

Forming Creative Communities Around The Dinner Table: F.O.C.U.S, Alisa Tanaka-King

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On a summer evening on Sørøya Island, on the far northern tip of Norway, a group of ten have gathered for a curious dinner. One by one they are seated at a narrow, candle-lit table, set with inventive serving vessels fashioned out of weathered stones and shells from the Island’s coastline. As the night progresses the guests are presented with a five-course feast – a Japanese-inflected omakase, prepared with ingredients foraged from the landscape surrounding La Wayaka Current art residency: meadowsweet, cloudberries, rhubarb, and wild greens. Prompts and stories guide the conversation, from ice-breaking personal anecdotes to broader topics touching on climate change, the refugee crisis, privilege and social justice. For a few magical hours a special bond is created – a meeting of hearts and minds that will forever remain connected by this intimate experience.

Japanese-Australian artist Alisa Tanaka-King describes her multisensorial project as such:

“F.O.C.U.S is an invitation to be part of a transient community. A conversation. A journey of food, a sharing of stories, a connecting of dots. It is a conceptual art project that takes place all over the world, inviting people to share in a dining and conversation experience that embodies social creative practice and sustainability.”

Like most of Alisa’s other artistic work, F.O.C.U.S cannot be contained by a single genre. It is fluid in style and in form, combining live performance, storytelling and installation, with a pinch of social experiment. The dinner is structurally informed by traditional Japanese haute cuisine, Kaiseki – a culinary art form that marries taste, texture and appearance within a sequence of small

dishes. Dishes are brought out at a calculated tempo, which paces the dining experience and helps the host curate and shape the dialogue in-between courses. Alisa shares stories, poses questions, extends observations, and invites responses from the diners. The forces underlying the dinner are laid bare for the participants to examine – the role of host and guest, the provenance of our food, the process of conversation, and the power of cooking to provide care and intimacy within a fixed or fluid community.

But F.O.C.U.S reaches beyond the scope of the meal itself: in preparation of these events, Alisa also spends time with local community, liaising with indigenous communities where possible, and working directly with local producers to source ingredients. The materials used are grounded in a site-specific exploration of land, resources and natural ecology. Local, seasonal ingredients are showcased, with great importance placed on balance and environmental sustainability.

As a child, Alisa Tanaka-King fell in love with the magic of cooking – the alchemical process of transforming ingredients into something beautiful and nourishing. “Initially, cooking was not part of my art practice at all. I hosted regular events –we called them ‘feasts,’ for friends and family, that were purely for the joy of cooking, feeding people, and sharing food.” Later, her interest extended into traditional culinary ceremonies – such as Kaiseki and Japanese tea ceremony, which eventually formed the meta-structure of F.O.C.U.S. Her time spent in Japan – first as a child and later as an artist, sharpened her sensitivity to the balanced aesthetics of ceremonial dining, and also to its potential for cultivating meaningful community experiences.



Community building at the dinner table

A F.O.C.U.S event aims to spark intimate connections between people who may have otherwise never crossed paths. “By sitting at a table with people from different walks of life, your perspective will always be changed if only slightly.”

Being a geographically transplantable project, usually hosted at residencies and research trips in unusual or remote areas, F.O.C.U.S has put Alisa in contact with a vast, multicultural network around the world. “Rather than being a tourist, or even an artist working just within the art network, I am suddenly connected very rapidly and deeply with a place and its people in a way that I never have been before.” Working at the intersection of people, art and food has cemented her interest in socially engaged practice, using her creative practice to better understand, communicate and document global issues.

Each dinner is accompanied by a discussion of the main issues we face as a global society: climate change, political unrest and the refugee crisis. “These conversations usually result in stories of surprising connections, unprecedented acts of kindness and generosity, and the general consensus that we should strive to do this more as a community.”

“Everyone understands the ritual, no matter what your cultural or generational background. A dining table is a place where conversations naturally occur, people feel comfortable, they can look across and address each other without feeling awkward. It is the perfect stage/frame/canvas for an artwork that asks people to share their stories.”

To Alisa, food and the preparation of food is the answer to so many of our societal problems. Take, for example, the concept of fusion food – a perfect embodiment of globalization and social evolution. As the child of cross-cultural parents, the idea of food representing a cultural melting pot hits a tender spot. “The sharing of food, the fusing of ingredients, the combining of cooking techniques is the most gentle, generous and magical start to paving the way for social cohesion. What better way to appreciate, respect, and be introduced to someone else’s culture than through their cuisine?”

But above all other dinner-time conversation topics, Alisa is struck by the universality of our human experience of isolation, across places and cultures: “Without a doubt, the constant that comes out of the dinner conversations is the experience of incredible loneliness that we suffer, and the importance of generosity and kindness. We talk a lot about lack of connection.”

Besides the F.O.C.U.S project Alisa coordinates the Community Arts & Wellbeing Program at Ballarat Community Health in Victoria which connects community members and promotes wellbeing through creative activities. There, she helps run art and drama workshops, education programs, and creative support groups for a wide range of clientele including – mental health clients, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and support, trauma clients, migrant and refugee clients, people with disabilities, people living with

chronic illnesses and the elderly. “This role has become an integral part of my solo practice, influencing my work hugely, and ultimately leading me to pursue a practice of art for social change. I believe community is essential in our survival – emotionally, environmentally, and economically.”



