



Cooking Lessons for Designers

by Ryan Freitas

With careers as an interaction designer and a professional cook (sometimes simultaneously), I've noticed striking similarities between the design studio and the kitchen. Like their peers in design, chefs are under constant creative and competitive pressure to execute and innovate. Both professionals service an increasingly savvy customer base in a

landscape where only the tastemakers and trendsetters survive.

Three years have passed since my last night in a professional kitchen. While I've kept my knives sharp, since then I've been flexing other creative muscles: I joined Adaptive Path, a design firm that has flourished as the big brands increasingly embrace user-centered design. My time in the



kitchen shaped how I respond now to challenges in an industry that is dependent on creative services.

1 Order and Discipline are not Natural Enemies of Creative Processes

There is often a misconception that structure gets in the way of generating new ideas. The kitchen taught me that the creative process thrives under constraint and that a little discipline helps more ideas make it to the table.

The most creative of chefs are renowned as much for their food as for the way they run their kitchens. Lisa Lu, the pastry sous chef at Quince in San Francisco, told me that “great restaurants devote themselves to two ideals: consistency and quality.” To safeguard these ideals, chefs oversee staffs under the “brigade system,” so called because of the strict chain of

command, uniform, and well-defined role in which each player engages in executing collective creative excellence.

Uniforms and shouted orders are likely a hard sell to designers, but I’ve found three other lessons translate well from the kitchen to the design studio.

2 Keep Your Eye on the Clock

Chefs know that the pressure of a ticking clock can inspire cooks to accomplish what seemed impossible at the start of a dinner rush.

At Adaptive Path, I advocate “time-boxing”: the setting of artificial time constraints for tasks like brainstorming and issue resolution. The objective is to cut down on exhaustive consideration of endless possibilities. With pressure to stay focused and disciplined, we can reduce the amount of time it takes to reach consensus. More importantly, we have found that decisive choices in the

concept phase generate momentum that carries us swiftly through the design process.

3 Recognize Internal Opportunities for Creative Freedom

Anyone who has worked in a restaurant can tell you about the horror of the staff meal. Overloaded with “real” work, many cooks view the meal for servers and dishwashers as an unrewarded chore. The opposite was true while I was in cooking school, where students were frequently asked to cook for one another. Our chef instructors hammered home the idea that the cooks and staff around us had the potential to be our most appreciative audience. Every staff meal was an opportunity to prove our resourcefulness, commitment, and pride to the people whose reactions we could see and whose feedback we valued.



In the design world, internal initiatives often offer more opportunity for employees to engage in creative risk. With the growth of our studio at Adaptive Path, we need new and different infrastructure, tools and concepts. While it is tempting, even prudent, to let these tasks take a backseat to client work, we've learned that an internal project offers creative freedom. These occasions are unbound by external requirements and every member of our team is encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity.

4 Trust (not just) the Guy with the Knife

A chef's success is dependent upon trusting others to execute his or her unique vision. (I should note that since the people who work in a kitchen are dealing with fire and knives in very tight quarters, their judgment is even

more crucial.) Jason Pringle, executive sous chef at Aqua in San Francisco, shared how he learned to trust the cooks he's trained: "They'll keep asking questions over time, because they want to know exactly how to do everything. I like to put it back on them. You'd be surprised how powerful asking, 'What do you think it needs?' can be."

Jason's method points to a larger truth: Told what to do, his cooks won't develop the critical faculties that they'll need in order to be chefs. Jason pushes them, challenging them to be better and to trust themselves and each other. Ultimately, he trusts his cooks because he has seen them confront and resolve ambiguity. "By the time they tackle challenging dishes," he told me, "I can trust them to experiment the next time. So long as they don't destroy a quarter-pound of white truffles."

In the design studio, we open up our work in weekly all-staff reviews. Designers explain their decisions, walk through their individual processes, and even expose biasing presumptions. Opening up our workflow to each other has proved invaluable, not only because it reveals the methods of our peers and lets us learn from their experiences, but because it creates confidence in the soundness of our coworkers' decisions.

Ultimately, I'm convinced that these lessons that I learned first in the kitchen—the importance of order, time limitations, creative freedom, and trust—can improve the quality, consistency, and overall chances of achieving success of any creative endeavor, whether in food or in design.

