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BAKING WITH DEPRESSION
An Exploration of Crisis Response Through Dessert

Phoebe Jacques

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in
University Honors and Graphic Design.

Thesis Advisor: Meredith James
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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the conceptualization, research and execution of my cookbook, Baking with Depression, in which I explore how cooking habits reflect human behavior during times of crisis. Looking through the lens of cooking provides a unique perspective into how widespread stress can alter behaviors and outlooks. By comparing the Covid-19 pandemic and Great Depression, I make historical connections and use humor to create an engaging exploration.

INTRODUCTION

Our world has changed dramatically over the last few years. Our outlooks, our values, our friend groups, our passions, our habits, have all been altered by the Covid-19 pandemic. With such a drastic and longterm shift in our collective routines, the pandemic has caused us all to reflect on our habits and daily activities. Katy Milkman, a behavioral scientist at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, says “Normally we go about our daily lives and ... tend not to change our behaviors, we need some sort of triggering event that leads us to step back and think bigger-picture” (Pinsker, 2020). Without the same structure we are used to, we are given the opportunity to evaluate and analyze our behaviors. There is also more time to explore what is comforting or beneficial to oneself in times of stress. Having the time to explore these new habits and routines can cause one to realize things they wouldn’t have otherwise, and carry this knowledge even past the pandemic times.
My curiosity around this topic culminates in the question of how peoples cooking habits reflect response to crisis. In order to explore this, I created a cookbook that connects the two time periods and makes space for personal voice and artistic experimentation.
RESEARCH

My research comparing the two time periods informed my approach because it affirmed the idea that patterns appear throughout history. When Americans think of other widespread lows in history, our minds go immediately to the Great Depression. The Great Depression was the largest longest economic low in American history. And although there are many statistical differences, there are many similarities both economically and socially. Similar trends of unemployment, economic activity and industrial production are seen in both events. During the Great Depression, though, these rates continued to worsen while the 2020 recession has seen improvements in these categories. Knowing the data that associates the two time periods is helpful in understanding how to compare and connect other aspects of these times.

Although widespread food scarcity during the pandemic never hit the point that it did during the Great Depression, there was still immense panic over running out of things leading to empty grocery store shelves and hoarding items. The fear alone led to people getting creative with what they had on hand, and caused people to think more consciously about what and how they were consuming food. Glen Powell, a baker who has worked with Great Depression era recipes says, “With the current Covid-19 pandemic—sheltering in place and social distancing and restaurants being closed—people are looking at [the Great Depression] a little more closely, at how we can apply what happened then to what’s happening now” (Weinberg, 2021). Similarly to the scarcity seen during the Great Depression, lack of typical access and resources has forced cooking as a whole to become more creative. On the podcast Home Cooking, hosts Samin Nosrat and Hrishikesh Hirway talk about opening their fridge without a plan and making whatever sounds good with what they had. So, on a similar note, without the pressure of having all the perfect ingredients, people can experiment more and get creative (2020). The pandemic has also created a more inclusive atmosphere around cooking. The Pioneer Woman’s, “Staying Home” series, filmed at home with an iPhone camera at the start of quarantine, made cooking star Ree Drummond more relatable and down-to-earth than ever. Celebrity Selena Gomez also took part, creating a remote cooking show on HBO called Selena + Chef, where she video chats with professional chefs. During an uncertain time, entertainment needs have shifted and no longer are satisfied by fancy ingredients and mind-blowing techniques. Instead, audiences crave familiarity and comfort.

By abandoning the elitist tone, foodie culture has become another way that humans are connecting and relating during a challenging time. Jane Ziegelman, author of A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression says, “There’s one thing that I’ve seen which is really positive and really encouraging to me. I’ve seen bunches of articles by food writers that aren’t so much looking at recipes but are trying to teach people basic laws of food and cooking. We’re learning sort of how it all works—how to cook without a recipe, how to keep produce fresh longer, how to make substitutions...” (Weinberg, 2021).
Because my project is centered around collective habits, it was important to get a better understanding of my peers' experiences during the pandemic. I created a survey with 9 questions related to cooking habits and general experience during the pandemic. I received 31 responses and found a lot of similarities in people's experiences. The first question, “what has been the most difficult part of the pandemic for you?” received responses like, “the uncertainty, the worry, the distraction,” “not being with friends and the unknown of everything,” and “feeling isolated and super low energy.” I asked what the good parts were and the responses followed the theme of spending time with family, reflecting and learning new skills.

