

Great Design into a Food Ecosystem

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Good Food Comes From Great Design

Today is a great day as Tamil Nadu celebrates Tamil New Year, Kerala celebrates Vishu, and Punjab celebrates Baisakhi. The day is also celebrated as Pana Sankranti in Odisha, Pohela Boishakh in West Bengal and Bihu in Assam. Some of these states also celebrate the harvest festival today.

When we think of festivals and celebrations, the thought of food cannot be far behind. However, in this time of national lockdown due to the global pandemic, food sources have become scarce. While for many people, this period allows them to spend quality time with their families, it has also increased the effort of women who ‘work for home’ and ‘who work from home’, and thus juggle their time between the kitchen and the laptop.

I am reminded of a wonderful Design analogy that I have shared in my #DesignThinking workshops. In the current context, this analogy seems appropriate to be shared with you again.

Let's start with a question

Can we utilize constraints for a positive outcome? I believe we definitely can! Design Thinking advocates seeing constraints as friends and in leveraging them effectively.

Much of South Indian food is based on Flour-based batter that ferments pretty soon due to the temperature. However, South Indians have come up with a unique process of using batter across extended periods just by changing the design of food around this.

Make friends with fermentation!

Let me expand this further.

What are the possible design objectives of the food chain? It should have (a) Nutrition (b) Variety in taste (c) Ease of cooking (d) Easy to digest (e) Minimum wastage.

A deeper look at South Indian food

Let's examine some food varieties such as Dosa, Idli, Utthapam, different varieties of rice and gravies such as Sambhar, in the light of the above parameters. There are insightful observations that revolve around interesting innovations and design elements.

1. The Dosa batter has the right mix of proteins and carbohydrates with pre-mixed portions of 1/3 dal and 2/3 rice as input/ingredients and this gives essential nutrition
2. In Sambhar, one can mix any kind of vegetable from potato, tomato, pumpkin to tomato, okra along with spices. These items not only impart a taste to the food but also provide essential nutritional value.
3. Variety is the spice of life, right? The same Dosa batter can later be used to create other items, such as Ddli, Utthapam, Paniyaram and so on, based on the fermentation level – and as the days go by.
4. Simplicity is component based cooking. For example, when you cook rice, you can make multiple varieties of flavored rice, such as curd rice, tamarind rice, sambar rice, coconut rice, lemon rice, etc. The major part of cooking is done once in the morning and for each serving of a meal, very little work is left to be completed.
5. Easy on Digestion: Pre-fermentation of proteins and carbohydrates help in easy digestion. The job is already half done even before it enters the mouth!
6. Almost zero wastage: The Dosa batter can be used for multiple days till it is exhausted. Boiled left over rice can be used for multiple recipes including recipes for the next morning. One can even add just a single okra into Sambhar without it getting wasted.
7. The chances of so many Design elements coming together cannot be a part of the evolution of food chain. Initial thinkers, who simplified many elements in human lives, must have applied their thinking in simplifying the food chain.

Food is essential to sustain life. In the current scenario, where food is scarce, leveraging batter-based foods like Idly, Dosa and Utthapam helps in cutting down on boredom by bringing variety and helps the women at home.

Have you relished any food or heard about any cuisine that has an interesting design aspect to it? I would like to hear your thoughts.