is the level of diversity I was able to capture and convey

throughout the final publication (See Figure 30). Food is a part of our society with unique capabilities to bridge cultural and generational gaps, and commensality is the best way to approach that. As such, it was vitally important for the cookbook to showcase a wide variety of ethnicities and age groups. My friends and family were able to provide a welcome variety of people, and *The Communal Table*'s message is strengthened by their presence throughout the visuals.

*Figure 30 - **Examples of Diversity within Photography***

Figure 31 - An Example of an Ingredients List in the Book

Ingredients

- **Meats:**
  - ◊ Pepperoni
  - ◊ Salami
  - ◊ Summer Sausage
- **Cheeses:**
  - ◊ Brie
  - ◊ Gouda
  - ◊ Chevre
- **Veggies**
  - ◊ Celery
  - ◊ Cucumbers
  - ◊ Lettuce
- **Fruits**
  - ◊ Grapes
  - ◊ Assorted Berries
  - ◊ Apple Slices
- **Grains**
  - ◊ Crackers
  - ◊ Sliced Baguette
- **Garnishes**
  - ◊ Rosemary
  - ◊ Mint
- **Toppings**
  - ◊ Honey
  - ◊ Jam
  - ◊ Nuts

Divvy it Up!

Here are some ways to work on a charcuterie board with friends:

- Task each friend with bringing a different cheese they want everyone else to try.
- Have different friends place different ingredients on the board, as a lot of it can be arranged at the same time!
- Buy a bunch of small boards instead of one large one, have your friends make their own with provided ingredients, and compare!

Written Voice

Drawing heavy influence from the style of creative chefs like Andrew Rea and Joshua Weisman, the written content throughout this publication is decidedly personable, opting for a friendly and accessible tone over an educational, formal, or professional voice. *The Communal Table* is more than just instructions; Instead, it is intended to offer a narrative of growth and a written companion to aid in the journey toward interpersonal connection.

The tone of voice varies slightly throughout the publication depending on the needs of the content. While the finer details of the recipes may read as more technical for the sake of clarity (See Figure 31), there are still details and anecdotes sprinkled throughout to provide a sense of guidance and good humor. Likewise, these sections often encourage experimentation and customization, offering tips and suggestions to personalize the recipes further (See Figure 32).

Some of the instances that most benefited from the intentionally down-to-earth tone were the introductory paragraphs, both those which introduce the sections and those which introduce the individual recipes. It was these passages where I could best emphasize the personal significance and application potential baked into each recipe.

As stated early on in the documentation, a beginner's cookbook would need to offer a goal that seemed both attainable and desirable to those new to the world of cooking. Using personal anecdotes and jokes where applicable, the cookbook aims to be accessible, entertaining, and above all, inviting. Influenced by the communal spirit and shared target audience with culinary influencers like Andrew "Babish" Rea, the writing style seeks to not only guide but also inspire a sense of camaraderie in the kitchen.

Everything Hot Pot

Hot Pot is a little different than your usual soup recipe. Since people take turns throwing in their different preferred ingredients, it's a bit more free-form. It is an incredibly effective communal dish, and this is something I would save for a very very special occasion (like convincing my brother to visit me). I won't list one specific recipe, but I will list ingredients to obtain, and how to set it up. I will also have some helpful tips to ensure a smooth sailing hot-pot experience. It is time-consuming, but well worth the effort. **Tags:** Tabletop, Dinner, Fancy, GL5

Cuisine: Asian-Fusion | **Great for:** Trying new forms of food, making a big mess, an all-you-can-eat buffet

Protein	Vegetables	Starch	Spices/Sauces	Soup
• **Steak** — try sirloin for a leaner cut, or ribeye, which is my personal favorite • **Pork belly** (or chopped-up bacon) • **Shrimp** • **Scallops** • **Eggs**	• **Bok choy** • **Beansprouts** • **Green Onions** (Chopped) • **Enoki Mushrooms**	• **Noodles** (udon, ramen, rice noodles, etc.) • **Dumplings** (which might include pork, beef, seafood, or just veggies) • **White rice** (remember to cook it first!)	• **Ginger** • **Fresh garlic** • **MSG** • **Red pepper flakes** • **Chili oil** • **Sesame oil** • **Soy sauce** • **Sesame seeds**	• One or two soup stocks of choice, depending on how many pots you have. I recommend the knock-off Shoyu broth listed in my spicy ramen recipe, though a Tom Yum broth from your local Asian market or grocery store aisle will do nicely. For an even simpler flavor, start with something like a chicken stock and add spices to your liking.