To Alisa, art exists first and foremost to help us communicate and address things that are of relevance to our community. “Food is a perfect tool in this endeavour, as it automatically brings people together and starts conversations. Finally, I see sustainability in two parts - emotional and environmental - and I believe they are equally important.”

F.O.C.U.S addresses the importance of each of these topics, in form and in practice. It invites people to share food, an age-old tradition that strengthens communities, provides support, and enhances intimacy.

It also creates connections between people and their local agricultural landscape - “It is astounding how little people know about local producers, community gardens, farmers’

markets, and foragers.” By attending these dinners, participants are able to tap into local resources that they would not otherwise have known about.

Where possible Alisa forages for ingredients, as this is usually the most environmentally sustainable way to access food. “I have also previously used excess or unwanted produce from farmers and producers that would otherwise go to waste. For ingredients that I need to purchase, I make sure they are seasonal, and where possible, locally sourced. The knowledge of foraging has been incredibly interesting. I try to connect with a local forager at every location, and I am blown away by the amount I learn from them.” Alisa also researches the ingredients she uses in her cooking, to ensure that the farming or producing practices being used are ethical

“Art. Food. Sustainability. I think these three things are all related, and very difficult to separate.”



and responsible – this particularly applies to fish, meat, eggs and dairy.

The guests of a F.O.C.U.S event are given information about all the food they are served, where it comes from and how to access it themselves. Invitees are given practical tips for working towards sustainable environmentally, and are also encouraged them to support local business which supports and sustains their economy. “I think education and accessibility are the main factors, and I think they are the factors where, as a society, we often fail. One of the most interesting conversations that has arisen from a F.O.C.U.S event was around the privilege of time. If we are born into privilege, or somehow acquire it throughout our lives, it becomes much easier to be environmentally responsible. We can afford to buy more expensive produce, we have time to plant, grow, forage, visit farms, and so forth.

Unfortunately for many people, sustainable food choices are too financially or logistically difficult to achieve in day to day life. I believe that it is the responsibility of those who are privileged to help make a change in consumerism, supporting the local economy, and being environmentally conscious. I also believe that a huge



responsibility lies on the government’s shoulders, and unfortunately, across the globe we see the bare minimum being done. Governments should be ensuring that environmentally sustainable food production and consumption is prioritised, and sustainable choices are accessible to everyone in the community, no matter what their situation is.”

True to its mission, F.O.C.U.S is also a zero-waste project. After the first few events, it became clear to Alisa that there would be large amounts of leftovers. “The nature of Kaiseki means that you are serving tiny portions of things, presented beautifully to awaken all the senses. This, unfortunately, means that you make more than you need. After several events where friends or fellow residency artists ended up eating the leftovers, I decided to make a thing of it – and so, For The Love of Leftovers was born.

It is a casual feast open to anyone that takes place a day or two after a F.O.C.U.S event. Laid out buffet-style, we eat until it is all gone. Everyone is invited, there are no bookings, it is marked “pay – as-you-feel, pay-as-you-can”. Generally the people who attend are those who were at F.O.C.U.S events, who have brought friends along, sometimes attendants are just passing by and happen to stop. Needless to say, there is no waste, and once again, we gather, connect and share stories – although this time it is not curated at all. Done”

Next Steps:

So far, Alisa has taken F.O.C.U.S to Norway, Chile, Finland and the UK now – the next location is open to invitation. She also hopes to exhibit the journals and research books she keeps during the planning of her meals, which include field notes recipes, and reflective writing from the F.O.C.U.S event conversations.

“For me, recording notes from each F.O.C.U.S location is essential. I see it as a form of mapping – mapping towns and cities, mapping ingredients, mapping people and stories. At this stage, only people who attend the event have the opportunity to receive one the book from their location. I keep one from each location in my collection, so I have an encyclopaedia of sorts, a collection of places, people, and notes I have made along the way. I hope to exhibit these books at some stage, and possibly produce a book of highlights from the various locations that is available for people to purchase.”

F.O.C.U.S has taught Alisa invaluable lessons about people, places and food. “I think the most important one has been that people are craving community. Everyone suffers from loneliness, and we cannot ever underestimate the importance of bringing people together over a meal. It’s that simple – invite someone to the table, the rest takes care of itself.”

How would a typical F.O.C.U.S dinner unfold?

Step One: The preparation

Generally, the guests invited to a F.O.C.U.S dinner are determined by some pre-existing connection – for example, participants in a residency program or exhibition at which Alisa has been invited to showcase her project. As such, there is no typical guest to attends these events. Alisa has, so far, brought together artists, local producers, refugees, children, homeless people, and even Mongolian camel herders to attend F.O.C.U.S.

“The week prior to a F.O.C.U.S event, I spend time in the local community meeting producers, farmers and foragers who can provide information about local ingredients and dishes. These conversations inevitably give me some information about the local area, and this begins to shape the stories and questions I share at the table. The connections made during this “research” time usually result in some, if not all of the producers attending the event. They invite friends, and word of mouth does the rest.”



