

EATING
the
MUSEUM

Adriana Gallo

In the history of museum dining,
there is a clear first.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London lays claim to the first in-museum dining concept. At the then–South Kensington Museum (as the V&A was then named), state-of-the-art gas lighting allowed patrons to stay later into the evening, opening up opportunities and needs for dining at the museum. In 1868, visitors were greeted by a trio of refreshment rooms. Each refreshment room was handled by a different architect and featured examples of different architectural styles and crafts (in line with the mission of the museum). The dining experience consisted of tiered menus, assigned by class and priced correspondingly, though museum workers and working-class visitors were relegated to another dining area altogether. A first-class menu would have consisted of jugged hare (for 1 shilling and sixpence), steak pudding (1 shilling), and seasonal tarts (half a shilling).

The subsequent development of museum dining would mirror the development of The Museum itself, one which is deeply concerned with the behavior and economics of its patrons. The development of museums from private collections of the royal and aristocratic classes, to the (increasingly public) collections of business magnates, to finally, as many, including Rosalind Krauss argues, something closer to an amusement park or hedge fund full of “noninvested surplus capital.” The final landing place of the contemporary or industrialized museum, as Krauss writes, “will have much more in common with other industrialized areas of leisure—Disneyland say—than it will with the older, preindustrial museum. Thus it will be dealing with mass markets, rather than art markets, and with simulacral experience rather than aesthetic immediacy.”¹

1 The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum, Rosalind Krauss

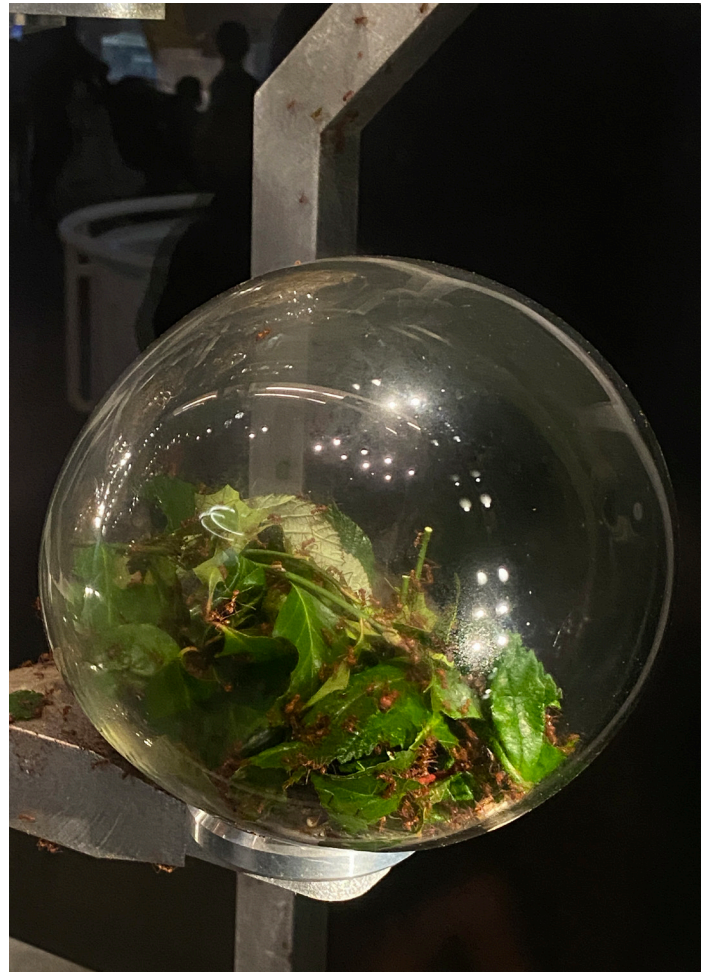
A Museum Dining Typology

What follows is an attempt at a museum dining typology that breaks up the range of museum dining options into categories based on intersections of atmosphere, culinary offerings, and price. As in the original V&A museum dining concept, the aesthetics and price are relative to the class of the intended customer. Patrons are effectively sorted according to their willingness to spend, extent of their leisure time, and their level of comfort with the available types of dining experiences.



1. The Fine Dining Restaurant

Perhaps most aligned with the original museum dining concept at the V&A is the institution of the fine dining concept within or proximate to museums, which has become increasingly prevalent. One of the earlier modern examples of this approach is The Modern at MoMA which overlooks the sculpture garden, boasts two Michelin stars, and is operated by Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group (which has been tapped for a number of museum dining establishments, including The Whitney and the 9/11 Memorial & Museum). [Pictured above.] MoMA is reflected in the restaurant through both its physical presence and a decidedly cosmopolitan, elevated and architectural approach to space and even plating. But the contents of the menu exist within the confines of conventional fine dining, at which it clearly excels.



