

Madeleines and Hummus, Antique Armchairs

The tension between the familiar and the novel in design

by Eleni Bastéa

When we visit my relatives in Greece, we often cook a few new dishes for them. Some dishes, like hummus and braised chick peas, were immediate hits. Others were met with polite nods, if not resistance. When my father first tasted my husband's "al dente" pasta, he said, "We like our pasta cooked!" When we prepared mushrooms for a big family dinner, my Aunt Fofó took some but never actually tasted them. The mushrooms she encountered in her childhood were often poisonous, and now, at seventy, she was not about to take any chances.

Designers face a predicament similar to what we face when cooking for our relatives. They can bring a better chair to the market, but most people will not give up their old one. Some people always gravitate towards new tastes in food or design, others remain open to both the old and the new, but for many, newness itself is not an inherently positive attribute. They stubbornly resist it, just like my Aunt Fofó, refusing to taste the mushrooms. As a professor of architectural history, I find myself somewhere in the middle of the road. I appreciate and share my relatives' attachment to the old and the accustomed, the stuff of history, but I also recognize the attraction of the unknown that inspires and drives designers. How can designers convince people to overcome their resistance to new designs?

Many foods bring about powerful associations; Marcel Proust's famous madeleine comes to mind. Tasting again that dainty cookie brought about an avalanche of memories to the narrator of the semi-autobiographical novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*. In another poignant passage, the narrator refers to his grandmother's habit of giving antique armchairs as presents:

" . . . to married couples, young and old, which on a first attempt to sit down upon them had at once collapsed beneath the weight of their recipient. But my grandmother would have thought it sordid to concern herself too closely with the solidity of any piece of furniture in which could still be discerned a flourish, a smile, a brave conceit of the past. [. . .] [She] would have preferred to take a house that had a Gothic dovecot, or some other such piece of antiquity as would have a pleasant effect on the mind, filling it with a nostalgic longing for impossible journeys through the realms of time."

Here we have a marriage of aesthetic sense and design, both harkening back to one's childhood and beyond. Personal memories and the passage of time rendered the madeleine, the antique armchairs, and the old houses irresistible. Familiarity and nostalgia attract us to the flavors and designs of the past.

How, then, can we make the new in cooking and design palatable? Although we cannot render every new dish and design broadly acceptable, those with elements of familiarity have the potential to be accepted by a wider audience. Most of us need some kind of bridge, a connecting link that helps us make the transition from the known to the unknown. Exciting as the unknown may be, it can also be scary, exposing our ignorance and ineptitude. For example, of the foods we have introduced to my family in Greece, hummus has been the biggest hit. Even though the dish forms a staple in several Mediterranean countries, it is not a part of traditional Greek cooking. Nevertheless, my parents liked hummus because they were comfortable with chick peas—cooked in hearty, soupy dishes—and they made the connection between their familiar chick pea recipes and the new twist on them. In food, a trusted ingredient, name, or cooking process all act as bridges between the known and the new. In design, the early icons and terms of the word processing programs—the white page, "cut," "paste," "files," etc.—similarly aimed to render a drastically different method of writing less frightening and alien.

Ceremonies and special events also help forge links between the familiar and the new. On a rare winter visit to Greece, we made egggnog on New Year's

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Eve for our extended family. On an ordinary day, it would have not been well received, but associating eggnog with a special holiday left a positive impression on everyone's memory. Isn't the coupling of a new taste experience with a special event akin to the unveiling of a new computer program or the latest German automobile amidst an extravagant commercial ceremony?

Simple family rituals can also help usher in the new. Eating lobster for the first time may be daunting, but eating it in the company of New England friends or family transforms it into a pleasant and memorable game. In our case, the cousins from New England became the link that helped the rest of us learn and enjoy the new gastronomic experience, providing a safe environment for new experiences. When new appliances are introduced to the market they are often couched in established, domestic imagery, for example television sets in the 1950s and cell phones in the 1990s. The new TV sets, housed in wooden consoles that matched the living room furniture, were intended to recreate the experience of going to the movie theater, only on a smaller scale. They could enhance family gatherings with entertainment. Similarly, cell phones were originally introduced as a mobile alternative to the traditional phone. Like many people who normally avoid high-tech devices, my Aunt Veta became attached to her

cell phone. Fond of the old-fashioned telephone, she came to enjoy the power of reaching her family and friends more easily. Yet, like most people of her generation, she ignored all the new features that make current cell phones such complex communication devices.

