

Inaugural address

A taste of the Future

Before I begin the speech, I would like to very warmly welcome everyone who took the time to join us today: of course our students, my dear colleagues and members of the executive board, and my friends and family. Thank you so much for being part of this moment.

Today marks a very special moment for me, of course every inauguration is a nice occasion to call lovely people together, but more importantly for me because of the people that are here today, and the image of the type of education that I truly believe in. In one place, we have students, researchers, partners from the industry, but also our close personal context from all parts of the Netherlands as well as other countries, all the way from Denver Colorado to South Korea. Bringing all these people to the same table, where we can enrich each other's perspectives from the vast backgrounds and experiences, that's what I believe is needed to learn, innovate and grow in the 21st century. For the Research Centre Future of Food, this means creating an environment, where all of you come together to create, learn and get inspired to co-create "the next step in hospitality".

I'm very fortunate to be working for two institutes with amazing colleagues and students, here of course at the Hotel Management School Maastricht, Zuyd and at Breda University of Applied Sciences. This event also symbolizes the close collaboration we have between the two institutes and the evidence that together there is so much more that we can do and learn, with a much bigger network and much wider reach. In my field, I have the pleasure to work with great chefs which allows us to translate our theoretical understanding in this area and push the boundaries of creativity and meaning through their creations in traditional and new, digitally enhanced environments. In each step of the preceding Food Experience Tour, we covered a key theme prevalent in our research, from using products that are grown and sourced locally, to the explosive flavors of sustainable dishes, to immersive food experiences and upcoming opportunities for consumers and businesses in the food service sector such as meaningful use of 3D food printers, but there is still much to look forward to.

I come from a family of restaurant owners, all the way from the high street snack bar selling 'to-go' dishes to full-service Korean restaurants in Germany. Thanks to this background, over the years, I could observe a shift in the way of how restaurants of this sort were established. It has changed drastically from the time when my parents and that generation of baby boomers set up restaurants to the type of food outlets that I see popping up across the country today. From what I've observed in the past, the focus was very much on preparing dishes that are authentic and closely image the taste of the country of origin. But just talking to a dear friend of mine a few weeks ago, who is opening a new food outlet in the middle of Eindhoven this weekend, the first consideration was not which food items should be on the menu, or a careful assessment of a complex and multifaceted market, but the design of the outlet and how to present it to make it 'instagrammable' for the younger audience. Today, we can access functionalities through our mobile devices that blend digital content with our personal lives and physical surroundings that are even able to reinterpret what we see and share through the overlay of computer-generated content into the real environment.

So where do we go from here in the future of food in the food service and hospitality sector? At our research centre, we advocate that the future of food dictates an interplay of four distinct dimensions, the social dimension, the contextual dimension, the sustainability dimension and the individual dimension (Figure 1).