In addition to The Modern, within New York City alone there are a number of restaurants housed within museums that offer a fine(r) dining experience and are destinations in and of themselves. Overlooking the Atrium, in the American Museum of Natural History's new wing is The Restaurant at Gilder. [Pictured above, left.] Requiring admission to the museum to dine (followed by an additional reservation to dine at the restaurant), the space is lined with forms evoking various insect hives and nests (displayed elsewhere); like much of the museum's collection, it encased in glass, functionally placing diners on display in a scaled-up version of some of the enclosures for the ant colony just down the stairs. [Pictured above, right.] The menu gestures at a further commitment to the theme with appropriately named drinks like "The Butterfly" (a lemonade colored with butterfly pea flower) but shirks from fully committing, instead providing a requisite range of dishes to satisfy correspondingly broad palates and dietary restrictions, including a grain bowl and a burger.



2. The Themed Restaurant

Rare are museum restaurants that are themed to match the museum. Café Sabarsky at Neue Galerie, for instance, presents an interpretation of a Viennese café with a photorealistic approach to food and service (read: Sachertorte served in a wood and mirror paneled dining room by waiters in matching vests) that verges on Disney World's Epcot (minus the characters). Its commitment to the theme has resulted in a high level of social media notoriety, at times overshadowing the artworks just outside the confines of the dining room. [Photo above courtesy Café Sabarsky.]



3. The Café

Perhaps the most common contemporary museum dining concept is the standard museum café. In most cases, these cafés are essentially shells provided to outside catering contractors to offer a minimum viable selection of goods meant primarily to soothe pre-tantrum children and a stale cookie energy boost for tired patrons. Closer to an airport dining experience than to a city café, these spaces serve an expected and short list of items, which are almost always pre- and individually packaged. [Pictured above, left.]

4. The Food Court

An alternative to the standard café is the old-fashioned food court. A format lifted from malls and corporate cafeterias, the museum food court presents an illusion of choice and a contained space for large groups and families to simply refuel before continuing through the museum. These food courts can bring in outside vendors (e.g. Pizza Hut, or local chains) or produce large quantities of food in-house and served in hot bars. [Pictured above, right.]

Though consistent and coherent in structure, the specifics of museums and collections vary quite widely. Between natural history, art (contemporary and historic), cultural sites and living museums, anthropology, science, and even war monuments, a common feature to all is the presence of some sort of dining option. These options span the full taxonomy discussed previously, usually in some sort of combination, but the specifics of these dining spaces tend to relate very little to the collections and curatorial intent of the museums themselves. Their relationships to the museums that house them tend to appear in ways that are incidental or inevitable depending on your vantage point. In a visit to the Met in New York, one encounters glass cases in the cafés not unlike those throughout the museum, though these cases display premade sandwiches and chilled soft drinks rather than historic artifacts of (similarly) obfuscated origins. Perhaps at its most extreme, there becomes a consistency in the way these museums present pilfered or stolen objects while serving ambiguously sourced foodstuffs or even the sale of a chocolate bar likely implicated in vast systems of enslavement and extractive agriculture. At the American Museum of Natural History in New York, apples are individually wrapped in plastic wrap, evoking the taxidermied animals throughout the building, while generic plastic (sometimes compostable!) utensils relate strangely to the carefully placed examples of indigenous South American food implements ingeniously composed of shells (also at the American Museum of Natural History) or a silver Roman combination spoon and knife from the 3rd century CE (at the Met).

The question that seems to arise is, should museum dining reflect the specific contents or mission of its containing museum?

In the case of MoMA, what period or geographic area might it attempt to translate into a dining experience? Would it change with the exhibitions or constitute its own exhibition showcasing various objects from its own design collection? Or would a museum of natural history be obligated to produce a naturalistic animal or dinosaur “watering hole” experience, or fabricate replicas of various historic anthropological food related objects and specimens from the collection? Or might this approach force certain institutions to admit their alarming proximity to the amusement park in form and intent?

An unusual and recent example is the retrospective ‘Rirkrit Tiravanija: A LOT OF PEOPLE’ at MoMA PS1, in which the works exhibited included a number that centered the preparation and service of food, including Tiravanija’s oft-referenced work ‘untitled 1990 (pad Thai),’ in which visitors are cooked and served pad Thai. Within the confines of the work itself, cooking is happening, ingredients are sourced, fuel is used, and pots are cleaned. The cooking happens at seemingly at no cost to the visitor, though there is an exchange being made in the cost of admission (which, in the case of PS1, is pay what you want), having your bag searched, and the tacit acceptance of a photo waiver. Writer and curator Nicholas Bourriaud writes in his 1998 work ‘Relational Aesthetics,’ “The artwork is thus no longer presented to be consumed within a ‘monumental’ time frame and open for a universal public; rather, it elapses within a factual time, for an audience summoned by the artist. In a nutshell, the work prompts meetings and invites appointments, managing its own temporal structure.”¹ And so, what is gained or lost when the work itself turns the museum into an eating destination?