Step Two: The ceremony

Prior to the event, a FOCUS guest would be given a meeting spot close by – often a bar or cafe – some sort of comfortable waiting place.

“As the host, I come and meet you at this waiting area. I introduce myself, and encourage the audience members to do the same. I then explain the process of the meal, what to expect, let you know that you are encouraged to speak and participate when invited to do so, ask you to please respect one another throughout the evening. I explain that the event usually runs for approximately 1.5-2 hours and that there is a clear ending to the evening.”

Guests then arrive at the event location and take a seat at the table.

And so its begins.

- **First course:** a drink (usually alcoholic and featuring something local) & a tiny amuse-bouche style bite-sized starter;
- **Second course:** Traditionally sashimi, whatever local ingredient I find to replace this is served raw;
- **Third course:** Some sort of very small soup – sometimes hot, sometimes cold;
- **Fourth course:** Something grilled, often served with something pickled;
- **Fifth course (main set):** Something steamed, some sort of rice or carbohydrate side, pickles;
- **Sixth course:** dessert;
- **Sometimes there is** an extra course in there featuring something fried, or a palette cleanser.

During these courses, Aline curates the conversation, using the different dishes as landing points for stories and questions.

As she clears dessert, she wraps up the event with a specific ending – sometimes this is a piece of music, sometimes a poem, sometimes a story.

She thanks the audience and invites them to gather back at the original meeting place for a post-dinner drink. “I find that people often want to stay back afterwards and talk about the experience, so it is good to have somewhere away from the table to gather in a more casual manner.



Tips For Launching a F.O.C.U.S Style Dinner in Your Community?

F.O.C.U.S is a great satellite project that can complement all sort of events, as well as holding its own. It lends itself to festivals and community events, while also activating spaces in a different way. It invites and appeals to a wide range of people who would not otherwise engage with arts projects/exhibitions/festivals, and provides an even playing field for everyone at the table.

- **Have a clear plan: why are you doing this? what are you hoping to achieve?**
- **Know that you don't have to change the world with your project. It can be as simple as activating a space, feeding people, or using up leftovers**
- **Do a trial of your event before you launch into something huge. You will learn important lessons from a trial**
- **Do your research – make sure you are connecting with as many local resources and partners as possible. This will make your life so much easier!**
- **Be prepared to be flexible, the best things come from the unexpected**
- **Take time. Take time reflect, rest, evaluate and listen to people's feedback**
- **Be open – open ears, open heart, open mind. If you have decided what your community or audience is going to say or do before you begin, you are setting yourself up to fail**



Alisa's Notes on Curating a Culinary Art Event

The curation can be tricky, and there are a number of things that are put in place to ensure everyone can participate as much or as little as they wish.

Firstly, the multi-course nature of the meal means that there are practical breaks in the conversation. With each course I serve, I explain the dish, where the ingredients come from, and how it has been adapted into modern Kaiseki. There are generally 6 or 7 stages where I serve a new dish to the diners, which gives the control of the conversation back to me. Prior to the event, I create key “landing points” that align with these dishes. Some of these landing points are personal stories, some of them are questions, and some of them are reflections on what I have observed during my local research.

Another control measure, is that I limit the seats at the table strictly to 10 people, including myself. This means only 9

attendants are at any given seating. More than 10 at the table means that conversation splits, it is difficult to hear everyone, and it is difficult to focus (pardon the pun...)

At some locations where I have run a number of F.O.C.U.S events in the same place, I have adjusted the events as I go. While the framework of F.O.C.U.S remains the same, the curation of the conversation is always different. At one particular location in a very small town where everyone knew each other, the first F.O.C.U.S event was quite lively, and challenging to curate. The second F.O.C.U.S event at this location I conducted as a silent dinner. Each participant was given a notepad and a pen, they could write each other notes, share notes with the whole table, or write notes for me to read at the end. With each course, I would give them a note with a story, a question, or an observation.



What is your favourite recipe to cook during a group dinner? Why?

I don't think I can pin-point a favourite recipe, as most of the time a recipe changes each time I cook it (yes I'm one of those casual cooks who just throws things in and hopes for the best...). The thing I like to achieve the most when I'm cooking a dish, is creating a surprise. For the most part, that is doing **VERY** little to ingredients. This is difficult as there is nowhere to hide in minimalist cooking, but if you can hero an ingredient without doing too much to it, you've done your job well.

So here's the basis for my favourite recipe:

- Make it small, a mouthful of something that you have to eat all in one go;
- Experiment with unusual flavour combinations (honeycomb and cheese, reindeer and rhubarb, heart of palm and watermelon);
- Keep your ingredients list to a minimum, two or three ingredients, let them do the work;
- Treat your ingredients with respect – this means doing as little to it as possible. If you have really fresh, good quality ingredients, don't do anything to compromise them.

Recommended reading material / movies / documentaries / podcasts for people who want to learn more about dinner-table / food art arts!

Chef's Table – Seasons 1 & 2 in particular;

The Third Plate – Dan Barber;

TED Radio Hour – The Food We Eat. THEEARTISSUE