Comfort Food - Comfortable for who?
An Exploration of Genuine Comfort Food Through Design.

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Term: VT20
Subject: Design+Change
Level: Bachelor
Course code: 2DI67E
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BFA Thesis Project
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Design + Change
Linnæus University
Växjö, Sweden
Spring 2020
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Why should we change our habits of eating animals?

The need to eliminate the consumption of animal foods from people’s diets in the industrialized global north has become critical. We are the people consuming the greatest amounts of animals per capita while being the people in the privileged position to choose our diets. The animal agriculture industry is responsible for extreme environmental devastation with further social impact and the obvious affect of killing and torturing millions of innocent animals.

This project addresses the urgent need to change the destructive normative eating habits as an effort to minimise the negative social and environmental impact of our food consumption. Aiming to critically explore the habit of consuming animal products, and how to best implement a change in such behaviour through design.

A Meat Eating Culture

My initial research has led me to understand the complexity of reasons behind our persistent meat-eating culture. The consumption of certain non-human animals is a tradition, a norm, a behaviour deeply rooted in our social construct. As with all such norms these eating habits are recognisably a learnt behaviour, a behaviour taught to us by our families, formed by our cultural context and place of upbringing, and most commonly these initial learnt behaviours become habits that follow us throughout our life.

As eating is one of the fundamental aspects of human life, our learned habits of eating become integrated parts of our own identities, these habits are our social roots and emotional anchors. Therefore it is no surprise people are most often very challenged by the idea of drastically changing their eating habits, it might feel like having to give up a part of yourself, or loose something important to you, and that is not typically something people are inclined to do.

In my process I investigate why these habits are so hard to beat and how to most effectively persuade people to change them. Through exploring the medium of food and cooking as design practice, I want to understand the factors essential to creating a comforting eating experience, and how to design new plant-based eating habits while maintaining those essential factors. A truly comforting eating experience for humans, the planet and all it’s species.

Research Question:
How can we inspire and encourage a change in eating habits through design, serving genuine comfort with and beyond human-only needs?
The Psychology of Meat

The invisibility of Carnism
Carnism is the shared set of beliefs that portray the consumption of animals as ethical behaviour, as opposed to veganism. The term was coined by psychologist Melanie Joy in 2001. The term is closely linked to the term speciesism, coined by Richard Ryder in 1970, speciesism being the ethos that enables carnism. Speciesism is the system in which we live which values beings based on the group of species the belong to. Typically prioritising and favouring some species like chimpanzees or dogs, while discriminating against other species like pigs or rats. Speciesism allows people to consider it ethical to consume some animals while loving others and thereby supports carnism as a persistent ideology.

The psychological aspect to meat-eating is interesting to me, especially this concept of how people simultaneously love and care for animals while also eating them, dubbed the “meat-paradox”. A popular psychological explanation to this paradox is cognitive dissonance theory, specifically the case of “meat-related cognitive dissonance”, where meat eaters effectively rationalise morally problematic behaviour around meat consumption. Meat eaters use dissonance-reducing strategies to alleviate the affect of their contradicting beliefs, for example avoidance and wilful ignorance. In his paper on this matter, Hans Rothgerber brings up the concept of “Carnism” (Joy, 2011) in relation to the idea of meat eaters’ seldom surfaced need to identify as such:

“Carnism is a largely invisible ideology, but vegetarians potentially reduce this invisibility and threaten the prevailing belief system that encourages meat consumption. Vegetarians not only encourage reminders of dissonance, they also may threaten to make it harder to alleviate the dissonance and to morally disengage from the harm inflicted upon animals used for food.” (Rothgerber, 2019)

Melanie Joy elaborates on the invisibility of Carnism in her book *Why we Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows*, she claims that when an ideology is as firmly ingrained as Carnism, it is essentially an invisible ideology (Joy, 2011). Due to it’s persiscence and invisibility the consumption of animals is an engraven social norm which we rarely question. Therefore I find it essential to address this invisibility in my design work, challenging the carnist norm while being understanding of it’s reach in social influence.
Meat and Psychic Numbing
Going further on the psychological aspects of consuming animals it feels important to understand the methods of the carnist system in order to create change from within them. Psychic numbing is the psychological process which allows us to disconnect from an experience, by numbing ourselves. This otherwise beneficial coping mechanism is truly destructive when it is used as the primary tool of the carnist system. It is the phenomenon that enables violence against animals by distorting our perceptions of what goes on in order for us to eat them (Joy, 2011).

When people eat meat and other animal products their true feelings about the animals are systematically numbed, through mechanisms like denial, justification, objectification, deindividualization and dissociation amongst others. Therefore in order to change behaviours within the carnist system, we need to understand these underlying factors and respect that peoples’ actions are based on these structures and not an individual’s bad intentions.
The Patriarchal Foundation of Meat

Why is feminism important in tackling the meat consuming norm?
To further understand the foundations of our meat-eating culture it is interesting to compare the belief systems of carnism and patriarchy and similarly veganism and feminism. Due to the problematic invisibility of carnism it it impossible to change it without bringing it into light, similar to how early feminists had to bring forward and name the system of patriarchy in order to fight its persistence.

The correlation between these belief systems or ideologies is interesting to me. The values shared amongst vegan and feminist ideologies could include care, compassion and equity, while values of carnist and patriarchal ideologies are more likely to include problematic terms like oppression, moral authority and control. In her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* Adams discusses the connection of the two ideologies veganism and feminism through various examples, all of which have provided me with a valuable insight and inspiration to consider questions of meat consumption in relation to masculine norms in my project.

