



Report   

**New aesthetic and emotional food values**  
25/01/2010  
Kristina Dryza



Cupcakes at Miette  
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**Scope**  
In her last report for Canvas8, Mandy Saven assessed the impact of the financial crisis on the food industry, concluding that although consumers have had to watch their spending, dining out practices have not died out. In their attempt to win back customers, inventive food entrepreneurs have survived by devising unconventional dining initiatives, which secured their revenue during the recession. Dining out has become one of the smaller, more attainable luxury goods and spawned a new consumer group who will plump for a visit to The French Laundry in California over a new Prada handbag. As the personal food indulgence market continues to grow, Kristina Dryza identifies some of the new aesthetic and emotional values being appreciated by food lovers.

**Jewellery box-style dining**  
Food presentation has become an art form in itself in line with the perception that certain foods, like jewels, constitute art objects in terms of texture, form and colour. The Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Marunouchi has realised that aesthetic presentation enhances the experience of food, just as a Tiffany blue box does a ring, and has taken meal presentation beyond the scope of nouvelle cuisine. Meticulously presented on fine lacquer and ceramics, the food resembles precious gems – to be savoured on the tongue, rather than admired on the ring finger. This artful and rich style of dining is not only about the harmony of delicate and moreish desserts paired with exquisite teas but the titillating experience of tucking into a jewellery box and the pleasant psychological associations attached to such luxury.

**View matching**  
Tasting is not just limited to what's digested by the stomach but also by the eyes, and it is therefore no longer just about matching food to wine, chocolate to whisky or cheese to port but instead pairing food with a view. A restaurant is a place of socialising and appreciation of food, but diners also choose where to go to get a 'taste' of the views. Whether it's of the city landscape, a beach or garden, the view is the ultimate complement to the food. For example, at some venues in Tokyo it's possible to dine whilst overlooking the Imperial Palace, the skyscrapers in Nishi-Shinjuku and, if you're lucky, Mt. Fuji. A carefully timed sunset becomes the perfect 'plate' on which to appreciate a meal. For a sunrise experience, the visually hungry patron may secure himself a seat at the Ngorongoro Crater Lodge in Tanzania for breakfast. Perched on the edge of the largest unbroken volcanic caldera in the world, the restaurant's Pan-African cuisine is complemented by a spectacular panoramic view of the large expanses of savanna, dotted with wildlife.

**Extraordinary to ordinary**  
Conspicuous food consumption and fine dining are not only reserved for special occasions but are moving into the everyday realm. Daily food choices are thus increasingly influenced by extraordinary experiences and the desire to enjoy life to the fullest. Miette Coniserie and Patisserie in San Francisco, named by Conde Nast as one of the top ten pastry shops in the world, believes that cakes are wrongly classified as 'special event' eating experiences. According to their lighthearted but calorie-heavy philosophy, every day calls for a cake celebration. Their elaborate, artisan fare is beautifully presented, and branded with messaging as saccharine as the cakes themselves: one message on the site invites customers to 'indulge your ballerina spirit'. Nevertheless, this gastronomic hedonism provides welcome respite from the outside world.

**Reinterpreting tradition**  
Daily food rituals have many variations, and restaurateurs continuously try to accommodate them and to meet their customers' demand for novelty. The chefs at Tokyo's Mandarin Hotel, for instance, work to deliver a twist on the typical. Ordering 'The Legendary Afternoon Tea' will therefore not get you a traditional three-tiered stand of sandwiches, scones and cakes. Served on a small Oriental display shelf, the sandwiches are not made of simple cucumber, egg and cress but consist of foie gras paste and pear puree. Scones are in the flavour of the season like yuzu (citrus fruit) or sakura (cherry blossom). The traditional afternoon tea acts as a framework for creative interpretation - both seasonal and cultural.

**'Memorial book' cuisine**  
Another take on cultural culinary tradition comes from the Michelin-starred restaurant Nahm at the Halkin Hotel in London. The restaurant's recipes reflect Australian chef David Thompson's extensive research into royal Thai cuisine. For years, Thompson has sampled Thai food in all its varieties, learning about Thai culture in order to fully appreciate its food culture. He finds inspiration in his large collection of memorial books, an old Thai custom dating back to King Rama V 1881 that records a deceased family member's life details. On a family member's death, the family publishes a small book on the life, hobbies, achievements, interests as well as favourite recipes of the

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family publishes a small book on the life, hobbies, achievements, interests as well as favourite recipes of the deceased. The tradition reflects the importance of food to Thai culture and daily life, and by capturing this emotional and cultural aspect, Thompson manages to bring an element of authenticity to his dishes.

### Insights and opportunities

'Authenticity' is an oft-quoted buzzword, and in the restaurant industry, it is commonly used to validate the experience of a regional or national cuisine. Nahm attempts to move beyond the idea of eating as mere cultural tourism, however. Its location in the Halkin Hotel makes little attempt to recreate or invent 'traditional' Thai surroundings and décor. Instead the simple, warm ambience indicates a level of transparency where traditions are not forced upon the discerning restaurant-goer, even as they browse a menu that recommends the customary manner of selecting dishes 'for sharing'. As such, Nahm is a holistic dining experience which offers customers a more nuanced authenticity, enabling them to connect with the culture behind that cuisine on a deeper level.

The fact that ideals such as transparency appear to be trickling into the everyday suggests that many consumers want to loosen their belts, financially and otherwise, and treat themselves to small, affordable luxuries like cupcakes and other indulgences, packaged in a visually appealing way. Nowhere is this better expressed than at the Four Seasons Tokyo's 'jewellery box' experience.

There is a real appeal in the playfulness of this approach to food, something which can also be seen in the spread of the Bento box trend outside of Japan - there are numerous US blogs on crafting and celebrating the aesthetics of the perfect Bento lunch.

Miette also offers a luxuriously-packaged daily treat, but this is soaked in nostalgia and strongly appeals to the consumer's inner child. There are beautiful cakes, but there is nothing grown-up about the way they are presented: candy colours, old fashioned weighing scales and oversized sweet jars all tug on fond childhood memories.

**Kristina Dryza** is a designer, strategist and writer. She makes the imagined future real by translating emerging consumer trends into new products, spaces and experiences. Some of Kristina's previous clients include BSB, Virgin and JWT. You can find her online [here](#)

### Further reading

[miette.com](#)

[halkin.como.bz](#)

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Mandy Saven, 'Global business recipes: an industry in flux', 24 November 2009. Available [here](#)

Kate Mew, 'Quickfacts: Cupcakes', 20 November 2009. Available [here](#)

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