1 Relational Aesthetics, Nicolas Bourriaud



Café display case at the American Museum of Natural History



Collection display cases at the American Museum of Natural History



Café entrance at the American Museum of Natural History



Collection displays at the American Museum of Natural History

The inclination of contemporary gastronomy, specifically restaurants and commercialized cooking products, experiences, media, and services (anything from a meal delivery service to a food magazine), is a postmodern one. Postmodern in the aesthetic sense, that is an understanding of the world and cultural production defined by heterogeneity and an unmooring of signified from signifier, or to put it more simply: a decentralization of reference/s. Geographer David Harvey describes this inclination in 'The Condition of Postmodernity': "Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is." ¹

In fine dining, this approach is not new, as historic royal banquets deliberately confused and conflated dishes, ingredients, and forms from across the ruling power's territories and conquests. In contemporary fine dining restaurants like El Bulli, Ferran Adrià proselytized "a cuisine packed with references,"² wielding gastronomic reference and collage in a wholly postmodern way. This postmodern approach was noted and deftly absorbed by the rest of the culinary world, catching up in some sense with the worlds of architecture and art that had successfully diffused their respective postmodern expressions into popular culture (arguably a defining feature of postmodernism). In airports, malls, and amusement parks, these built postmodern monuments now could serve appropriately heterogeneous menus defined by placelessness and cherry-picking from various cuisines.

There was a moment in which a choice was made to follow the developments and trends of the culinary world (that is, the marketplace of restaurants, chefs, and hospitality) in museum dining rather than the absorption of food into a curatorial approach or strategy. The delineation between museum and dining space has been all but naturalized, with the occasional curatorial transgression in art museums intended primarily to be photographed and publicized (e.g., the Sarah Crowner work in the Guggenheim's now closed The Wright restaurant or a commission by artist Rashid Johnson for Frenchette Bakery in The Whitney).

Indeed, as Brian O'Doherty writes, "The Eye is the only inhabitant of the sanitized installation shot. The Spectator is not present" and neither is their stomach.³ In the majority of museum spaces, one is expected to effectively tune out ambient or spillover smells and sounds from dining spaces. While wall paint colors, acidity of framing materials, and the temperature of lighting is agonized over, the museum café is allowed to infiltrate and leak into galleries as if the designed boundaries of the café place it beyond the jurisdiction of curatorial intent or responsibility.

1 The Condition of Postmodernity, David Harvey

2 Ferran Adrià by Maurizio Cattelan, Flash Art <https://flash---art.com/article/ferran-adria/#>

3 Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Brian O'Doherty

In modern critical scholarship on the societal function and intent of museums, the history of museums as institutions shows they function as a “civilizing” space, presenting aspirational bourgeois behavior (that is, based on consumption).

Tony Bennett outlines it bluntly in a history of the museum: “By contrast, the museum’s new conception as an instrument of public instruction envisaged it as, in its new openness, an exemplary space in which the rough and raucous might learn to civilize themselves by modelling their conduct on the middle-class codes of behaviour to which museum attendance would expose them.”¹ By necessity the visitorship of The Museum consists of a range of classes but upon entrance they are conscribed into a reality which requires a kind of bourgeois cosplay in order to participate.

As museum prices sky-rocket, the steep markup of basic food items feels increasingly smug. Even after leveraging a student ID, a credit card with a “culture pass”, or some sort of community hours discount, low blood sugar visitors are still subjected to the price of an \$8 for a stale cookie in order to continue participating and circulating. Or in the case of families, a choice between a visit-ending tantrum and a moment to refuel that essentially constitutes a second admission in price. In some cases, the cafe is one of a few moments in which the majority is attempted to be quite literally catered to.

The result is often a generic menu offering which seeks to reduce friction and remain familiar (though not necessarily delicious) while also up-charging for the privilege and convenience. The Museum remains, in many ways, as intended: an “exemplary space” (per Tony Bennett) exemplifying class distinctions, socialized behaviors, obfuscation of origins, and pilfering and recontextualizing material culture, dynamics that all of which can be perhaps most clearly seen at the threshold of The Museum Cafe.

1 The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics, Tony Bennett

About the Author

Adriana Gallo (she/her) is an artist and researcher living and working in New York with roots in Milan and the Northeastern U.S. Her practice embodies and complicates ecologies of labor and outcomes take the form of installations, sculptures, texts, workshops, and meals. (@adriggallo on instagram; adrianagallo.com)

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