Meat and Masculinity
In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* Adams suggests that the beginning of patriarchy is closely linked to the beginning of meat consumption, as the human species started hunting animals it was a task for the males of the group, while the females were gatherers and caretakers, this might very well have been the point where men first gained power within the group, as their hunting actions brought back some capital, in the form of meat (Adams, 2010). This theory clearly depicts the beginning stages of the “meat as masculine” norm and reminds us that the way to go is to return to those traditionally feminine values of gathering and caretaking in order to redirect the current path of the growing meat-eating culture.
Cooking as Interventionist Design

Why Cooking Is Design Practice
My interest in the problematic meat-eating culture has always gone hand in hand with my love for cooking. In my process of going vegan, cooking was no doubt the most important tool in my transition.

A few years ago I decided to stop eating meat, and a few months later I gave up all animal derived products. The idea of vegetarianism and veganism had been slowly growing on me, almost beyond my own awareness. In 2015, I invited my friends over for a goodbye dinner as I was about to move abroad, a couple of my friends were vegans so I decided to make the whole dinner spread vegan, as I felt it was nicer for everyone at the table to be able to enjoy the same food, despite the majority of guests being meat eaters, including myself. I did a bit of research on how to make alternatives to the typical meat and dairy-based foods I was used to, and eventually figured out a way to make chicken wings out of cauliflower and cheese dip out of potatoes, it was delicious.

This was the event that sparked my now endless curiosity for veganism and plant-based cooking. This experience drove me to change my own habits as I noticed that these fundamental aspects of food, in the cooking and eating experience, were just as comforting and valuable without the animal products. The food is quite obviously the factor that changes the most when making the change towards a more plant-based diet and therefore cooking becomes a fundamental practice in adjusting to the new and different eating behaviour.

I believe the practice of cooking is just as relevant to design as other practices more typically associated with design, like ceramics or wood working. Cooking is a practice of form-making, where the material is produce, the tools are various kitchen equipment, the design methods are recipes and the result is a meal of some sorts. The meal is a sensory experience of flavours, textures and aesthetics, that has the potential to influence people’s feelings and perspectives.
“I also see that if you work with food, you have a more political aspect to your work because food is in itself a more political material. If you make a wooden table, for example, you can have a look at where the wood came from and whether the workers were treated right. However, I think the political impact of food is so much greater than other materials – in a way that makes food stand out. When we talk about food, we’re not just talking about one material. Meat is very different from chocolate, which is very different from bread or vegetables.” (Marije Vogelzang)

In line with “Eating Designer” Marije Vogelzang I recognise the inherent political aspect of food in relation to design. For this reason I find it so important that cooking is applied as interventionist design practice, with the aim to bring about change for the better.

**Intervening at the Level of Habit**

By using cooking as the main design practice in my process, I am intervening in the issue at the crucial level of habit, since what we eat is driven by our habits and cooking is the practice that keeps those habits alive. By using cooking as the primary method for design exploration in the project I stay close to the root of the problematic meat-eating culture, in order to encourage more compelling behavioural change.

The vegan movement is known to use many different methods and tools to encourage and spread their values. Often using gruesome imagery from factory farms or slaughterhouses to show the horrifying meat, dairy and egg industries, a method which is definitely important in exposing the truth about the industry. Other methods focus more on the positive sides of being vegan, like spreading photos of amazing vegan food or affirmative statistics of the positive climate impact of veganism. In my process I am determined to practice a friendly and pragmatic approach to veganism, an approach where I accept and work with the difficulties of changing people’s eating habits, understanding that changing this norm is a long journey and not something that can magically change overnight. I want to work in line with the movement Tobias Leenaert introduces in his book *How to Create a Vegan World*, his recommendations for an effective strategy to impact veganism is to stay openminded, empathetic, rational and positive towards those people you want to impact (Leenaert, 2017). By using cooking as my design practice, I will focus on sharing methods aimed to make a transition to a vegan diet smoother and more comfortable, and thereby more approachable and apprehensible.
Explorative Co-Design Workshop
Early on in the process I wanted to broaden the scope of my topic of eating habits, I had my own ideas on which elements of eating were important to people, but I found it important to experience other people’s thoughts on the topic. I held a collaborative workshop on the topic of eating habits, together with a group of students from the department, a discussion and mapping practice on the topic, producing an overview of the group’s common eating culture.

I started out by asking the group to go around and share their favourite food, followed by a round of their least favourite foods. The foods named by the participants were just as diverse in the favourite and least favourite round. Favorites ranging from burgers to sourdough pancakes to rice noodles and least favorites from pickles to sweet potatoes to parsley. From here we discussed the reasons for why we have these personal preferences, the participants mentioned both cultural factors and more bodily and sensory factors. We recognised the impact of how the eating habits in our upbringing have shaped our current eating habits.

Next up I asked the participants: “Who are you as a food consumer?”, I asked the participants to sketch out their relationship with food and eating individually. We then collectively connected and mapped the commonalities between our food identities, creating a sketch of a common food culture within the group. The results pointed out the common feeling of wanting to eat with other people: the social element of food, as well as a common gesture of using food as a comforting tool.

The results broadened my view of my topic and led me further in the process. I gained some insights into how emotionally and socially significant the act of eating is to people. The concept of comfort food came up during the workshop, which I have since made a central part of my project. In the final iteration of my collaboration practice I also brought back the question of favourite foods, similarly to how it was used in this initial workshop.
Explorative Co-Design Workshop: Mapping

Explorative Co-Design Workshop: Discussion
Why comfort food?
As an attempt to further explore the action of cooking as design practice with the goal to change mindsets and behaviours around consuming animals, I want to question the concept of comfort food. Comfort food is a term most common in the USA, but by definition it applies to food cultures around the globe, it describes a group of foods or meals that are nostalgic, indulgent, convenient or provide physical comfort (Locher et al, 2005). The concept of comfort food is useful in my process to narrow down my framework, it does describe a large group of foods but they all have in common the strong emotional connection between the person and their food, as well as the food’s social significance to that person. When it comes to advocating veganism I believe these emotional and social factors are crucial factors to keep in mind.

