



The Value of Eating Together

By Didi Yunginger



**WHITE
PAPER**

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Our Recipe for UnitySM—with its mission to bring people together, fostering empathy and compassion and understanding using food as the catalyst—is founded upon the notion that there's value in eating together.

Plenty has been studied and written about the importance of families and co-workers eating together. A quick literature review unpacks articles questioning the degree to which “the family that eats together stays together” and workplaces wrestling with the cost/value benefit of in-house cafeterias and the bonding and performance payback of commensality. But what about the value of strangers eating together?

Sharing food as an act of hospitality dates back to the Ancient Greeks, who believed that a stranger should always be treated as a guest. But it seems that many forces in our modern society have driven us away from such practices.

**Sharing food is the ‘simplest
and yet most unifying of acts’**

In recent years, however, there's been an emergence of ideas around strangers eating together, including one aptly named “EWSAs,” or “Eat With Strangers” apps. A segment on NPR’s “Here & Now” talked about two of them, EatWith and Feastly, which feature home chefs offering fresh-cooked meals to strangers. The chefs are screened and participate in a feedback system, similar to Uber for drivers. And while being an EatWith host is a moneymaking venture, there is, according to home chef Surinder Marbha, who hosts Indian dinners through EatWith in Dallas, an element of cultural learning and experiencing the goodness in humanity. ([NPR “Here and Now,” May 23, 2017](#))

In the UK, People's Kitchen is a community supper club that brings people together, tackling both loneliness and food waste. “It's the simplest and yet most unifying of acts, and it's at the heart of



People's Kitchen," says Kiran Chahal, who runs the project, "strangers sharing a table as equals whilst being nourished and connecting with each other. Cooking and sharing dinner together breaks down barriers effortlessly." (Huffingtonpost.co.uk Jan 29, 2018)

In the words of Johanna Mendelson Forman, American University Scholar-in-Residence and creator of the Conflict Cuisine® course of study, the boom in popularity of food content on TV and the web and food products via food trucks and fresh markets "all attest to the growing awareness of the role food can play in letting down one's guard and speaking truth to power." (2015 report, "Is The Kitchen The New Venue of Foreign Policy?")

"The very notion of 'breaking bread' with someone," writes Siobhan Norton, "suggests dialogue, communication and peace." Her comment appears in an article about a series of supper clubs in London called Conflict Kitchen, designed to demonstrate how "food can unite and inform." The project was inspired by a Pittsburgh restaurant by the same name which for a number of years offered menus based on foods of countries in conflict with the US, intended to inspire dialogue and challenge xenophobia. ([The Independent Sept 22, 2014](#))

Food Diplomacy

A similar but separate venture, Global Kitchen, is a social enterprise that hosts immigrant-led cooking classes to promote cultural exchange and awareness through food. Chefs teach students a traditional recipe from their culture and elaborate regarding ingredients and related traditions; then the group shares the food. Co-founder Leah Selim talks about it as "gastrodiplomacy," advocating the communal act of sharing food, which in turn encourages the free exchange of ideas, which in turn begins the process toward community-building. ([Food+Tech Connect, Sep 26, 2012](#))

In fact, the US and other governments employed gastrodiplomacy, including the American Chef Corps, instituted in 2012 by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who called it the world's oldest form of diplomacy. The program selected American chefs, many of them immigrants themselves, to go to foreign countries to cook for and mingle with locals.



In 2015, American University, led by Conflict Cuisine founder Johanna Mendelson Forman, hosted a conference titled “Is The Kitchen The New Venue of Foreign Policy?,” using an interdisciplinary approach to “look at food through the lens of diplomacy, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and national identity.”

Highlights from the conference report include the following:

- “Diplomacy,” says Tara Sonenshine, Professor at George Washington University and former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, “is about finding common ground. It is about figuring out where people intersect in the most human of ways so that they might be able to set their differences aside and find some way to get along.”
- Paul Rockower, a gastrodiplomacy and communications expert, describes this field as “the nexus of food and foreign policy and how countries communicate their culture through food.”
- Sam Chappel-Sokol, a researcher and culinary diplomat, promotes “the use of food or a cuisine as a tool to create cross-cultural understanding.”
- American University Professor Gary Weaver downplays the food itself and says what’s most important is “the gesture and values behind the food... It’s not just an invitation to a dinner, it’s an invitation to a relationship.”

Eating Together: The Quintessential Human Experience

Author Louise O. Fresco agrees with the food/humanity connection, observing, “The table makes us human” in an article titled “Why We Eat Together: Eating Dinner Together is the Quintessential Human Experience.” ([The Atlantic, Nov 2015](#)) She further explains, “People sitting opposite each other inevitably pass dishes or pans, and are almost forced to look each other in the eye and to converse.”



"Preparing and eating food together has been important across many different times and cultures," writes Victor Pisapia in a blog article titled "Why Cooking and Eating Together Matters" ([Apr 1 2014](#)). His Victors Food is an award-winning catering business and cooking school in Australia that has used the kitchen and culinary experiences for corporate teambuilding.

"Food is particularly important when you become part of a diaspora, separated from your mother culture." ([ideas.ted.com, Dec18, 2014](#))

While immigrants have greatly influenced American cuisine over the years, food and food traditions continue to be a marker of cultural identity. Sharing those, together, person-to-person, can be a powerful connector.

"If you want to bring people together and think about what people have in common, how they can come together, or celebrate the kinds of struggles that diaspora peoples go through to build their lives in a new place, food is a wonderful place to do that," says American University Dean Emeritus Louis Goodman. (2015 report, "Is The Kitchen The New Venue of Foreign Policy?")

"Food feeds the soul. To the extent that we all eat food, and we all have souls, food is the single great unifier across cultures." ([ideas.ted.com, Dec18, 2014](#))

"Food is a human experience," says Feastly founder Noah Karesh. "It always has been." ...And "eating has always been a communal experience. We look at the dining table as the original social network." ([Forbes, Aug 5, 2016](#))

What do you think about the value of eating together? Please [share your comments](#) or [check out our Food TapestrySM](#)—and keep this idea rolling!