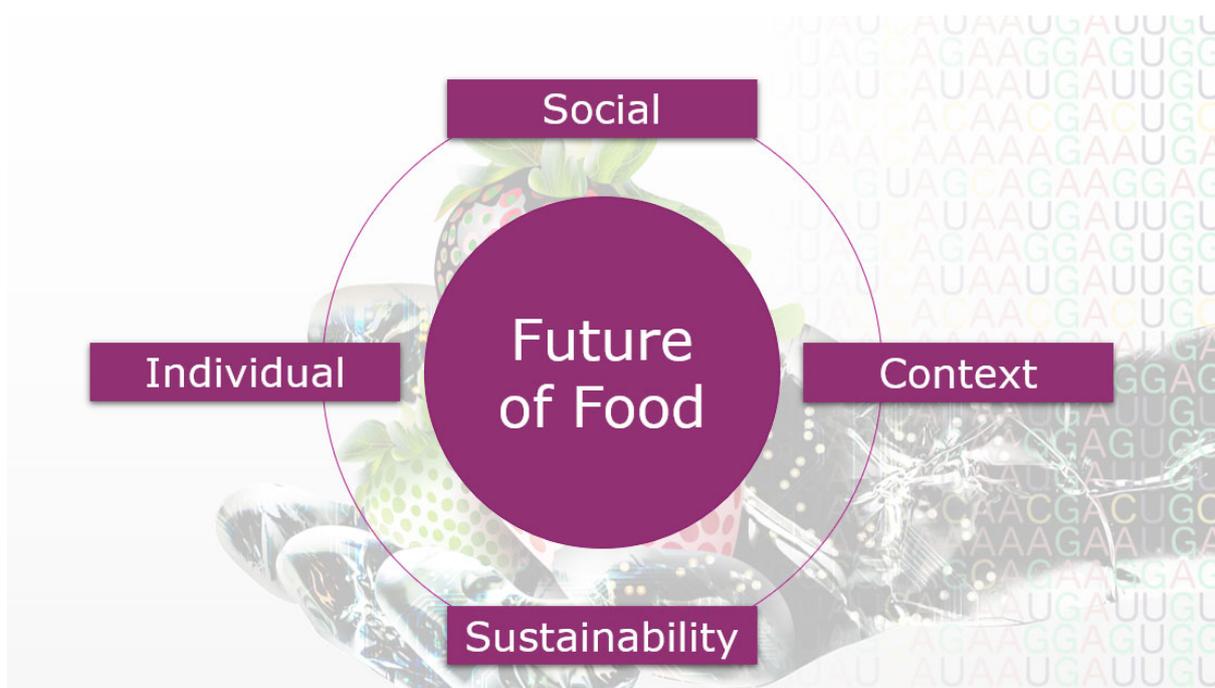


Figure 1: Future of Food Framework

Social Dimension

For quite some years now, experts have agreed that eating is ultimately a social endeavor (Higgs & Ruddock, 2020). Particularly in the service context, it seems plausible that my dining experience will be influenced by whom I'm dining with, which will determine what I will remember of the dining experience by the time I get home. A study conducted by Higgs and Thomas (2016) concluded that it's not only what we remember, but also our eating behavior is highly influenced through our social context. For instance, eating with someone who eats a large amount stimulates us to eat more than we would do by eating alone. Interestingly, conforming to social stimuli also happens on an experiential level. Conforming to a group norm for instance is a rewarding experience in which positive social feedback can affect liking and attitude towards a food and how it is evaluated (Stok et al., 2014). A fairly recent study conducted at the University of Oxford (Dunbar, 2017) even took it up another notch, concluding that the more we eat with others, the more we feel happy and satisfied about our own lives. So with all of these findings, it seems we need to rethink what the social role in the dining experience actually entails. The social component in food has become so much more than just the evening together with your loved ones around the dining table. Technology has enabled us to share our experiences globally with friends and strangers alike with one click of a button and makes it possible to reach thousands, sometimes millions of people instantly. Particularly in recent years we see a surge in adopting augmented reality technology to create and share social media experiences like TacoBell's Snapchat lens or augmenting restaurant menus (e.g. Wahaca restaurant in the UK) that allow guests to get a real-size view of dishes and information on its nutritional value. In every discussion on implementing consumer technologies in restaurants, there is the inevitable question whether technology does not in fact create a barrier in fostering the social component, and instead isolates people from the social context around the table. This can certainly hold true for devices that are individual based, like your smartphone or the use of virtual reality glasses. To address this shortcoming, our very own Food Experience Lab here at the Hotel Management School Maastricht offers what we call an immersive playground for research and a creative testbed for

innovation in the food service and hospitality sector. In this controlled lab setting, we can transport entire groups of people to environments only limited by your own imagination. This allows us to create immersive learning experiences in our education like being transported to a vineyard in Bordeaux while teaching about the blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, or reinterpret the meaning of virtual learning by revolutionizing what it feels like to collaborate with students from other institutes around the world by connecting physical classrooms to create the sense of being together.

This creates of course a whole array of new opportunities for what is possible and raises equally as many questions for researchers and industry professionals alike. We've come to realize that it also comes with a global benchmark of what this and upcoming generations will find worthwhile visiting and engaging with, as we move into a social context where ideas and personal thoughts can be freely created and shared over a variety of channels across different technologies available to us today.

Contextual dimension

In fact, a little while ago, I was driving back from Germany to the Netherlands and was listening to a podcast by Alex, a French foodie from Paris, who is known through his YouTube channel for his attempts to recreate the perfect version of well-known dishes. The podcast is basically a conversation with his editor, and in this particular one, they were discussing the question "Are tomatoes in Italy better than elsewhere?" While much of the conversation digressed in various directions, they came to the following conclusion. Although the quality of ingredients might in fact be better in some parts of the world than in others due to for instance more favorable climate conditions, for many people it's the difference of the experience of being there, immersed in the environment in the middle of Napoli or the Campania region and enjoying Italian tomatoes compared to having the exact same tomatoes back at home for a quick ten minute lunch before jumping into the next online call.