What is genuine comfort food?
Can comfort food be comfortable for more than human beings?
Is there a way to overcome our somewhat selfish, conventional eating habits by maintaining an element of comfort while designing alternative eating experiences?

Going forward on the concept of comfort food, I want to go beyond it’s traditional definition, twisting the perception of it and further broadening the spectrum of beings it addresses. Generally we only care about human comfort when it comes to our food consumption, why don’t our ethical values cover our eating behaviour?
Collaboration: Iteration #1

Dinner Intervention Event
As an attempt to explore comfort food in a social setting I had planned to throw a dinner event at a local restaurant here in Växjö, but due to the outbreak of COVID-19, I had to cancel the event. I will still aim to use my work on planning this event in another way in my project, despite the unfortunate loss of an element of social gathering, something I thought was crucial in exploring comfort food and behaviour change for my project.

I initiated this collaboration with Villa DeLuxe because I knew I wanted to intervene in a restaurant with a somewhat conventional menu, one serving mainly animal products. Villa DeLuxe is a restaurant run by the same people who run another restaurant in downtown Växjö, Kafé DeLuxe, a restaurant which is arguably one of the most popular and wide known spots for lunch, dinner, drinks and other cultural events in Växjö. I had a meeting and interview with the head chef of both restaurants, Gustav Hektor, he is known for being a creative and experimental chef and he was open to the idea of doing some sort of vegan take-over at his restaurant. He told me the restaurant already serves many vegan and vegetarian options on their menu, and it is clear to me that Gustav cares about the environment and knows he has a responsibility as a chef in that case. Still I imagine most of Kafé DeLuxe and Villa DeLuxe’s customers are meat-eaters, and come to the restaurant for their rather conventional European cuisine. Villa DeLuxe has an ever-changing tasting menu where guests choose from either 5 or 8 courses, as well as a more casual a wood-fired pizza menu. For my event I was asked to follow their concept of a 5-course menu, including one course which is pizza.

VILLA DE LUXE
Biskopen 495 kr, Dryckespaket 450 kr
Ostron, jordgubbar & citronkulor
Råraka, tångkaviar, lök & smetana
Pilgrimsmissla, äggkräm, laxrom & råg
Svartröt, brynt smör, vitlök, tomatvinägrett & pinjenötter
Vildand, persiljerot, pärnorkompott, rostad hasselnötter & skysås
Lokala ostar, villabakat knäcke & tomatmarmelad
Choklad sorbet, olivolja, brödkrisp & salt

Examples from Villa de luxe's Menu
“Comfort Food — Comfortable for Who?”

For my event I aimed to use the concept of comfort food as my basis, asking the question: “Comfort food — Comfortable for who?” Challenging our human centered food habits, where people rely on consuming animal bodies for their own comfort, while proposing an alternative that remains just as comforting for humans while being comfortable for the environment, and non-human animals too. The concept of veganized comfort food is nothing new, and many vegan restaurants around the world base their menus on such a concept, making vegan versions of popular animal based comfort foods. I am inspired by such restaurants, their impressive menu items and their drive to make vegan food attractive for those who don’t want to let go of the food they have a strong emotional connection to. Yet these restaurants tend to target the ‘already vegans’, the people who have given up on animal products, but are searching for alternative comfort foods. And most often the people who still consume meat and other animal products are unaware of the potential of vegan foods to satisfy their emotional food related needs. For my project I choose to target those who have not been exposed to vegan comfort foods, who possibly have a fear or misconception of what it really means to cut out animal products. I want to target the people who are open to the idea of trying plant based foods, while still sticking to conventional eating habits. With the hope to open their eyes to following through with active change in behaviour.
The dinner event was to be more than a veganized 5-course meal. Taking inspiration from creative food performances and interventions, by adding other design elements to the experience to further enhance the message, for example elements of visual communication in the invitation, poster, menu and other printed material, participatory activities and music installations during the event. Examples of similar practices are the Dutch EAT ART collective and The Eatelier, both of which address questions of sustainability and the future of food through events and installations on the subject of eating. The EAT ART collective hosted an event called “Scarcity Dinner” where they explored the social dynamics of sharing food in a scenario of scarcity, the concept makes the dinner guests active participants in the event, subjects in a sort of dinner experiment (EAT ART collective, 2020). The Eatelier is a food design studio by designer Katinka Versendaal, where projects often involve a collaboration with a local chef, where they join forces in translating research on the future of food into a multi-course dinner experience, with the aim to start a conversation at the table (Versendaal, 2019). These projects were useful inspirational references for my Villa DeLuxe dinner event, expanding my ideas on what sort of design practice could be involved in the event.

I viewed the event as both an experiment for my food-design practice as well as a research opportunity, where I could collect information and experiences from the guests, to further enhance my understanding of persistent meat-eating habits.

The concept for the menu was a 5-course experience where each course represents an animal or two who we conventionally eat as comfort food.