Divvy it Up!

Here are some ways to work on a Hot Pot Dinner with friends:

• Buying all these ingredients on your own can be pretty expensive. Instead, divvy up the ingredients among participants. On top of being more affordable, it also gives others a chance to bring something unique to the meal. If, however, you can afford to treat all your friends to a free meal, don't let me stop you!
• I like to send some friends to different stores to find different things. Bok Choy, Beansprouts, and Fresh Ginger are best procured from an Asian market, while the meats could be handled by the meat counter at your local grocer. Things like soup bases and sauces may be trickier to find, but the international aisle has never let me down.
• I'm serious, having your friends pitch in to clean up makes it go much faster.

Step By Step:

1. Purchase your ingredients. This will take so[...] ask the meat counter at your local grocery s[...] speaking, thinner is better, so get them nice[...]

2. Some ingredients will require a bit of pr[...] rice, cook a hefty portion on the stove or[...] broth.

3. Chop your green onions and separate[...] and do the same with your ginger (unle[...] of your meats aren't cut into strips yet, [...]

4. Set out the optional ingredients on [...] raw meats with their own serving ute[...]

5. Add your stock or soup base to yo[...] and savory broth can be more acc[...] stock or soup base to a desired le[...] and green onion whites early to m[...]

6. Give each guest a big plate an[...] are for cooked items. Have your [...] approach the hot pot one at a t[...]

7. Take turns cooking chosen ite[...] with different tongs or chops[...] times to ensure a safe eating[...]

8. Once items like meats ar[...] helping of broth. Top with fi[...] spice. Some things, like soy[...] topping for individual bowl[...]

9. Have everyone eat un[...] stomachs like twenty min[...]

10. Have all your friends[...]

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Figure 32 - An Example of a Unique Spread

Figure 33 and 34 - Example Spreads from the Book

The Final Recipes

The different recipes that made it into the final cookbook were each chosen for very specific reasons over other options. Some of the deciding factors were affordability, scalability, beginner-friendliness, capacity for participation, accessibility of ingredients, and ethnic representation, to name a few. The resulting twelve recipes (as well as their suggested upgrades) exemplify the best of these qualities and lend themselves to the overall message of community and collaboration.

The twelve recipes comprise three categories, each carefully chosen to highlight the special qualities of each meal in the book. The snack recipes, for example, were all chosen for their sharable nature and ideal use for situations without actual place settings. The dinner recipes, meanwhile, were each chosen for being complete meals in their own right while being particularly convenient for large groups. Finally, the buffet recipes were all chosen for their ability to host very large groups with the greatest level of customizability for each participant.

The order of the twelve recipes is also intentional beyond their placement into categories. In general, though not exclusively, the simpler recipes are gathered near the beginning of the book, while the more challenging recipes can be found in the second half. This is intended to help convey the "narrative" of the book, guiding the reader in a journey from isolation to togetherness and experimentation to mastery.

Finally, the total selection of recipes represents a diversified window into modern cuisines, including examples from seven different ethnic traditions, varied exercises from multiple schools of cooking, and at least one option for every common mealtime. At the same time, every recipe in this book is accessible for beginners, and easily mastered with just a little practice. Above all, these recipes represent a philosophy of food built around community, commensality, and the importance of collaborating for both health and enjoyment.

In Summary

The culmination of a multitude of influences, from contemporary cookbooks to vintage recipe cards, food photography to Kodachrome, modern art to traditional illustrations, *The Communal Table* offers a new kind of cookbook and a novel approach to the nationwide problem of isolation among the younger generations of a post-COVID world. This approach is founded on a significant breadth of research into both food psychology, emotional development, and social sustainability — the intersection of which is a nearly untouched field of study.

Through this tangible solution, this thesis hopes to influence positive change, emotional growth, and improved interpersonal development among young American adults. *The Communal Table* stands as a practical solution to the challenges of isolation, loneliness, and disconnectedness. It envisions a world where shared meals become not just a routine, but a

powerful tool for building resilient, interconnected, and culturally vibrant communities.