The same is true when you go skiing all morning in the Austrian alps. You start at 8am, and after four full hours of racing up and down the slopes, you finally arrive at the long-awaited restaurant at the top of the mountain overlooking the valley. You are standing there, the sun shining, people walking awkwardly around you in their skiing uniform, and the question is, what's the best food to have right now to satisfy your hunger in this very moment? It's not Schnitzel and fries by the way. There is something so much more comforting and the perfect fit for that exact moment on the snowy mountain: Instant Cup Noodles. The hotness and spiciness of the soup warms your frozen body instantly. You can literally feel the hot liquid entering your body through your lips, going down your throat and settling in your stomach. It's absolutely fantastic. Now, I'm not an advocate for instant noodles, and I would sincerely hope that instant noodles will not play a big part in the future of food. But what's interesting is that there seems to be a strong relationship between a specific context and the situation I find myself in, and the type of food that is accepted or even desired. The concept of the experiencescape by O'Dell and Billing (2005) perhaps sums up this interplay quite accurately, in which they argue that the environment in which experiences are created as part of people's mental process, must consider the particular contexts, the subjects, the physical objects and their sets of relationships to form a meaningful whole. There is absolutely no other occasion where I would consider consuming instant cup noodles. This food item has close to zero nutritional value and it sounds absurd to think people would actually pay money to consume this. It is clearly built on something else that many apparently find much more important today, 'convenience', 'access' and of course 'price'. So much of the food that we see out there today

that is deeply integrated into our daily lives is built on these values. Take Starbucks for instance, in a city like New York, there were a total of 219 Starbucks in that city alone in 2019. CNBC in 2017 already called Starbucks "their own worst competition", indicating that in the U.S. there is fear of Starbucks saturation, as each store has almost 4 other Starbucks within a radius of 1 mile (=1,6 km). It's completely absurd, and yet, it seems to be profitable enough from a business perspective to do exactly that. In parts of Europe on the other hand, we can observe quite a different competitive environment, but also people's mentality and lifestyle seems to oppose this business approach to be equally successful. This shows that we need to investigate and integrate our understanding of the contextual conditions and their influence on aspects like the food experience of consumers but also when considering the viability of businesses in the food service sector now and in the future.

Sustainability dimension

It is perhaps to no one's surprise that much focus so far has been put on the effects of our immediate environment on our lifestyles. For our food system this meant that it had to be set up in a way to accommodate to this need for max accessibility and convenience. To fill this demand, we have had no choice but to mass produce and push out products at a pace that is simply unbelievable and unsustainable for the health of our planet, as the food that is produced has become so detached from its origin and natural growing time and habitat to accommodate to our own consumption patterns. Currently, global food value chains account for close to 30% of greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change. A large proportion of that is for raising livestock which needs vast amount of land to produce the animal-based products that we consume every day. Inconveniently, an increasing change in climate also creates more challenges across the food system (Nicolini & van der Vaart, 2020). So it's really a vicious circle.

The great irony in all that is that even today, not only is one third of the produced food lost or wasted across the food system, but we still have 800 million people undernourished across the globe (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2018). So, I'm sure I don't need to convince anyone here that what we are currently doing doesn't seem to be very smart. However, at the same time, I'm relieved that there is definitely more awareness in the public and activities across the food system on these issues. Some great businesses and new initiatives have also been launched in the food retail and service sector to address some of these problems, also here in the area of Limburg. 'Sjuut' for instance is one of the restaurants that prides itself for keeping a close link to the traditions of Limburg through the sourcing and producing of food products from the region. Cooperatives like 'FoodCoop' Maastricht made it their mission to make local food available to everyone and connect the local community to food producers in the region while educating about sustainable food consumption. Many more initiatives are on grassroots level and need support to grow in a resilient way in this dynamic world. To see transformational change, we need stakeholders from industry, research, and public policy to come together to create solutions that very simply "make this world a better place". But this transformation in the food service sector starts with the individual. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has called for sustainable diets that not only provide access to food globally addressing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 2 on Zero Hunger, but are also healthy for consumers while addressing sustainable production in line with SDG 12. And while there are a several initiatives that contribute to this endeavor, we are still falling short on steering our daily consumption patterns and diet preferences towards a pathway that triggers changes across the food system.