**Genuine Comfort Menu**

The first course was based on fish, an appetiser made with carrot-based smoked salmon and seaweed caviar. With the goal to replicate the characteristics of fish and the ocean, in terms of flavour texture and overall experience, asking the guests if they consider fish to be comfort food. The second course a take on the classic Swedish meatballs, with soy-meatballs, and the essential accompaniments. During the second course the plan was to ask one guest on each table to wear an accessory resembling a pig or a bull, the animals addressed in the course. As an attempt to eliminate the invisibility commonly used to distance people’s perception of their food from it’s reality, making the guests fully aware of the animal ingredients conventionally used to make meatballs, by becoming the animals themselves, or seeing their friend as the animal. By doing this I wanted to enhance the guests’ understanding of their food’s origin, eliminating any cognitive dissonance applied in the context, while keeping a playful and humorous atmosphere in the room.

The third course, ‘kebab pizza’, another very common comfort food in Sweden, and a great combination of different food cultures. With this one I wanted to address the convenience element often associated with comfort food as well as the element of indulgence (Locher et al, 2005). Kebab pizza, as any other pizza is a popular take-out food, making it a quick and easy meal, factors most often not associated with vegan food. The course represented the animals lambs and chickens, as lamb-meat is a traditional kebab ingredient and chicken-meat commonly used in kebab here in Sweden today.

The fourth and fifth courses of the menu did not
address the consumption of slaughtered animals for meat, but the common use of animal products derived from the reproductive systems of animals; cow’s milk and hen’s eggs. The fourth course was to be a cheese platter displaying artisan cheese products from the Malmö based cashew cheese company, Casheury. As cheese is a food very often associated with comfort, as it is indulgent and even a bit addictive, I wanted to show the guests that such indulgent foods very much exist without the suffering of cows on dairy farms. The fifth and last course, the dessert was a take on eggs, as eggs are one of the most commonly used animal ingredients in desserts. I wanted to visualise the egg in this course as eggs are often a very invisible ingredient in desserts, masked with other flavours and forms, so for this course I wanted to make sweet alternatives to the typical cakes, merengues and custards typically using eggs as a foundation, with a semi realistic boiled egg replica on the plate, once again enforcing the visibility of the animal on the plate.
Meal Experience & Documentation

Throughout the meal experience I wanted to encourage discussions on the topics of comfort food and the true discomfort caused by our conventional eating habits. Each course was to be introduced verbally to the guests by me, in which case I had the chance to interact with the guests and tell them my intentions. The music during the event was to be selected from a selection of vegan and vegetarian artists only, to add another playful element of vegan encouragement. Furthermore the experience and results from the event were to be documented with pictures and video. As well as having a couple of friends observing the guests’ interactions around the room while I was busy in the kitchen. Finally I wanted to ask the guests to leave a review in form of a survey before they left, to obtain further data on their experience.

In my process of preparing for this event I have been experimenting in the kitchen, cooking and recipe testing. The recipes and menu concepts I have developed in this process I have found another use for in final materialisation as I had to cancel the event.
Initial ‘Fish’ Experiments: Parsnip, Zucchini and Tofu with Nori: Frying vs. Dehydrating
Final ‘Fish’ Experiments: Smoked Carrot Salmon, on Sourdough Toast
Dessert ‘Egg’ Experiments: Custard Eggs with Seaberry Yolk
Final ‘Common Comfort Food’: Comfort For Fish, Carrot Salmon on Toast

Final ‘Common Comfort Food’: Comfort For Pigs & Bulls, ‘Meat’balls, Potatoes, Mushroom Gravy & Lingon

Final ‘Common Comfort Food’: Comfort For Lambs and Chicks, ‘Kebab’ Pizza with Garlic–’Yogurt’sauce and Plant–cheese
Final 'Common Comfort Food': Comfort For Cows, Nacho ‘Cheese’dip and Chips

Final ‘Common Comfort Food’: Comfort For Hens, Chocolate Cake, ‘Egg’ Custard & Crumble
New Direction: From Public to Personal
Moving forward in the process, with the complications of social distancing, I decided to focus my comfort food explorations more inwards rather than outwards. I had planned to use the social setting of a public restaurant dinner as a platform for intervention and a method for collecting reflections from the guests, an outwards, public approach to collaboration. Instead I decided to now focus on collaborating on a more personal level, with one-on-one interviews and accompanying cooking sessions, both of which were executed online.

The change of emphasis in my practice has made my process more diverse and added another level of meaningful reflections on the topic of comfort food. The truth is that the preparation and consumption of comfort food more commonly happens within the home and therefore a transition from the public eating experience to a more private and homely setting is both interesting and logical.

Participants and Interviews
For my one-on-one collaborations I chose to involve five people who are all close family and friends to me, my parents, my grandfather and a couple of friends. The participants span age groups across three generations, from the age of 23-69, the choice of participants was also affected by what I knew about their eating habits and their attitude towards cooking, as I wanted some variety in my results.

Invitation to participate in my thesis project:
Hello!

I would like to ask if you are interested in participating in my final independent project at the Linnaeus University?

As my plans to host an event at a restaurant here in town has been cancelled due to the current situation, I would like to try a new approach to my project.

My project is about researching people’s emotional connection to food and doing some experiments on that topic. Especially around the concept of “comfort food”. Throughout my process I ask the question: “Comfort Food - Comfortable for Who?”

In order to participate I will ask you to meet me on two occasions. First for a short interview, for around 15-20 minutes. And secondly a longer meeting for a collaborative cooking session, where we would cook together through a video call. We would cook a meal which we decide upon in the initial interview and then eat ‘together’ and discuss our experience.

I would really appreciate if you want to take part in this experiment with me, please let me know as soon as you can, and don’t hesitate to ask me any questions!

Kind regards,
Una

Invitation for Participation: Co-Design Cooking Sessions
I invited each person to participate and set up a time for the first interview. The interview process established a connection between me and the participant on the topic of comfort food, as an open conversation with a few set questions leading us through the process. The main goal with the interviews was to figure out the participant’s ultimate comfort meal, and analyse why that meal was so special as well as determining it’s essential elements in terms of flavour, texture, cooking method and appearance.