Through this new and innovative variety of cookbook, I invite individuals of Gen Z and beyond to rediscover the joy of shared meals, to break bread together, and to forge connections that extend beyond the confines of a dining table. This cookbook is not just a final solution; instead, it aims to be a catalyst for a broader movement toward a more connected and compassionate society.

Figure 35 - A Classic Recipe with Photos and Steps

"The Communal
Table offers
a new kind of
cookbook and a
novel approach
to the nationwide
problem of
isolation."

Chapter Five:

Conclusion

WHAT COMES NEXT

In Closing

Defense of Work

Now, more than ever, the once unifying practice of Commensality is threatened by societal change. Backed by thorough research, there is a strong defense of the transformative power inherent in communal eating.

It is not just a theoretical concept for me; it is a belief that food is not a mere commodity but a dynamic force capable of rebuilding fractured communities, social sustainability, and harmful isolation. The stakes feel personal, with society grappling with a lack of healthy community, mental health challenges, and a struggle to form meaningful connections, especially in the aftermath of a global pandemic.

Goal and Method

Motivated by a deep-seated urgency to address these challenges, my overarching goal was to provide a practical solution by harnessing the communal nature of food. I delved into an in-depth exploration of historical and contemporary perspectives on food, social sustainability, and community. The culmination of my research is *The Communal Table*, a cookbook designed to bridge the gap in culinary literacy and empower individuals to engage in communal food preparation.

Process & Reflection

This journey began with research, specifically identifying and examining the challenges faced by young adults. The research showed the profound social significance of food, ingrained in our instincts as a historically social event. It emphasizes food as a form of communication, carrying personal and cultural significance while acting as an indicator of social dynamics. Commensality emerges as a powerful force fostering community by meeting both physical and emotional needs.

The identification with a food-based community is shown to offer benefits at personal, interpersonal, and communal levels. Furthermore, communal food preparation not only encourages exploration of diverse cultural cuisines but also promotes healthier eating habits. Ultimately, a community formed through commensality acts as a dual safety net, addressing both social and nutritional needs during times of personal necessity.

As I navigated the subsequent steps, proving the relationship between shared mealtimes and social development and establishing commensality as a practical means of cultivating community, *The Communal Table* evolved. It is not just a cookbook

to me; it is a tangible manifestation of collaborative efforts, reflecting the spirit of communal bonding. Reflecting on this process, I have experienced a myriad of emotions. The initial draw was deeply personal, rooted in my own discovery of the profound connection between food, community, and personal growth. Throughout the process, I faced challenges both within and outside of my control, and had to learn how to adapt and overcome. The challenges I faced guided me towards the final piece, helped along by my own personal community and stepped in with financial, emotional, and spiritual support. Changes in my mindset were necessary to navigate a society entrenched in convenience, advocating for a return to intentional communal food preparation.

Future Potential

The societal and personal implications of the research that brought forward *The Communal Table* extends far beyond its current form. This cookbook, born out of research, a love for cooking, and a desire to reach others, has the potential to become a transformative tool for individuals and families facing social isolation. I envision the possibility of expansion, creating additional resources and tutorials that cater to various social standings and demographics. My hopes for publication and an expanded audience extend beyond personal aspirations, envisioning a broader impact, reaching educators, mental health professionals, and community workers who can leverage these insights and strategies.

In addition, I want to expand into potential digital means of community. With a generation formed with digital literacy, it only makes sense to expand into various mediums such as TikTok, Pinterest, Instagram, and other platforms on the internet. When individuals reach for a recipe, aside from reaching out to family members, they often look it up online, and I want to make sure my work is accessible to them as well. Like an old-school cooking show, I can make my passion and my message of commensality accessible in a more modern and digital age, connecting people across the world.

...wing up in a middle-class American household, with a family that (as far as I knew) was not really tied to Italy. My meat sauce is ...least authentic recipe you could find, but it has incredible flavor. I won't list amounts for seasonings, because I believe you should ... heart's content, tasting frequently. I often have my best friend and sous chef on permanent tasting duty, to make sure that the ...ent. REMEMBER: The most important ingredient is a friend!

