

Sunny disposition:
The large-format
Gebakken Ei (2015)
by Dutch megarealist
Tjalf Sparnaay.



Meet the artists taking inspiration
from gastronomy to serve up work that
is almost good enough to eat

Words NIONE MEAKIN

THE TASTE MAKERS

Since the days of Ancient Egypt, when lavish images of food were drawn on tombs to nourish those on their way to the afterlife, artists have found inspiration in what we eat and drink. Over the centuries, depictions of all things edible have served as symbolism, signs of wealth and status, and, of course, simple temptation.

In Giuseppe Arcimboldo's *Reversible Head with Basket of Fruit* (circa 1590), produce is both everyday and strange; in Rembrandt's banquets, it is studied and captured in exquisite detail. By the first decades of the 20th century, the Futurists encouraged the world to see dinner

not just as sustenance but as an art event. In the 1950s and '60s, as food production methods became more mechanized, Wayne Thiebaud responded with hyperrealist images of popular consumer goods, while Andy Warhol also alluded to the new, mass market with his repetitious, screen-printed soup cans.

Today, the theme continues to inform the work of artists such as US sculptors Robin Antar, who carves lifelike replicas of ketchup bottles and Oreo cookies, and Tom Sachs, whose pieces splice low-budget meals with high-end brands. Here, we profile three other figures who draw inspiration from food. »



Tjalf Sparnaay THE PAINTER

His hamburgers practically ooze off the canvas. The fried eggs appear the size of continents. And iced doughnuts could double-up as life rafts. The phrase the acclaimed Dutch painter Tjalf Sparnaay has coined to describe his work is “megarealism”—hyperrealism writ large. And his favorite subject is food, specifically the trashy, greasy things many of us eat but very few of us will admit to. “I like to paint things that are not usually painted,” he says. “I want the viewer to re-experience the essence of these ordinary things, and to better appreciate what I think of as the beauty of the everyday.”

While his subjects and style are contemporary, the artist’s process harks back to the techniques and masters of the past, most significantly the Dutch still-life tradition of the 17th century: the opulent, food-laden tables of Vermeer; Rembrandt’s luminous red apples. Although photographs are an unavoidable starting point when working with food, Sparnaay says:

“My paintings begin where the photograph ends. I want to add a new dimension, to make new choices. I use oil paint and brushes in a very traditional way. The brilliance of glazing layers of oil gives the image more depth and timelessness than a print or photograph ever could.”

The enormous scale of the Dutchman’s pieces highlights every detail, confronting the viewer with the reality of the subject and inviting them to reevaluate their view of it. “I want the work to act as an assault on the senses,” he says. “The paintings should hit the retina like lightning in a clear blue sky.” As for the symbolism that’s so prevalent in the food paintings of his heroes, the passage of time represented through a fruit bowl: “It’s there. In fact, many of my paintings could be seen as a modern vanitas, the food pictured just before it starts to decay. I like to show beauty but, of course, there is no beauty without a beast...” www.tjalfsparnaay.nl

Clockwise from above: Tjalf Sparnaay’s appetite for the everyday has inspired contemporary still lifes such as *Big Burger* (2015), *Pastry with Strawberry* (2016), *MATO TCHUP* (2012), and *Bakje Patat* (1999).

Far right: *Tables for Ladies* (1930, oil on canvas) by Edward Hopper (1882-1967) is on display at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, USA/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Angelis Nannos THE GUIDE

“There’s a papyrus shopping list that really speaks to me,” says Angelis Nannos. “It’s from the third century BC and is written in ancient Greek, yet the ingredients and tone sound so contemporary. When I look at it, I imagine the writer reaching out across time, and us sitting down to dinner together.”

This instantly accessible exhibit is the kind the Greek-born, now New York-based culinary tour guide loves to share with the “guests” who join him on his food-art tours of the city’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Some people host dinner parties at home; I throw one almost every day at The Met, where my guests and I enjoy a ‘menu’ of food-related masterpieces.”

Food was the compass by which the former food blogger first navigated the museum’s collections of more than two million works when he moved to New York four years ago. “It’s a thread that connects many of the artworks and artifacts, and tells us so much about the politics, religion, and history of the times in which they were made.”

Take Edward Hopper’s *Tables for Ladies* (1930), for example. On first glance, it is a simple scene of a restaurant: a waitress arranging a window display, another at the cash register, a couple dining. Yet its title tells of an era when restaurants were bringing in separate dining areas for a new wave of upwardly mobile, independent women—who may otherwise have been assumed to be prostitutes. The abundant display of food in the window was designed to whet the appetites of the few who could afford such luxury at the height of the Great Depression.

“In this one elegant painting, we have two stories of burgeoning gender equality and food scarcity; a particular point in history captured through food and art. To my mind, you could come to The Met and eat at its restaurant, but you will find the greatest feast for the senses in its galleries.” » www.infoodwetrust.nyc



Elizabeth Willing

THE EXPERIENCE CREATOR

A dinner party hosted by Elizabeth Willing is like no other. Cutlery is infused with scents of tobacco and leather. Mirrored plates enlarge their contents and distort diners' faces. Sharing dishes attacked too greedily tip over towards the other party.

These choreographed "experiences" are part of the Australian artist's body of work that explores both the qualities of food as an art material and the emotions it inspires. "I like the idea of surprising people or confusing them," she says. "Manipulating someone's experience is really enticing to me."

A "hugely influential" period spent with London's Experimental Food Society introduced Brisbane-based Willing to University of Oxford food scientist and Professor of Experimental Psychology Charles Spence, and took her practice in sculpture and installation into a new field. "Charles had me exploring the connection between sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste. A lot of what I've made since is based on what I learned in his lab."

While pieces such as *Stew* (2012), a collage of clippings from vintage cookery books, toy with notions of disgust and confusion, a more playful quality is also evident in Willing's work. Foil-wrapped chocolates attached to a wall dared audiences to breach the unwritten rules of the gallery by consuming the artwork. A mountainous range of marshmallows cried out to be squished.

The ephemeral nature of the work is important to the artist: "The materials are so sensual that to preserve them would remove their most interesting qualities." Willing wants the works, like her dining experiences, to survive in the memory rather than on walls. Still, she is not immune to conventional food etiquette. "I consider myself a host as well as an artist; I want people to have a good time. Food should always be enjoyable." ● www.elizabethwilling.com

Nione Meakin writes about lifestyle and the arts for The Guardian, The Telegraph, and Marie Claire.



Clockwise from above:
A glazed ceramic *Mouth Cup* (2013); *Goosebump* (2010); *Afternoon Pick-Me-Up* (detail, 2015); *Untitled (Marshmallow Wall)* (2014); *Tipping Plate* (2016).