In this process I returned to the question of favourite foods as I had explored in my first co-design workshop, but now with the focus shifted from favorite meals to the most comforting ones. By keeping the focus on this element of comfort around eating, the results are meals that the participant has a social and emotional connection to. As mentioned before such meals are part of people’s identities. They are meals that typically represent a memory or a special family member or friend important to that person and are therefore also meals that people have a very hard time giving up on.

The second meeting with the participants explored the possibilities of remaking these ultimate comfort foods with plant-based ingredients. The meals chosen by the participants all included animal products, my grandfather chose a meal based on breaded and fried lamb chops, my mom chose a dish based on cheese filled pasta, with a creamy sauce, my dad chose risotto, made with butter and cheese, one of my friends chose a typical Icelandic ‘mashed fish’ dish based on a milky sauce
Co-Design Cooking Sessions

In preparation for the cooking sessions I looked into each participant’s comfort food meal request and developed a way of making that same meal but with plant-based ingredients, a “comfort for all” version of the original. Some of the recipes were more challenging than others, but all of them had a great potential for re-making. After testing veganized versions of the recipes I sent out a shopping list to the participants, asking them to prepare for the cooking session by getting the ingredients on the list. For some of the recipes the ingredients were quite unusual to the non-vegan participants, so I added pictures to the shopping list and described to the participants where to find them in the supermarket. When remaking the recipes I tried my best to create a simple and easy to follow recipe while maintaining the mandatory comfort elements of the recipe.

The cooking sessions were set up in a way where both me and the participant had our laptops placed in the kitchen in a spot with a view over the bench top and cooking area. That way we could follow along each others’ processes on the screen. These sessions were mostly guided by my instructions, while I regularly asked the participant questions to make sure we were doing things according to their comfort food needs and somewhat in line with their traditional way of making the dish. By doing this we kept the recipe in dialog amongst us throughout the cooking process, and so the final recipes are a co-designed product of our cooking sessions.

and the other friend chose a creamy tomato and chicken soup. It is interesting to see how diverse these meals are, it reinforces the idea that comfort food is something very personal, not a one kind fits all fix.

By doing this experiment on such a personal level I am returning to the feminist and vegan values of care and compassion in the process. I believe that by taking such an approach to the challenge of changing eating habits, the results are more impactful than other efforts like showing gruesome slaughterhouse videos or by sending links to vegan recipes. By addressing the change effort in a customised way for each participant you show care and attention to that person’s needs and compassionately guide them in the process.

Jón, my Grandfather: Holding His Favorite Comfort Snack
The easiest recipe to transition from animal based to plant based was my dad’s risotto, the creamy texture of risotto is caused by the rice releasing its starches while stirring them in the pot. The traditional animal ingredients typically used in risotto: butter and parmesan cheese are quite easily replaceable, we used a vegan butter based on rapeseed oil and we made a parmesan substitute from cashew nuts and nutritional yeast, a cheesy flavoured deactivated yeast product. Sometimes risotto recipes also include meat or animal based stocks, but my dad’s recipe is all about the mushroom flavour, using both fresh and dried mushrooms. The mushroom is the hero flavour in the recipe and the base ingredient is rice, so therefor there was no need for drastic changes in our plant-based version.

My grandfather’s request for comforting breaded lamb chops was a bit more challenging. The hero ingredient is lamb, which has a pretty distinctive texture, in my memory it is a bit tough and chewy, while the flavour is typically a pretty bland lamb’s meat flavour. In my plant-based version I replaced the lamb with a portobello mushroom, I wanted to mimic the texture by drying out the mushroom and flattening it in the oven. That way it was more dense and meaty and less spongy like mushrooms tend to be. Portobellos usually pack quite a meaty umami flavour, but to enhance those flavours we added smoked paprika, onion powder and salt to the breading mixture. We replaced the typical egg mixture with a mix of flour and water, acting like a glue to make the breadcrumbs stick to the mushrooms. Despite this recipe re-make being a bit challenging, it managed to meet my grandfather’s general comfort criteria in comparison to the original.

Doing these cooking experiments online was the only way to execute this collaboration during these odd times in which we are unable to socialise, which in turn provided the comfort of being able to choose participants beyond the local. It felt good to spend these quality cooking moments with the people I care about and miss back home. Furthermore it felt logical to cook with people who are close to me as we inherently trust eachother in the process and we can both feel comfortable in collaborating and communicating though such an otherwise awkward platform, like Zoom or other video-call platforms. The process of cooking together via video-call was not optimal, the sounds from moving around pots, pans and other utensils are quite uncomfortable when trying to communicate verbally, but usually it became a bit smoother a few minutes into the process, as the participants got used to the scenario and as I figured out how to deliver my instructions better suiting to each person. Finally after making each meal I would sit down with the participant and we would discuss the experience of cooking together this way. We would then analyse the meal we made in terms of the participant’s comfort criteria.
Snapshots from Cooking Collaboration with my Grandfather, Jón

Snapshots from Cooking Collaboration with my Dad, Hallgrímur
Outcome
The results from the cooking collaborations were all positive and this experience of veganizing another person’s comfort favorite was very insightful. As expected it became clear that the participants hold an emotional bond to the original comfort meal. By changing that meal and making it something slightly different the participants’ common attitude seemed to be a bit of scepticism when asked if the meal qualified as an identical substitute to the original. The original is something very specific to each person, in terms of flavour, texture and even aroma. The participants could very easily identify the differences in the plant-based version compared to the original. That being said all participants agreed that the plant-based meal met the comfort standards of the animal-based original, they all felt it was a comforting alternative. I am pleased with the results, as the purpose with the experiment was not to create an identical substitute, but to recreate the elements of comfort in each meal, with truly comfortable ingredients.