...n-American

...eople over at your house all at the same time, Potlucks, Experimentation.
...Lunch, Dinner, Affordable, GL10

Step By Step

1. In a large pot, turn the heat to medium-high and toss in your ground beef. Stir until fully cooked.

2. Add in your cans of crushed tomato, tomato paste, and seasonings. Stir thoroughly and taste frequently, adjusting with more spices as you go. Sometimes, a simple pinch of salt will do the trick.

3. Some notes on the seasonings: It's hard to have too much onion salt, garlic salt, or paprika. Others, like smoked paprika and oregano, can change the flavor rapidly, and should be used with care. If you choose to use bay leaf, just add one or two (and remember to fish it out when you're done).

4. Grate some fresh parmesan, and toss a whole bunch in the pot. Parmesan has a wonderful umami flavor and is arguably one of the most important parts of this sauce. Turn the sauce to low and let simmer for at least 40 minutes.

5. While the sauce simmers, cook some pasta per package directions. I prefer angel hair for texture, and I always cook to "al dente" (the pasta version of medium rare).

6. Drain the pasta in a colander (save a cup or two of that pasta water for the sauce), and parse it out into bowls.

7. Ladle a few tablespoons of pasta water into your sauce and stir until emulsified.

8. Set out your pot of meat sauce with the biggest ladle you have. Beside it, place a bowl of fresh parmesan, an open jar of pesto, a bag of shredded mozzarella, and a bottle of extra virgin olive oil.

9. Make sure everyone has a bowl of pasta in their hands and set them loose on the ...ppings. If any of your friends are as picky as mine, you'll be glad to have options. The ...io makes all the difference.

to Paste
ed

an

Charcuterie Board & Antipasto

◆ Charcuterie Board

It's a little bit weird to call this a "recipe" per se, because I find that the best charcuterie boards are a combination o[...]
ingredients. Because of this, I wanted to include a suggested upscale nearer and dearer to my heart, a traditional[...]
into an Italian family, the Antipasto my mother-in-law set out became a staple for the holiday gatherings, and I wa[...]
most lovingly prepared snacks I have ever had. The best thing about the charcuterie is that everything is replaceab[...]
you prefer!

Cuisine: French and Italian | **Great for:** Bring-your-own or build-your-own board | **Tags:** Cold, Appe[...]

Ingredients

- **Meats:**
  - ◊ Pepperoni
  - ◊ Salami
  - ◊ Summer Sausage
- **Cheeses:**
  - ◊ Brie
  - ◊ Gouda
  - ◊ Chevre
- **Veggies**
  - ◊ Celery
  - ◊ Cucumbers
  - ◊ Lettuce
- **Fruits**
  - ◊ Grapes
  - ◊ Assorted Berries
  - ◊ Apple Slices
- **Grains**
  - ◊ Crackers
  - ◊ Sliced Baguette
- **Garnishes**
  - ◊ Rosemary
  - ◊ Mint
- **Toppings**
  - ◊ Honey
  - ◊ Jam
  - ◊ Nuts

Divvy it Up!

Here are some ways to work on a
charcuterie board with friends:
- Task each friend with bringing a
  different cheese they want everyone
  else to try.
- Have different friends place different
  ingredients on the board, as a lot of it
  can be arranged at the same time!
- Buy a bunch of small boards instead of
  one large one, have your friends make
  their own with provided ingredients,
  and compare!

Step By Step

1. Procure a cutting board of a decent size, such as an 8"x1[...]
and lay down a bed of greens, such as lettuce.

2. Cut your solid cheeses, like Gouda, into slices to be arrang[...]
Softer cheeses such as Chevre will need to be whole, either [...]
on the board. A semi-soft cheese like Brie can be cut into wed[...]
can try making whipped Brie as a spread.

3. Roll or fold the meats and arrange them around the chee[...]

4. Chop up the remaining veggies, and layer them on the bo[...]
well with the reds of your meats.

5. Place down your Grains in a similar fashion, but distanc[...]
from the veggies or fruits. No one likes soggy crackers.

6. In some of the empty spaces, place your fruits. You can [...]
cheeses and up the "classiness" by putting some on top.

7. Garnish with your herbs and honey, and enjoy!

Whipped Brie

1. You'll want to start with the softest Brie you can find, p[...]
While it's still cold from the fridge, carefully remove the rind a[...]
Cover your pieces and let them come to room temperature [...]