This survey showed me that everyone has had very similar experiences during the pandemic, which was not surprising but also interesting considering how broadly the feelings of isolation and loneliness were felt. It also validated my initial thought of making the best out of a challenging situation. In response to the prompt “what were you most proud of in the kitchen?” one person responded “making full on expensive looking meals with only food from the PSU food pantry, like pretzel bread and corn chowder.” I loved this response and it made me think of the quote, “necessity is the mother of invention,” which applies so well to pandemic habits and making the most out of what you have.

To summarize my findings, the habits displayed during both time periods revealed a resurgence of simple recipes with less or basic ingredients, experimenting with what is on hand, a curiosity to try new things, and a more accessible and empathetic tone to cooking.
EXECUTION:

“There’s a kind of cherry-picking taking place where we’re going back and finding novelty recipes that are kitschy in a way. And we feel like it’s almost fun to go back and cook these historical recipes” (Weinberg, 2021). This idea of cherry-picking, choosing or passing down the most valuable recipes, can apply to design aesthetics too. By looking to previous times for knowledge and inspiration, the best parts of a time period can be learned from and benefited from. In terms of designing this cookbook, it was important that the style reflected this idea and the research that was done. By combining traditional and contemporary styles, the design can appropriately reflect the sentiment of connecting two time periods together to compare and examine. Aspects of current and vintage design mix to create a unique and modern take on the cookbooks I researched.

The photography, as seen in the page on the right, is shot in a traditional way and edited with a focus on saturation and texture to further amplify the vintage look. On recipe pages, it is then combined with more modern type to balance the aesthetics. The type choices are also informed by vintage aesthetics, but arranged in a way that better reflects modern design choices. For example, the recipe pages feature small body copy with a large script font title. While the elements are similar to vintage design, the hierarchy and amount of white space would not be typical for traditional page design and brings a modern feel to the layout.

The photo styling incorporates thrift store props, which emphasizes the idea of making do with what’s on hand and adds to the casual nature of the book. The recipes are broken into groups of 4 and feature a full-size spread, which is inspired by old photography layout. Not only was the design heavily infused with humor, with slightly-off photographs or kitschy props, but the writing took on a personality of its own. With the goal being that the recipes sound like a retelling by a friend, the copy is written in a stream-of-consciousness style. The tone is empathetic and cheeky. It creates a sense of accessibility that supports the easy-to-follow recipes.

The style choices reflect the ideas I convey through my project; examining past times in an effort to adapt and learn from them. Just like cooking in general, passing down the most successful recipes, or in life, passing down habits that are beneficial. This is how generations are connected and how human responses to situations can be explored.
Opening and closing letters provide context for the project and introduce the personal and welcoming tone.
Using hierarchy to create visual interest brings a modern touch to the vintage aesthetic.
CONCLUSION:

By exploring patterns and habits in human behavior on a large scale and personally, we are able to expect and prepare for future events. And through relating our own thoughts and feelings to those of others around us or even in different time periods, we feel less alone and can better understand and act forgiving towards each other. I believe this shift is starting already, with vulnerable internet sharing and more transparency in general, and my project supports and adds to this conversation.

Baking with Depression explores cooking habits in times of crisis through the content and tone of a cookbook. Through this project, I concluded that times of crisis reveal and reflect people’s ability to adapt, get creative, approach life with a sense of humor and prioritize joy. Choosing a printed medium and distributing copies to my peers, the object will go on to live a life separate from me and the label of a thesis project. My long-term vision is that this book becomes a point of reflection for those who read it, and whether anyone tries the recipes or not, I hope it brings humor, joy and a greater sense of understanding.
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