The experience of developing the recipe together was positive. Before each cooking session I had the base of the recipe figured out but throughout each session the participant and I collectively created a more detailed recipe based on their preferences. By cooking this way the recipes are customised, they are made for that specific person and not necessarily for any greater audience. As I do want to share this experiment to a further audience I am aware that I should rather focus on sharing the method of collaborative cooking than the specific recipe. I believe that the action of challenging a person close to you to cook a veganized version of their ultimate comfort food, or any comforting food for that matter is a very powerful way of encouraging a change in their eating behaviour.

This method allows people to engage in change-making through cooking with a very openminded and respectful attitude. As mentioned before, this project is based on the recognition that our food is more than just nutrition, it is part of our cultural and individual identities, and it both impacts and is impacted by our emotions. By respecting these factors and empathising with the people possibly in the process of changing their eating habits, we create a comfortable environment to pursue this change-making process. This method is founded in a balance between the necessary criticality of the current eating norms and a caring and compassionate approach. Thereby tying together my goals of pursuing a feminist approach to the issue of eating habits and following Tobias Leeneart’s openminded strategy towards veganism, as mentioned earlier.
Filled Pasta Ingredients and the Resulting Meals, First Mine then my mom Brynja’s

Lamb-chop Ingredients and the Resulting Meals, First Mine then my Grandfather Jón’s

Risotto Ingredients and the Resulting Meals, First Mine then my Dad Hallgrímur’s
Mashed Fish Ingredients and the Resulting meals, First Mine then my Friend Perla’s  >>>

Chicken Soup Ingredients and the Resulting Meals, First Mine then my Friend Arna’s  >>>
Purpose & Outreach
Going forward, I want to communicate the material I have gathered through my explorations in a way which adds up with my initial goals of encouraging a change in eating habits and behaviour. The material I have designed in my process is made up of ten recipes, five of which were made in relation to the dinner event at Villa de luxe, and the other five were made through cooking co-design experiments. All of them have in common that they represent true comfort food. The first five represent commonly consumed animals in a plant-based adaptation of popular comfort foods. The remaining five represent five different personal perspectives on comfort food, in a plant-based format.

The purpose of sharing these recipes is to demonstrate how a transition from traditional comfort foods to plant-based ones is a suitable way to kick-start a journey towards new and better eating habits. The goal is to inspire and encourage the viewer to adapt plant-based versions of comfort foods for themselves and further through collaboration with family or friends. More specifically, it intends to present just how a caring and compassionate approach to veganism is both possible and viable.

Format & Exhibition
The initial idea for communicating my design outcomes was to create a critical take on a cookbook, in printed form. But as I analysed my material and thought of its opportunities, it became clear that the next iteration had to be digital. My final design outcome is a website, where the recipes are still in line with the format of a cookbook as well as a recipe blog. The recipes are presented as methods for change, communicating more than just your typical food recipe, emphasising critical reflections and encouraging a change in action.

By framing the recipe methods and their processes in an open source, online document, I hope for them to travel a bit further and reach some sort of audience. Whether the viewer will try collaborating on a plant-based recipe with a friend or simply questions their eating habits, I believe it could contribute to a larger discussion and practice.

The website became a means of communicating my process and exhibiting my outcomes, you can find it through this link: https://comfortfoodforwho.com. Find further details on the thoughts and design decisions behind it in the ‘exhibition’ appendix below.
Behind the Scenes: Cooking Setup in my Kitchen in Kalmar

Behind the Scenes: Setup in my Dad's Kitchen in Reykjavík

Behind the Scenes: Eating 'Together' Setup in my Friend Perla's Kitchen in Reykjavík
Despite the inconvenience of cancelling and changing my plans in this process, it brought me the opportunity to see cooking as design practice from a broader perspective. I believe we have to recognise the ongoing pandemic, as a reminder of our privilege. It’s emergence has brought about changes in human behaviour we maybe didn’t think were possible, it is a truly unfortunate situation and a humbling one. I hope it further generates people’s capabilities of change in action, through care and compassion.

Reflecting on my project process, I want to gather my thoughts and outcomes in the form of a ‘recipe instruction’. The recipe is my ongoing attempt to contextualise the mental and socio-cultural complexities involved in the challenge of changing eating habits, it is a recipe for change. The instruction is a conclusion of my insights, but also an open-ended summary, as there is no one solution to this great issue and I am aware my design emphasis and relevant tools and methods will change and evolve as I keep working with this subject.

**Instructions:**
First critically analyse the animal–eating norm, observe both the patriarchal social constructs and the psychological foundations of our eating habits. Try to understand and respect people’s emotional relationship to food by recognising food as a more than nutrition, as a source of comfort. Add a challenge to the cognitive dissonance persistent in our behaviour and attitude around food.

Next recognise and use cooking as interventionist design practice, apply change-making methods that involve a fair compromise, one that respects and values our normative habits while sufficiently challenging them. Make sure to broaden the spectrum of cooking and eating scenarios in need of change: Cooking at home, ordering in or eating out, following a recipe, cooking by instinct or heating up a precooked meal. All of these scenarios and many more are relevant to the task of changing eating habits, everything from the common and public to the personal and private.

Meanwhile involve collaborative efforts, the importance of going beyond your own ideas of what it means to change these habits is essential. You can do this in every stage, during research and in practice, recognising the fact that change will not happen with one person and that a collaborative effort will always be more meaningful. In a similar way, make sure to involve customised efforts, there is no ‘one kind fits all fix’ to the issue of changing habits! Finally and most importantly engage in a truly compassionate and caring way throughout the process.