The lure of the old was certainly not supposed to drive our designs when I was an architecture student at Berkeley in the early 1980s. Like most students, then and now, we studied the latest architecture magazines with fury, determined to become the next avant garde. In the midst of all the future-oriented enterprise, there were also the architecture studios taught by Christopher Alexander. "Make a floor plan that your grandmother would like," he once admonished us. I found the comment liberating. It allowed me to look beyond the fashionable and the trendy. Thinking about my grandmother (who had passed away

those original experiences that I sought design inspiration. Familiar forms, past experiences, and memories of space became the seeds of new forms, experiences, and memories.

Today, when I watch architecture students progress through school, I recognize a similar pattern. During their first years, most stay away from any personal references when presenting their design to faculty juries. As they become more advanced and confident in their work, some will acknowledge that their designs are, in part, influenced by their earlier experiences. Similarly, well-known chefs often explain new recipes by connecting them to their own family meals or treasured travel experiences. And even cutting-edge designers have their "madeleine" moments. Consider, for example, architect Frank Gehry's references to the sculptural fish form, present in many of his designs, and

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long ago) made me reflect on what was essential in my design. The search for the essential brought me to my own original memories of space. It was from

its connection to the fish dishes his grandmother once prepared.

Maybe the chasm between traditional and modern tastes in

cooking and design is not unbridgeable after all. As I am writing this essay in late May in Athens, where it has been raining and chilly the last few days, I can almost taste the salads that await us all in late summer: ripe tomatoes, cucumbers, olives, and feta cheese, all drenched in olive oil, sprinkled with some pepper and oregano. Not only are all of my traditional relatives partial to a good Greek salad, but so are all of my modern relatives, no matter how design-oriented, cosmopolitan, and sophisticated they may be.

Similarly, when I reflect on modern interiors, I find they often incorporate a more complex mix of the old and the new than I originally realized. I remember how proud my trendy Uncle Nikos was when he showed off his new Tizio lamp and metal-and-glass coffee table. But his apartment also held several old objects, revered for different reasons: there was his late mother's antique porcelain tea set; Indian ornaments and African sculptures collected on his travels; Javanese shadow puppets and ceremonial dolls from Bali; cross-stitched cushion-covers that my mother embroidered.

Some of the objects held for him novel, nifty qualities, while others embodied familiar and even nostalgic associations, tied to stories and tales.

And as I page through the latest IKEA catalog, I come across delicate crocheted doilies and tableware designs "of a bygone era" amidst the clean, modern furniture design. Maybe these old-fashioned items, cleverly updated, help bridge the old and the new, make the new designs seem more accessible. But reflecting further on the value of the old in the design process, I now realize that the crocheted doilies and the scalloped patterns on the white china may represent a point of departure from the design process itself. Many designers start with something old and familiar before moving on to a new form. Indeed, they may long for the memories of their grandmother, the meals of their childhood, or their family's country cottage, as they create objects for today and tomorrow. In design, the success of the new is intimately linked with the old and the familiar, just as the new taste of hummus is linked to the familiar taste of chickpeas. 

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Hummus

by Mark Forte
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1 cup dried chickpeas
3 or 4 cloves of garlic (the more the merrier)
1/4 cup tahini
1/4 cup olive oil (extra virgin is best)
1/4 cup lemon juice*
Ground cayenne pepper, to taste (start with 1/4 tsp)
Salt, to taste (start with a 1/2 tsp)

1. Soak the chickpeas overnight. Cook until tender. Drain.
2. In a food processor combine the cooked chickpeas, garlic, tahini, and half of the lemon juice.
3. Process until smooth. While processing, pour the olive oil in a thin stream until well blended.
4. Taste periodically, adding more lemon juice, oil, or salt as desired.
5. Pour the mixture out into a ceramic serving bowl and let it sit at room temperature for at least an hour.
6. Before serving take a knife or spatula and make decorative indentations on the surface of the hummus. Drizzle with olive oil and dust lightly with cayenne pepper.

*If using fresh lemons, try mixing in the finely-grated zest of one or two.