2. You'll need a food processor (or a blender). Whichever yo[...]
while your cheese comes to temperature.

3. Once the Brie is warmed, put the chunks into the chilled [...]
blend, taking breaks to stir the cheese and make sure yo[...]
warm. Take the time to do taste and texture tests until it's a [...]

**KEEP IN MIND: If the cheese gets warm, it will have [...]
you'll need to take a break until it cools down. If your [...]
chill it as needed.**

4. Once you're happy with the consistency, transfer your cheese into a sm[...]
on your cheese board. Try topping it with honey to taste!

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"It's a passionate and profound cry for a cultural shift toward intentional communal engagement with food."

Closing Thoughts

The initial draw to this research stems from my personal journey of discovering the profound impact of communal eating. It is not just a fusion of interests and values; it is a blending of my passion for food with a deep desire to address societal challenges. As we stand at this crossroads, my optimistic outlook hinges on the belief that, through initiatives like *The Communal Table*, we can reshape the narrative surrounding food, rebuild social connections, and foster a healthier, more vibrant society.

This work, rooted in personal meaning, is not just a culmination of research; it is a passionate and profound cry for a cultural shift toward intentional communal engagement with food. I invite each person who reads this research, my cookbook, or even hears about this tangentially to join in this movement, where the act of sharing a meal becomes a catalyst for building bridges, mending societal fractures, and cultivating a more connected and resilient world.
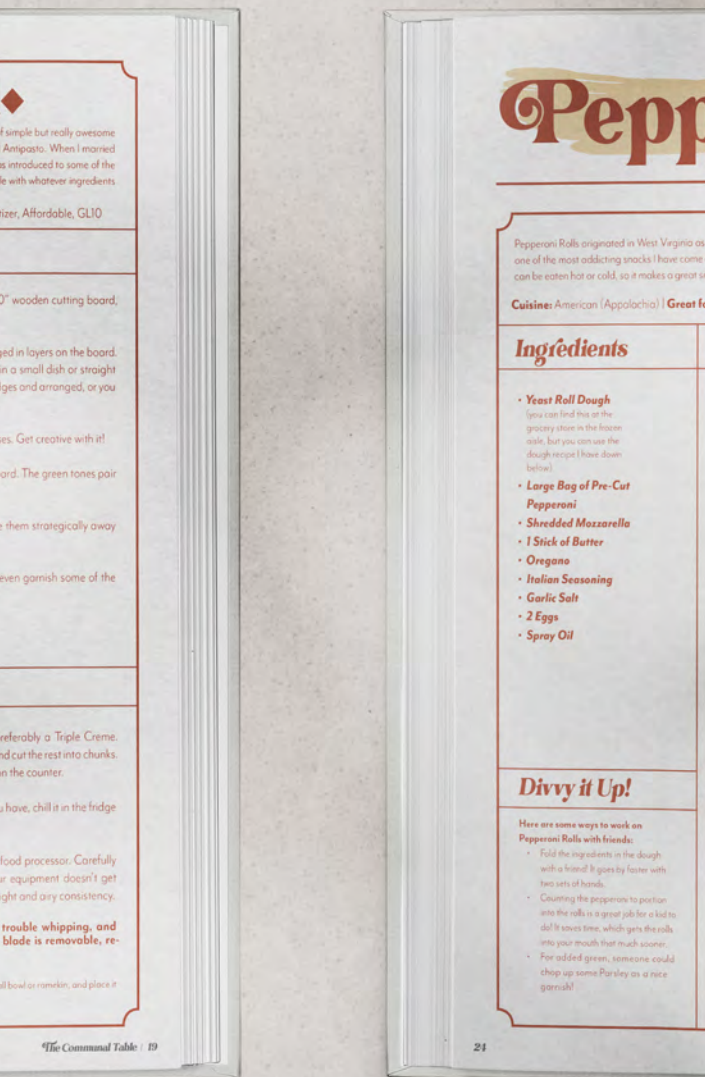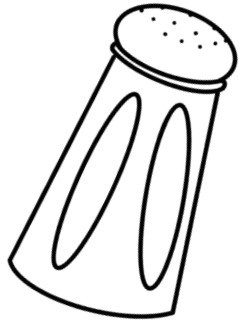
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