Conclusion

With this I encourage you to gather over cooking, whether that be in person or online and collectively challenge your eating habits. Whether you are already acting on these issues or you are taking your first steps, I hope you are inspired to take part of the strive towards a genuine comfort-for-all way of eating, serving comfort beyond human-only needs!


Exhibition
My design outcomes came to be a set of 10 recipes, half of them representing common comfort foods in the context of the industrialised global north’s food cultures. The other half was a set of 5 co-designed recipes for personal comfort food favorites, made with members of my family and friends! I wanted to use these recipes as a documentation and communication of my design process and outcomes, with the goal to inspire and encourage the viewer to cook and consume more plant-based foods.

In the process of thinking through ways of materialising my project outcomes, I shifted from wanting to work in printed form, towards a focus on digital communication. I wanted to create a critical take on a cookbook, displaying the recipes as more than only recipes for certain meals, but recipes encouraging a shift in perspective and a change in action. My turn towards the digital for format was influenced both by the fact that I had acquired some interesting video footage during my process, which would be best displayed in such a format, as well as fact that our projects would not be displayed in a physical exhibition space.

I made the decision to turn from the physical printed book towards a digital website format, while my idea of a critical take on a cookbook still remained in focus. The format of the website was inspired by cookbooks, while also looking to food blogs and other digital recipe venues for inspiration. The website format I chose gave me the option to display my recipes in a scrolling format similarly to other food blogs, the format also allowed me to involve a kind of storytelling in a fluent way throughout the communication of the “personal comfort food” recipes. For these recipes I combined introduction interviews, cooking instructions and quotes from the participatory cooking sessions with images and videos to weave together the story of cooking collaborations, with the resulting meal. The hope with the communication of these co-designed recipes was to make the cooking process as intriguing as the resulting meal, making the viewer inspired by the impact of collaboration in tackling the complexities of changing eating habits - recipes for change.

The “common comfort food” recipes used a very similar scrolling format while they were much shorter. Instead of the participant interviews present in the personal recipes, I included a short description of statistics and other information on the common consumption of the certain animals of which each recipe was based. This was an attempt to somehow mirror the importance of the animals we most often don’t think of in relation to our comfort food consumption with the importance of the individual human’s comfort when eating the food. The human participants’ introductions reflect their emotional and cultural connection to food while the animals’ introductions reflects the environmental and ethical need to not consume these animals as food.

The change making elements of my project are focused on the socio-cultural and personal sphere, on implementing change in people’s eating habits, with the greater goal to thereby minimise the harmful environmental and ethical effects our eating habits cause. I see my recipes as methods or tools for encouraging a change in mindset and in habits, they can be used as they are as direct cooking instructions or they can be seen as inspiration for collectively imposing change in eating habits with the people close to you.
chapter 1
common comfort foods
recipes for five courses of comfort-for-all classics

chapter 2
personal comfort foods
recipes for co-designed comfort-for-all favorites

the recipe / method:
Choose a classic comfort recipe of your liking. Prepare with care and compassion a comfort-for-all version of the original. Cause less harm to the planet and all its beings.

Serve as a norm challenging meal!

the recipe / method
Co-design a recipe with a friend or family member, show them you care through a truly compassionate act of cooking together, forming a new version of a favourite meal, with animal free, comfort-for-all ingredients.

Establish the essential comfort elements of the meal, and let this guide you in the process. Do this together in person or apart with digital tools, with the goal to recreate the feeling of comfort in cooking and eating the meal, without causing harm to the planet and its beings.
common comfort food #1
comfort for fish
smoked carrot salmon on toast

Fish is one of the most consumed animal proteins by humans, especially in the global north industrialized countries. Russia consumes 20-25kg of fish per capita, while my home country consumed 90kg of fish per capita - 3x more to say the least. A common comfort food in the northern European culture. One of the most used recipes is preparing and serving the fish by smoking it. Smoked salmon is considered a delicacy, definitely boosting the box of indulgence comfort food.

recipe

Recreate a classic smoked salmon, prepare with care and compassion a comfort-for-all version of the original. Cause no harm to our planet's fragile fish stocks, and contribute to a healthier ocean. Serve as a comfortable norm challenging appetizer!

ingredients

- 3-6 carrots
- merlot
- olive oil
- 1/2 cup soy sauce
- 2 tbsp sesame paste
- 1 tbsp caraway
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp pepper
- lemon and toppings
- sourdough bread
- seaweed (optional)
- carrot leaves
- red onion

instructions

Rinse and dry the carrots, no need to peel. Place in a baking dish and sprinkle with salt. Bake on 190°C for 40 minutes and cool.

Blend all remaining ingredients until smooth. Use a vegetable peel or mandoline to cut the carrots in long thin strips. Cover the carrot strips in marinade and store overnight. It gets even better if you let it sit for longer. Keep in the fridge for up to 4 days, you can even reuse the marinade for making some spicy sauce or for seasoning other veggies.

Prepare the toast with a spread of vegan cream cheese, the carrot salad and the other toppings to your liking.

Screengrabs: Example of “Common Comfort Food” Recipe Sub-Page:
https://comfortfoodforwho.com/common-comfort-foods
comfort for perla, fish and cows
icelandic mashed ‘fish’ with potatoes and rye bread

recipe
A co-designed recipe with Perla (my friend), showing care through a compassionate act of cooking together, forming a new version of traditional mashed fish, with fish and dairy free, comfort-for-all ingredients.

