

Presentation and Plating

“Looks delicious!” is a seemingly impossible phrase. How can you see what something will taste like? Presentation and *plating*—the arrangement of food on a plate—set an expectation for how food will taste, and when cooking for others, can be a powerful signal of much more than taste and flavor.

Food presentation is a form of signaling, most easily understood by looking at what biologists call *signaling theory*. In biology, animals use signals to communicate many intentions. Bright red coloration on frogs signals “poison!”, warding off predators. With time, other animals mimic the signals—imagine non-poisonous frogs that happen to be red—which leads to a race between honest signalers and copycats. This is why harder-to-copy signals replace older, copyable ones. Some gazelles ward off predators by pronking (now there’s a Scrabble word), jumping up high to demonstrate that they can also run fast. The cheetah that sees a gazelle pronk quickly learns that the gazelle isn’t worth chasing, saving both the cheetah and the gazelle an energy-intensive race. Weaker gazelles can’t copy the honest signal and suffer.

Humans use signaling too. Expensive sports cars aren’t practical, at least for driving around town, but they do signal one’s economic status. (Incidentally, this is why high-end sports cars have only two seats and little storage space: if the car were practical for daily chores, then it wouldn’t be a good signal of wealth.) Cooking from scratch and spending time making a meal is a signal, letting others know that you value them. Inviting guests over and preparing food for

Brownies in an Orange

Presentation doesn’t have to be fancy, difficult, or expensive to signal “special!”, but it does need to be considered and different than what you normally do to communicate that thought. Take brownies: even if you make them using a mix (guilty pleasure!), baking them in an orange

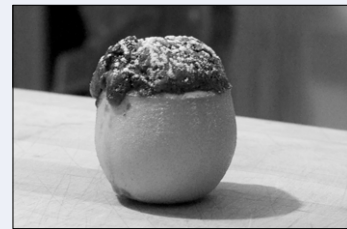
changes the presentation and shows thought. Remember, presentation depends upon your context, so making brownies in an orange will be special in some contexts (the person who never cooks showing an effort) but *déclassé* in other contexts.



Cut the top off and trim out the center.



Fill with brownie mix.



Bake until a toothpick inserted 1" / 2.5 cm deep comes out clean. Dust with powdered sugar.

them is a huge signal. Signaling theory partly explains why things like instant brownie mixes call for eggs and oil: in addition to the maker's gratification I wrote about earlier in this chapter, requiring those ingredients leaves just enough work that the baker can signal their care.

Different situations require different signals to communicate a message, and this makes writing a universal list of "how to plate food" tricky. To understand presentation, one has to understand the message that one is trying to communicate and then pick the appropriate signal for the context. If you're cooking an everyday meal, you wouldn't want a fussy presentation. (Using a fussy, special presentation on an everyday occasion would be its own signal, perhaps softening the blow of imminent bad news.) If it's a special date night, setting out cloth napkins and spending time on the way the food is plated is a way of signaling that it's a special occasion. And with good friends, setting up an environment that matches the expectations of your social circle communicates your understanding of the group norms. Following a fine-dining restaurant-style presentation can be charming, or can come across as aggrandizing, depending upon your peers.

Here are a few basic presentation tips if you do want to present food using appearances common to Western fine-dining.

Match the color and size of the plate to the food. I've been surprised what a difference using a large plate can make; it's like a frame around a picture. Some empty space on a plate is good! Color, too, can be instrumental. I find having two sets of plates—mine are either white or dark grey—makes it easier to pick one that contrasts well with the food. You can add color to a dish with food: a few herb leaves on the top of a bowl of soup, a dusting of freshly ground black pepper on roasted chicken breast, or powdered sugar on a chocolate dessert all add visual interest to otherwise monochromatic dishes.

Make it look different than traditional home-cooking. If you're plating a meal that has a vegetable, starch, and protein component, traditionally the three items would be placed next to each other, like wedges of a circle. Try placing the starch in the center of the plate and spreading it out in a thin layer, then adding the vegetable component on top of the starch, and finally stacking the protein on top of the vegetables. (If you want to go for extreme height, use a large can with both its top and bottom removed and stack the food inside it, and then slide the can up and away.)

Think about the size and arrangement of the food. All the rules of visual composition taught in art class (preschool counts!) apply to plating food. The "rule of odds" is one of the easiest: seeing either three or five meatballs on top of a bowl of pasta is generally considered more visually interesting than seeing four or six. Contrasts in size and shape help, too. If you're serving pork chops, try slicing them into two pieces and placing one part angled up on top of the other. This will show the interior of the chop, both revealing how the meat is cooked and adding visual interest from arrangement and color contrast.