Individual Dimension

In the end of the day, the consumption of food happens on an individual basis and while we might make different decisions of which foods we like and dislike, the flavor sensations can be asserted rather objectively. Scientists agree that the main criteria that allow us to judge the quality of food are in fact assessed by four indicators alone - taste, smell, mouthfeel, and appearance (Drewnowski, 1997; Guinard & Mazzucchelli, 1996). We are fortunate to have a track record from our preceding Professor Peter Klosse, who was leading the research centre Gastronomy here at the Hotel Management School Maastricht. Based on his theory, taste evaluations can be established based on objective assessment of flavor and deliciousness that create a taste profile of products. Interestingly, he makes a clear distinction however between deliciousness of food and liking of food. The first, which is product-based and assessed on product level, and the second, which is subjective and very much dependent on the individual (Klosse, 2019). And here lies exactly the problem, we choose food based on what we like and somehow we don't seem to be very good at making food choices that are actually contributing to our well-being. In fact, we are so bad at it that the United Nations had to go out of the way to create an exclusive Sustainable Development Goal for it, which emphasizes good health for people of all ages (United Nations, 2015). In the Netherlands alone, 51% of the adult population was prognosed as overweight in 2019 (CBS, 2020). And while many of us will blame the evil of highly successful marketing communication that messes with our minds on a daily basis, the World Health Organization (2011) seems to think otherwise, and postulates that this increase can largely be ascribed to the incremental consumption of high energy/low nutrient-dense foods that are increasing in the Western diet, where we are ironically lucky to have so much choice in food accessible to us. The choice of food is also a very emotional one, and I'm not only talking about certain foods triggering emotions like disgust or sometimes even fear, but something perhaps a bit more fundamental. Let's take a moment to do a short thought experiment, and let me ask you, imagine you are on your deathbed and you can have the free choice of one last meal before you leave this world. This is your very last meal, the very last thing you will eat or drink in this world. Please take a moment to make your choice. I would say with quite some certainty that most of us did not choose the dish with the caviar at the Michelin star restaurant, but chose something that is much closer to our hearts. For me, the last meal would have to be Korean tofu soup, which is literally made out of water, tofu, soy sauce, chili pepper flakes, and zucchini. It's so simple that my mother used to make this in about five minutes when I was a kid. But to me, this is so much more than just a dish. In this dish, there are memories of warmth and love, and I'm sure that whatever you chose as your last dish is so much more to you than just as dish as well.

So the question is: "In a world of abundance and individualism, how do we help consumers to develop habitual traits related to food that would pave the way towards a more sustainable future for the way we consume food, the way the food service and hospitality sector operates and inevitably the food system?" To address this question, we need to understand how individuals make food-related decisions and what stimulates these decisions. We need to understand how we can design food experiences and frame the context of individuals to trigger and embed changes in our daily lives. Being social animals, a big part of that context will be driven by our immediate social surrounding, the people we interact with on a daily basis, and finally, this demands that we need to stimulate changes that are contributing to the health and well-being of us and those around us, as well as truly grasping the implications of these changes to our environment that we live in to create a hopeful and enjoyable future of food.

To accommodate this ambition, the Research Centre Future of Food established two distinct research lines:

- 1) *Sustainable Food Experience Innovation* which focuses on designing and testing of innovative food experiences as means to stimulate sustainable change in consumers, and

- 2) *Food Service Transformation* which focuses on research supporting our industry to anticipate and embrace changes across the business and food value chain that contribute towards a more sustainable future.

The beauty of those two areas is that learnings naturally feed into one another through research that is not only applied, but in which stimuli and effects can also be experienced hands-on by research participants, partners, colleagues and students alike to co-create and grow a common understanding of how we can shape the future of food together. To educate our students to drive developments that are research-based and applied in practice, the Research Centre Future of Food strives to bring people from this and future generations that will be leading the industry together to create, learn and get inspired to co-create "the next step in hospitality".

Thank you very much

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Maastricht, 7 April 2022

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