Establishing the essential comfort elements of the meal, and letting this guide us in the process. We had to cook apart with digital tools, due to us being in different countries. The goal was to recreate the feeling of comfort in cooking and eating the meal, minimizing harm to the planet and it’s beings in the process.

ingredients

- Icelandic mashed cauliflower
  - 500g potatoes
  - veggie butter (so, reheat)
  - sea salt
  - lemon juice
  - black pepper
  - cayenne pepper
  - turmeric powder
  - cumin powder
  - garlic
  - ginger
  - cinnamon
  - nutmeg
  - salt
  - pepper
  - maple syrup
  - cashews
  - cacao powder
  - kelp flakes
- 2 cups of your favorite vegetables


- Icelandic mashed fish
  - 500g fish
  - veggie butter (so, reheat)
  - sea salt
  - lemon juice
  - black pepper
  - cayenne pepper
  - turmeric powder
  - cumin powder
  - cayenne pepper
  - garlic
  - ginger
  - cinnamon
  - nutmeg
  - nutmeg
  - salt
  - pepper
  - maple syrup


P: Mmm it’s so good, and it’s growing on me with every bite! U: Yes, I think it thickens up a bit when it starts cooling down, which is nice! P: Yes, and I think it might just get even better the next day! P: And the nori makes it look a bit funny, but I think it gives it a more authentic look! P: ooh and I just squeezed some fresh lemon juice on top, that is really nice! U: Yes I tried that as well, its good with a bit of acidity!

U: I want to ask if you would say this version meets your comfort expectations? P: Yes, it’s a bit hard to say because I have never actually

Screengrabs: Example of “Personal Comfort Food” Recipe Sub-Page: https://comfortfoodforwho.com/personal-comfort-foods
“Comfort Food – Comfortable for Who?” – Questions the true comfort of our eating habits, critically addressing our prevalent unsustainable animal-based food cultures by exploring genuine comfort food through design.

Screengrabs from my Exhibition Project on the Online Platform: https://2020.designportfolio.lnu.com
As mentioned by Maja and Reuben Fowkes in relation to Félix Guattari’s study of the three ecologies, there is a need to take into consideration the environmental, social and mental when thinking about sustainability in curatorial work. (Fowkes, 2015) Throughout my initial design process and eventually in relation to the exhibition I have kept in mind the importance of involving all three registers of ecologies in the reflection of my work. I find it important that my work not only focuses on one of these ecologies but at all at once, as I believe change won’t happen for the better of the environment unless humans feel the change is also possible within their social sphere as well as mentally viable for them. In the communication of my exhibition work I made sure to touch on these three registers, as all of them are essential to the concept of my design work.

I wanted to communicate the recipes in a way that would be very clear and easily read by the viewer, as well as using a visual language to further communicate my message: A spinning meat-planet, representing the critique of our traditional habits, participants and animals featured in the same style of line illustration, thereby representing at the same level of importance. The choice of colourful backgrounds on the website and use of tablecloths in the photographs, sets a home-like scene, where the emphasis is on displaying the recipes in a warm and comforting setting. The faded yellow on the front page was to feel calming and inviting, the grey-ish blue in the “common comfort food” section was to represent the slightly less personal approach and more generalised portrayal of comfort foods, while the soft pink scheme in the “personal comfort food” section was to emphasise the importance of each individuals needs and comfort food desires.

The way I chose to use the photographs was firstly to create a sense of before and after with the ‘ingredients photos’ and ‘result photos’, I wanted the ingredients to be represented visually as well as in writing so they can give a hint as for what is to come, they give the viewer the initial message that this will not be a traditional version of comfort food as you are used to, they show that plants are the stars of these meals and that this is a recipe for change. For the “personal comfort food” recipes the photographs also showed a comparison between my meal and the participant’s which I though could be a nice way for the viewer to experience the sense of collaboration, and feeling that there were two individuals at play in making these meals. For the video clips I wanted to show the same thing, the comparison and collaboration in action, for the viewer this was more so meant as a glimpse into this co-design cooking experience than for directional purposes.

For the eventual online exhibition platform ‘2020. designportfolio.lnu.com’, it felt a bit strange to exhibit a website within another website platform, I thought it would be best to chose a few important examples from my design and summarise them to make the viewer interested and possibly willing to open the project website ‘comfortfoodforwho.com’ for more, while still having the exhibition page to stand on it’s own, telling the story of my project as a whole. I articulated my work in writing and included picture examples from my website, where I associated the food pictures with the animals they represented. I included the spinning meat planet for movement on the page and for setting the tone for my project. I also included a sort of ‘teaser’ version of the video material from the cooking collaboration, to represent the important element of collaboration and for more enticing movement on the page.

The process of collectively curating and creating an online exhibition has been a challenge, something very new and different for the entire graduation group and staff, I would have really loved to exhibit my work in some sort of physical space, mostly for the sense of community and gathering that such spaces allow for. Throughout my process the element of coming together has been important, from organising a dinner gathering that since has been cancelled towards finding a sense of gathering in an online setting. I guess it is just as relevant for the exhibition of my project to take place in the digital world, free from geographical boundaries and more accessible for sharing. I hope the site reaches a few people here and there and serves as an inspiration to gather over cooking, whether that be in person or online and collectively challenging our eating habits, serving comfort beyond human-only needs.

References:
Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who made this project with me!

To Gustav Hector for opening your restaurant for a critical and challenging event.

To Brynja, Hallgrímur, Jón, Perla and Anna for cooking with me and co-designing recipes for change.

To Anna-Karin, Eric, Åsa and all my tutors for the support.

And finally thanks to everyone who has been and will be challenging the animal-eating norm in action, for the inspiration and for the important fight!