

ceramics

M O N T H L Y

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Cover: Forrest Lesch-Middelton
Spotlight: Designing for Food
Clay Culture: Indie Craft Fairs
Glaze: Celadons at Six



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in service of food

Ryan Fletcher's *Tapas Micros* project began as a BFA degree show in collaboration with a chef. It has expanded from there, exploring the gap between gallery and restaurant.

CM: What questions did you ask the chef regarding preferences for shapes, surfaces, etc?

I also did a lot of research in high-end restaurant product catalogs. I found that most manufactured ware is made to literally frame the food; using the rims of plates and bowls. Instead of framing the food, I wanted to elevate it, by making a pedestal for it, or add dimensionality to it by linking it to another form.

CM: How were the dishes used, and what did you learn from this?

All the pieces were made to be versatile, so I never made a "risotto plate," for instance. There are a few designs that are closer to most people's idea of what a spoon is and those were used—meaning handled, or picked up. Others were thought of more as decoration or pedestals and simply left on the plate.

The servers and dishwashers did their normal work, but seemed a little afraid sometimes. Part of their jobs is not breaking things, and I think the irregularity of the objects created a bit of anxiety in a few of them. Most of the pieces are designed to be picked up, but the patrons were typically apprehensive about touching them.

Almost every chef commented on the fact that none of my dishes were stackable. I never

RF: The questions I asked her were about the kinds of things she had seen in the

various restaurants she had worked in. She told me, "Only white or black, and only glossy," explaining that colors compete with the food.

RF: The forms are based on the idea of the "micro menu" or tasting menu of several small courses some

chefs use to show off their abilities, so I made small shapes that had a relatively small serving area to accommodate that.

RF: The testing was done in actual use. The kitchen at Lil's on 17th (the restaurant where the project began) is very small, and everything is hand washed. This poses a problem because the handling and stacking of dishes, even in water filled sinks is the reason for most of the chipping and breakage of all the ware they use. At the event in chef Celina Tio's Julian, they were washed in an industrial sanitizer, which minimized contact. Nothing broke at all there. I also noticed that most people are more careful with dishes when you say you made them. I think we average about one broken piece per event, which isn't bad.

RF: I never did the actual serving. I spoke with some of the guests as they ate, but I really wanted to exist as a part of the normal restaurant experience so we tried to leave things "business as usual." I was a dishwasher at several events, and this was actually a great experience. A few times, I was involved in plating the food, which is my favorite job in the restaurant. I love the idea of making food more appetizing by turning it into a piece of art someone is going to eat. This is the reason I made *Tapas Micros*. I really just wanted to be on the plate with the chef.

considered this because of the relatively small size of the pieces. One could fit about 35 pieces into a small Tupperware container.

CM: Were there specific dishes that inspired or led to a successful design?

RF: Not really. The thing that was most inspiring was thinking about high-end restaurant chefs and how they prepare food. One thing I noticed about all the chefs I worked with is that they, for the most part, have incredible control over the consistency of their food. These chefs weren't making heavy pasta dishes with runny sauces that filled the plate; the reductions were thickened precisely, and sauces stayed where they were put. Not every piece of ceramic needs severe indentations, or high rims, or large open surfaces. Essentially, I was creating sculptural pedestals for the food in the hopes that the pedestal would somehow inspire the formal aspects of the chef's creation.

CM: How did customers react to *Tapas Micros*, and did that change with the venue?

RF: It's hard to judge reactions specifically, but no one was angry or mad at me, which is good. I don't think I wanted everyone to pick up all the pieces, and I don't think all the designs were successful, but it was an experiment. The pieces have been sent to several galleries and set up in various ways that accentuate their sculptural, repetitive qualities. I think people responded positively to that.

The chefs and I responded differently to working in a gallery, and I think the customers did as well; in restaurants there is pressure to make food that will be generally acceptable to a large audience, but in an art gallery anything goes. For an installation we called "Comfort

Food," we served three tapas: *Hojalre de Lingua* (puff pastry with beef tongue), *Ensalada Tibia de Estomago* (cold salad of celery, carrot, onion, and beef tripe) and *Corazon con Tomate* (seared beef heart simmered and served in a Mediterranean tomato sauce). I went into the project thinking people would be generally turned off by the food. However, we prepared food for 250 people and it was gone in the first hour of the opening. There were menus printed and all the ingredients were clearly listed. This told me



that the presentation of the food was just as important as the preparation.

CM: How did you ensure that the pieces would stand up to heavy restaurant use?

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CM: What was your involvement with serving the food on your own dishes?

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You can read the complete interview, as well as Fletcher's full account of the project, and see more images, at www.ceramicsmonthly.org. To learn more about Ryan Fletcher and what he's up to, see www.ryanfletcherdesign.com.

